

IAIN CUNNINGHAM AND REBECCA MARK-LAWSON TALK ABOUT BRINGING *IRENE'S GHOST* TO THE SCREEN

WORDS BY JOE UTICHI

IRENE'S GHOST

DIRECTOR Iain Cunningham

PRODUCER Rebecca Mark-Lawson

SHOOT DURATION 3 years

LOCATION Nuneaton and the UK

FORMAT Digital

PRODUCTION COMPANIES Forward Slash Films / Irene's Ghost Ltd, in association with Tyke Films

PRODUCTION PARTNERS BFI, Creative England, Wellcome Trust, Maudsley Charity

FAMILY HISTORY

Iain Cunningham never knew his mother Irene. He was three when she died, after suffering severe postpartum psychosis since his birth, and the devastating effect of her loss on Iain's father made her an absent figure during his childhood years. "She wasn't spoken about in our house when I was growing up," he says now. "Her life and what happened to her was always a bit of a mystery to me." When he turned 18, he received a box of her possessions, including a baby book of his that she'd filled out. "There were crazy sentences in it, and things like that. I wanted to connect with her; I've always felt a deep need to find out what happened to her."

Over the last four years, Cunningham has been recording the process of unpicking that mystery for a documentary feature, *Irene's Ghost*. "It's really a film about a process I was doing for myself," he explains. "Capturing that became the genesis of it. But I didn't want to make it as a straight documentary. I wanted it always to have a magic feel, and with animation I thought I could bring that out, because the baby book is illustrated in an interesting way and tells its own story."

The BFI came on board with *Irene's Ghost* following a moving pitch by Mark-Lawson and Cunningham at Sheffield Doc/Fest 2015. (The BFI is also backing other documentaries that were pitched that year, including *The Lovers* and *The Despot*, which premieres at Sundance, along with *The Hard Stop*, which features on page 7.)

Cunningham has a background in television documentaries and he tapped producer Rebecca Mark-Lawson, with whom he'd made short films in the past, to help him realise the project. "Iain's need to make the film was very interesting to me," Mark-Lawson says. "And personal stories are always interesting because they have a universal appeal. The film deals with issues like



Iain Cunningham and Rebecca Mark-Lawson
(PHOTO: PAUL MARC MITCHELL)

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maternal mental health, families and generational things, but it was the personal story that drew me in."

She jokes that it is like "expensive family therapy", but the film, which has the support of charities such as the Wellcome Trust, the Maudsley Charity and Action on Postpartum Psychosis, promises to lift the lid on a common condition that regularly goes unrecognised. "It has the same incident rates as Down's Syndrome, but very few people know about it," says

Cunningham. "All the way through the film, what I was trying to do was put myself in her footsteps, and so part of that was understanding what the illness is like. We want this film to be part of a wider campaign to try and raise awareness about postpartum psychosis."

Cunningham began his exploration by talking to his dad. "It wasn't something he was keen on talking about," he explains. "Then I put an ad in the local paper, and started to meet up with her old friends, which opened up networks of people. She worked in a tights factory and used to go on holiday to Margate, and I learned more of these details about her life."

Over the four years of research and filming – the project is now in the edit – his relationship with his father changed. "I think he's learned things about my mum that he didn't know. He's come to understand the illness in a way he

didn't at the time, but that takes time to process. He's in the film and, in a way, it's built around our relationship because we're almost a mirror of each other in the way that we've dealt with it."

The plan is to complete the film later this year, though piecing the story together has been the biggest challenge. "Documentaries are especially difficult in the edit and always take a lot longer. And with the animation element, we've got a long post-production process," notes Mark-Lawson. She started her career in documentaries, and says there has never been a better time to bring them to the screen. "You can now identify an audience that would want to see this film without the traditional route of distributors and sales agents. With a film like this, you won't have sales agents knocking down your door, but you can certainly get a small theatrical window and there are other ways of getting it out to an audience."