



## Sex, power and videotape



A still from Neasa Ní Chianáin's film *Fairytale of Kathmandu* showing Cathal Ó Searcaigh and a young Nepalese man called Narang

Photograph: The Irish Times

What began as an 'ode' to Cathal Ó Searcaigh turned into something else as the film-maker documenting the poet's education projects in Nepal became concerned about the young men visiting his hotel room, writes **Kathy Sheridan**

The film *Fairytale of Kathmandu* opens like the gentle, observational portrait it was intended to be. In his Donegal home on the scenic foothills of Mount Errigal, the genial poet in his little pillbox hat leafs through photographs of himself as a small, dark-haired schoolboy. "The poor boy!" he says, laughingly kissing the picture, "he didn't know what was going to happen to him."

In fact, Cathal Ó Searcaigh would grow into a substantial, amiable figure, celebrated across the Irish-speaking world. He would be inducted into Aosdána, among artists deemed to have produced a distinguished body of work, and later, could call upon such luminaries as Brian Friel, John McGahern, John Banville and Seamus Heaney for art works to auction for his education projects in his beloved Nepal, his spiritual home.

At the time, in 2005, *The Irish Times* carried a piece about his work in Kathmandu, and noted that "Ó Searcaigh returns there regularly, has adopted a son, Prem, there, and is currently sponsoring the education of up to 15 Nepalese people . . . Ó Searcaigh is not part of any registered charity, and his financial contribution is entirely personal."

Some 80 works for auction realised €50,000 before costs.

Meanwhile, Neasa Ní Chianáin, a native Irish speaker and near neighbour of Ó Searcaigh, was preparing to accompany him on his annual three-month sojourn to Kathmandu. She planned to make a film she envisaged as "an ode to Cathal".

Ní Chianáin idolised him, enchanted first as a student by his poetry about identity, loneliness and homosexual love, then captivated by his courage in coming out as a homosexual in a small, rural community.

"It was a lovely, warm story," she says now. "Everyone knew that he sponsored boys' education in Nepal and I thought it was a great thing, paying for education as a way of empowering people . . . And obviously, there's a story of a homosexual man who has grown up in a society that didn't accept him and he's found another where he felt liberated . . . It was one of those stories you want to believe in."

HOWEVER, THERE WAS one small but persistent niggle. On an earlier trip to Kathmandu, on a trek with his two young Nepali friends and constant companions, Prem and Shantaram, who seemed to have the job of managing his life and activities in Nepal, she noticed that after dinner in a sleeping lodge, Ram, a local boy with no English, went upstairs with Ó Searcaigh and spent the night in his room. At this point, Ní Chianáin enters the film herself. "I was taken aback," she says in the voice-over. "But next morning, he sat close by Cathal and I told myself that it must be okay as Ram seemed happy to be with him. Next day, Ram was gone . . . I was unprepared to see him with a boy so young. He was nearly 50 and, he told me, Ram was 17. I felt I had no right to judge him for being with a boy who was above the age of consent."

She reminded herself that "this was not a film about homosexuality. I felt uncomfortable, but I also felt it was a world I knew nothing about - where there's a glance across a room and contracts are made; where the rules are different - and that therefore I had no right to judge him. If it had been a young girl, I'd probably - because I'm of the heterosexual world - have felt more comfortable, it would have been easier to take him on . . . I waited to see the boy next day and he was there, sitting close by Cathal. I felt if he had been unhappy, he'd have left. But what I wasn't taking on board then, was the whole dynamic of that relationship, the whole disparity of power."

In the film, she broaches the subject tentatively with Ó Searcaigh. He talks about the possessive, obsessive nature of his first love in Ireland and explains that he has learnt,

since coming to Nepal, that "you can't do that - that you let people leave if they want to . . .". The camera lingers for a long moment on his uncomfortable face.

Then Ní Chianáin's anxious voice-over: "I understand how important it is to him never to be so dependent on someone again . . . but I couldn't help feeling that it was his Nepalese friends who were now the dependent ones. Cathal told me that he preferred to give money directly to the boys and not through charities."

So we see Shantaram, in his halting English, express overwhelming gratitude to the westerner: "Maybe I am still in my village, doing farming for others or learning sewing if I don't meet him. He is as God for me . . . Real God for me. With my heart and my body I love to him."

An emotional Prem describes how, 10 years before, he too had been a poor village boy, when he met Cathal, "when my father was no longer . . ." - words fail him. After a two-month stay in Ó Searcaigh's Donegal home as a 15- or 16-year-old, he recalls how the poet had "proposed to make me his godson . . . I felt I got another father," he says.

Back in Kathmandu, Ó Searcaigh rented a room for him and boosted Prem's status immeasurably by acquiring a jewellery shop for him. He has entered an arranged marriage, with Ó Searcaigh's beaming approval. "The idea we have in western Europe of falling madly, passionately in love . . . so ridiculous . . ." says Ó Searcaigh. In a culture where a man and woman merely holding hands is frowned upon, Ó Searcaigh says he understands perfectly how Nepalese boys are so sexually inexperienced, compared to their western counterparts. "These boys have no experience of girls, none whatsoever." What he does not say is that in all likelihood, they have never been in close contact, sexually, with a boy either. Nepal is a homophobic society where homosexual acts are a crime.

Now he is helping Shantaram to build a house. "It is a huge project to make a house but I can make it easily with the help of Cathal," Shantaram says with a huge smile.

"I began realising how powerful we westerners must seem," says Ní Chianáin. "With a few euro we can change lives."

As the film progresses, she continues her tentative questioning of Ó Searcaigh. He says he is well aware of how and why tourists might be attractive to local people for what they might give them, but denies outright that he is involved in "sex tourism".

She is there to see Ó Searcaigh admiring the suit he has bought for a boy; buying a €140 bicycle for another. What does he get out of it, she asks. He answers: "I feel that there is a certain pleasure in giving rather than taking . . . They know they have nothing to give me, except to open their hearts and give me their love."

The camera crew happens to be in the hotel lobby when a youth comes in and gives Ó Searcaigh's room number. He phones the room and tells the person on the other end that his name is Prakash. Pause. "Prakash Poudel," he adds. "He knows many Prakash," says a weary voice picked up by the mic. The voice belongs to Ramesh, the hotel manager, sitting close by. As Prakash climbs the stairs to room 405, the camera catches the manager's agitated arm clasped to his head, and the receptionist's concerned expression.

Once again, Ní Chianáin tentatively questions Ó Searcaigh. He could pick people up on the street, he says, and he has seen people that he would love to sleep with, "but it's much more interesting to get to know someone . . . I think a lot of these boys love me and that love has nothing to do . . . I'm aware there are certain essential boundaries and I don't want to cross those particular boundaries. There are others [clicks fingers] . . ."

Ní Chianáin's voice-over is becoming more disturbed. "I met Cathal with more and more boys. Each new face brought more uncertainty and I started searching their faces for answers."

The point of no return finally arrives when Ramesh, the hotel manager, asks to speak to Ní Chianáin about westerners.

He tells her that he had asked Shantaram to stop bringing so many boys to Ó Searcaigh's room but nothing had changed. Now his anger is palpable. "They say 'I want to help in Nepal and Nepal's' and this and that. This is just blah blah. Somehow they are taking benefit, somehow . . . due to poverty like that."

After Ó Searcaigh's scheduled departure for Ireland, Ní Chianáin, with the help of counsellors from the Voices of Children NGO, used her remaining few days to trace some of the boys she has filmed.

Each had a similar story, she says. "They were on their way to college and they met Cathal, a friendly westerner who seemed interested in their lives. He gave them money, a month's wages, sometimes two or three months', and told them it was for their studies. He gave them his hotel card and asked them to come and visit. They went to his room and each time they came they left with some money, or clothes, or the promise of a bike.

They never had a boyfriend or a girlfriend before, they were 16 years or older, but this is how they do it in the West, they were told. And after all, westerners are like gods in Nepal, and if you're lucky you might meet one."

"It was my first time. It hadn't happened to my friends," said one of the boys, Narang. "When we woke the next morning, he told me to go. He said 'you should go because you won't complete the sex'. I explained that it was my first time and I told him 'because you were touching me and I felt tickled and giggled'."

"It's natural to feel angry. I have fallen victim," said another, explaining that he was giving the interview so that "none of my younger brothers should fall victim too. It is not just one - he has played with the feelings of 50 or 60."

And another: "Most of time, his hand is on my penis also. In the morning he told me 'I love sex'. 'But what is sex?' I asked him and he told me, 'it is complex'. He close to me and he touch himself but I don't like it. I am also nervous. I am very shy so he used . . . he bought myself."

Ní Chianáin's disillusionment is final. Within days of their return to Ireland, she confronted Ó Searcaigh in his home. Ní Chianáin tells The Irish Times that when she told him what the hotel manager had said and also mentioned that a German woman had voiced concern, Ó Searcaigh told her she had no evidence.

IN A RIVETING exchange in the film, Ó Searcaigh says "those boys have come out, and very, very strongly, saying that I have abused them. For me, that is not the truth. The truth is . . . I certainly . . . you know, boys came to my room . . . because my room is open all the time. I certainly had sex with some of them, yes, yes, yes. But I wasn't coercing them into having sex . . . I mean that door was open all the time."

Ní Chianáin tries to explain that it's not about physical coercion; rather a disparity of power. "Some of them are young," she says, "they are vulnerable, some of them don't understand what homosexuality is . . . They may not have the same self-esteem . . . They might just be caught in a corner."

"I understand that absolutely. But you know if you had asked them, I had explained to them exactly what I was," Ó Searcaigh says.

"But young Narang said he knew nothing about sex," Ní Chianáin goes on, "that he didn't know that homosexuality existed. He said you asked him to come to your room and bring his school books and not look at his school books . . . He said he thought you were there to help him with his lessons."

"Yes, but I did also help him with his lessons," Ó Searcaigh says.

"So why would he stay the night with you?" asks Ní Chianáin. The poet looks bewildered. "Why? You know . . . why not? But why not?"

Yesterday, in an interview with The Irish Times, Cathal Ó Searcaigh said that he feels "that I have been done a great injustice in this film". He claims that the final interview was done in Donegal "under tremendous stress. I had just come back from Nepal a number of days after Neasa . . . Totally jet-lagged. And I arrived to find her there with a camera and was confronted with these accusatorial things. So I admit I was very flippant in what I said - but they used that.

"I don't deny that I have slept with boys. But whatever relationship I had with many of those young men was one of companionable intimacy. Sexual intimacy never occurred. I had openly admitted I had relationships with people, embarked on with consent. I am a blatant homosexual, not a latent one. If I felt there was something untoward going on in my life, I certainly would not have brought out a film crew with me. The door is always open to people. I have not coerced anyone."

Ní Chianáin's point, however, was never about his sexuality or his generosity, but with the power disparity between a poor Nepali boy and a relatively wealthy westerner.

Were his offers of help and money a means of drawing boys to his room? "I absolutely deny that. I openly admit that I had relationships with young men in Nepal and many of these developed into long-time, companionable, beneficial relationships. Many homosexual men go to other countries and have encounters that over time develop into much more than a casual sexual relationship. I'm not dropping people along the way. Narang makes accusations in the film, because he was pulled in, interrogated . . . But he has spent two weeks with me in India. I support his education. The suggestion that I gave money in exchange for visits to my room is conjecture on the part of Neasa. After I left, she interrogated three people I had just met casually. This is not me helping people in exchange for sexual favours. I have developed lasting and enduring relationships."

NÍ CHIANÁIN SAYS that some weeks after the final interview, she and her partner (also the film's producer) David Rane went back to see Ó Searcaigh, without cameras. She wanted to make it clear that they perceived the boys as victims. "When we were leaving, we even hugged. I did believe he would address what had happened. Later on, it became

apparent to me that this was not the road he was going down.

"People have said to me, 'these boys are above the age of consent, what's the big deal?'" she says. "I say it is a big deal. Once you've seen their faces and their vulnerability . . . well, if you still think that, I'd like to see you say it in public."

Ó Searcaigh says that the film is "not an accurate and balanced view of who I am . . . and has turned out to be a salacious, tabloid piece of work", in which gestures and looks were taken out of context and where "clever editing can reduce anyone to something horrendous . . . I feel my trust has been betrayed in this documentary and that cuts me enormously and hurts all the people I am associated with in Nepal."

Ó Searcaigh was Ní Chianáin's friend. They are still neighbours. Her children go to the local school. As a film-maker, she is no Michael Moore, no gleeful needler of the comfortable. Tears come easily. "Two people who work for us were verbally abused by others saying 'why do you work for them?' The rumour is that I've 'stitched up a vulnerable gay man'. It's been uncomfortable for us. We don't know who has heard what version. And I'm not interested in talking about it until they see the film and make up their own minds."

*Fairytale of Kathmandu will be screened at the Dublin International Film Festival on Feb 18 and 21, and is scheduled to be shown on RTE1 on March 13*

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