

CONTENTS

Logline 3 Synopsis Director's Notes 5 Visual Style 8 Themes Producer's Notes 10 12 Cinematographer's Notes 18 Sound Designer's Notes 19 Music **Editor's Notes** 20 Costumes 21 22 **Production Design Estate** 23 Casting 24 Marketing Strategy 25 Budget 26 **Covid Compliance** 27



Logline

A married couple's life is turned upside down when neighbours in their perfect estate confront them and inform them that they believe that they're not soulmates.

Crew List:

Director/ Co-Writer - Jack Fahy

Producer - Stephen Kyne

Co-Writer - Ruairí O'Neill

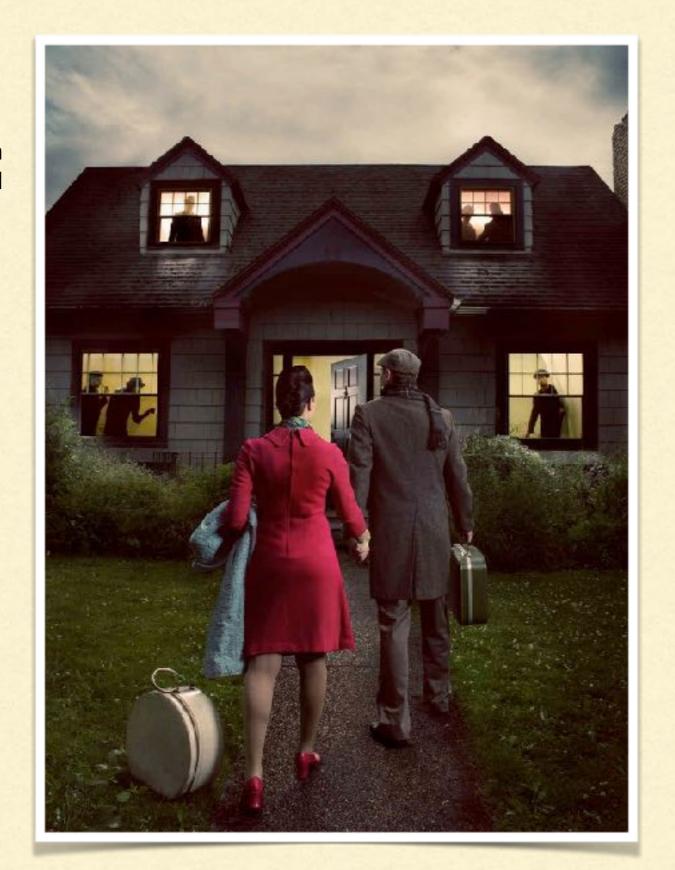
1st Assistant Director - Ben Spillane

Director of Photography - Elena Larionova

Sound Design - Dan Seymour

Editor - Ethan Jones

Production Designer - Aoibhe Rice



Synopsis

Martin (30's) along with his wife Denise (30's) and their son Oscar (6) are making their way home from the shop together. Martin and Denise somewhat playfully bicker with one another over the jam donut stain that Oscar now has on his shirt, curtesy of Martin. They walk through the indistinguishable houses within the suburban estates they live in. When they edge close to their own house they notice fellow neighbours Jerry and Vivian standing on Martin and Denise's lawn, as if they were waiting on them.

After the first few pleasant hellos with either couple in front of the house and a slight concern over the light-up Santa still up on Martin's roof in Mid-January, the conversation turns. Jerry and Vivian bring up the pressing matter that calls them to the house today with full happy smiles plastered on their faces. The matter of Martin and Denise's relationship. Their main concern being that they don't believe they're 'soulmates'. More neighbours from around the estate start popping up in and around the front lawn. Martin and Denise laugh-off this statement from the neighbours however the atmosphere starts to turn sour. The solution that Jerry and Vivian bring to the table is the idea of replacing Martin, with 'New Martin'. Obviously, Martin is taken back by this and firmly stands his on his own lawn, stating that he's just not fit for the neighbour and for the marriage he's in. More and more neighbours pop up seemingly out of nowhere, all with smiles on their faces. The situation turns more sinister as the family begins to grown surrounded on the lawn. They make a break for the front door into the house.

The family tries to make their way to the back door, too late, they're surrounded. Martin calls the guards to come to their safety, the guard knows his name, the police are in on it too. There is seemingly no escape. Martin picks up a hurl after one of the neighbours makes a comment about Martin. Denise yells at him for trying to respond to the neighbours in that fashion. This ignites a little argument between the two of them which sparks further verification for the neighbours that the two can't communicate with one another. Martin decides to run upstairs to find another possible exit for the family.

Martin runs into his and Denise's bedroom at the front of the house. He swings out wide the window at the front of the house to see what the crowd is like outside, they all look up and wave at him One of the neighbours knocks the light-up Santa off of the roof and it crashes down on the lawn below. In a bout of frustration he thumps the wall and a picture frame knocks off the wall and breaks. He picks it up and notices the family photo they took before, only instead of Martin in the picture, 'New Martin' now takes his place. He looks around at all of the framed family photos, all 'New Martin'. Denise enters the room with a smile on her face, wearing similar clothes to the rest of the neighbours. She explains to him how she has always strived for perfect in their relationships but she has never found it with him. She corners him into the edge of the window and pushes him out the window in to the crowd of unforgiving neighbours below.

The film ends with the scene of the new family life, with New Martin coming home to his perfect family in his perfect life in his perfect estate.

Director's Notes

I suppose the element that I've always liked the idea of when working on past projects and is constantly on my mind when it comes to developing new ideas for future projects is the idea of blending humour within a dramatic or somewhat thrilling storyline. This is something I'm really looking forward into experimenting with further in this project. I've always tried to make supporting characters memorable for the audience no matter how small the role. I want to make the film really feel like it's alive with a whole cast of characters. I've often looked to the films of The Coen Brothers as a deep inspiration in how to make the larger world of the film feel more full and alive with how they deal with and utilise their very minor character that may only appear in one scene. They manage very well to in a way shine a light on a very unusual character for a few split seconds in a very humorous that keeps the scene moving along without distracting too much attention from the main character. I aim to use humour in this film as a method of not only entertaining the viewer but also weave it into the very fabric of this neighbourly estate so as though the united front of good-humoured and jovial neighbours dispense out a level of intensity and sinisterness through their humour.

Something that I've been looking into quite heavily throughout the development of this project is the connection between characters and the geography of their location. There is a lot for the audience to take in throughout the run time if this film as the audience is only getting the information as it Martin gets it. So in order for the audience to take that information in better I'm going to make a very conscious effort to really establish the geography of the estate and the house itself and I'm planning on doing this through the movements of the characters moving from one new space to another with cohesion. I've been looking into and rewatching a lot of the early work from Roman Polanski for the way he tackles it as I feel like he has achieved this very well. I've also been looking at his early films as inspiration for how to pull off a scary film without any actual scares in it. The likes of 'Rosemary's Baby' and 'The Tenant' accomplish this very well.







Over the past few years of absorbing new films and rewatching them, I've found myself becoming more and more interested in the idea of a passive protagonist within your story. This is something that I thoroughly enjoyed while developing the film, the idea that these events and unfixable problems pop up and appear all around the main character, rather than the main character pushing the narrative forward with each decision they make. And what I liked about this project further is that as we look through the main character, Martin's eyes, nothing goes his way. Every decision he makes throughout the real time of the film doesn't save him or his marriage one bit, because these problems and obstacles that are only coming up now on his lawn, are problems that have arose behind his ignorant back over the 7 years or so of marriage and are only coming to bite him in the ass now in one big tidal wave.

One of the things I need to focus on is the fact the Martin may not be the perfect husband to Denise, but he is in no way the 'bad guy' of the film. But if I can really ride that fine line of Martin it would really help to drive home the devastating blow at the end of the film. The end being the image of the perfect happy family at home being a peaceful joyous image that would be perfectly at home as a happy ending in any other 'It's A Wonderful Life' type film. Yet by playing out the film through the perspective of Martin the 'happy family' ending is without a doubt the worst case scenario for Martin and in the eyes of the audience the good guy lost and the bad guys won.

A lot of this film centres around Martin and his family becoming ambushed by their neighbours in their front garden and then surrounding them once they enter the house. In this way I'm planning on treating this film as if it were a zombie film. Only instead of zombies, it's overbearing, nosey, over-friendly suburban neighbours.





Visual Style

We aim to create and communicate a strong sense of the intimidating presence of the estate and the neighbours through the visual style. Throughout the majority of the first scene when we are introduced to the family walking home from the shop we plan on keeping the houses that come in and out of frame as this menacing overshadowing element of the frame.

Similarly with the neighbours, we plan on framing the neighbours in a certain way so that when they are confronting Martin on the lawn. When a particular neighbour or group of neighbours are looking at Martin we want the actor to look straight down the barrel of the lens as a way of putting the audience in Martin's shoes, to really feel the intimidating nature of the neighbours.

I've been looking at various Edward Hopper paintings as inspiration. The way he frames suburban life in estates and the people around them. He manages to bring such a stillness to the image of the houses and people. Also the light he applies in these painting bring such an idyllic look to what suburban life aims to be.

I think a lot of the visual style and the pace of the overall piece would be heavily inspired by classic 'The Twilight Zone' episodes. In particular the episodes, 'The Monsters Are Due On Maple Street' and 'It's A Good Life'. These episodes are great examples of how to illustrate a seemingly perfect ideal life and distort it slightly so as the the tension naturally rises up and up and up to a devastating finish. They are also presented in such a calm and collected fashion that it makes the horror all the more terrifying.









Themes

The Fantasy of Soulmates

The theme of Soulmates is an idea that has been touched upon in many films in the past, mainly romantic films and Rom-Coms. But I think to look at the idea of Soulmates from that point of view can usually only lead down one path which tends to end with the two leads finding each other as Soulmates in the end. However I thought that if you look at the idea of Soulmates through more of a horror angle. The threat being the fact that Denise is no longer content being married to someone who isn't soulmate, that anyone less than perfect is not good enough. The whole idea of Soulmates is slightly ridiculous in itself as it involves finding the one person in the whole world who's soul you can form the most perfect bond with, a somewhat unrealistic expectation to set for relationships. The idea being that if and only if you find your Soulmate, you as a person will then feel 'complete'. And if Denise does not feel 100% complete with Martin as her husband, then how could the neighbourhood estate itself feel complete when not everyone is perfectly fit in the neighbourhood.

Conforming To The Suburban Estate Lifestyle

The idea of conforming to a new way of living in a suburban estate, the perfect well tended to house and gardens is one that has been tackled many times before in the likes of 'The Stepford Wives' and 'The Truman Show'. The way in which the neighbours in the community strive for every little detail in their estate to be nothing less than perfect. But I want to look at it from an Irish perspective. How the prying Irish neighbours in an estate, nose their way into other people lives for 'the betterment of the estate'. There are many of these types of people present in most Irish housing estate that seem to believe that any little thing that may be going on in someones life is their business purely for the fact that it's within the boundaries of the estate. I'm looking at exploring into how pressure can feel for someone who fails to conform to the standards that are set for estate living by heightening the reality so as though the neighbours form a sort of mob like mentality towards unwanted imperfections.



Producer's Notes - Stephen Kyne

When Jack Fahy initially described this film to me by saying "imagine a zombie film, but instead of zombies think overly-friendly neighbours", it piqued my interest rather quickly. Further discussions about the film's ideas of satirising soulmates and the neighbourly status quo, alongside an early draft of the script (which from the get-go contained such an idiosyncrasy of humour and style), I was delighted to accept the chance to be involved in this project.

The process of taking that initial script through development has been fruitful and rewarding. Working with Jack Fahy and his Co-Writer Ruairi O'Neill, we had a shared understanding of the broad strokes of the story and how we wanted to approach it's themes, which has allowed us time and freedom to play with nuance; to find comedic and resonant beats that serve the story before anything else. These nuances aim to utilise the global appeal of the idea of the "perfect match", ideas that are prevalent in today's world - particularly furthered through social media and reality television - to satirise the concept of soulmates, while also keeping a distinctive Irish flavour to the style and tone of the film.

Taking these ideas from the page to a place where they can be realised has been my primary area of focus. Casting is of paramount importance, seeing as we don't just need to cast actors, but given the importance of the setting to the world of the film, to also cast location, very much a character of the film in its own right, and one that must enhance the story. Through our research, we discovered Stillorgan Wood, a visually unique housing estate that will provide the perfect location for this film. Having written letters to each household, a number of homeowners have been in contact with us to express their interest in providing us with a location, giving us an opportunity to select the ideal house within the ideal estate.

In terms of casting for actors, we are in the advanced stages of the audition process and are very excited by the actors we have seen. Through various casting calls, we assembled a strong group of actors who were then auditioned via Zoom, which we are currently reviewing.





Dark comedy is a rewarding and widely enjoyed subgenre, albeit difficult to pull off well, particularly in the short form. This challenge is very motivating for us as we work through pre-production. Having put together a strong crew who all enthusiastically believe in the script that Jack and Ruairi have assembled, and with our encouraging progress in our casting and location processes, I have every faith Better Half will be everything that I thought it would be and more when Jack initially pitched it to me.

Cinematographer's Notes - Elena Larionova

TONE/ PALETTE EXTERIOR











LIGHTING

When shooting the exteriors, I plan on using natural light with the aid of flags, diff frames and reflectors to control the light and create a natural look with a slight uneasy atmosphere.









TONE/ PALETTE INTERIOR





















LIGHTING

There is a complete change in tone and lighting when entering the house to accommodate the panic and horror conflicted onto Martin.

The only light source lighting the interior will be window light. I plan on shining extra light through the windows to create a higher contrast between light and shadows.

No practical lights will be used during these scenes.



INTERIOR END











LIGHTING

The final interior scene will resemble a sitcom. I plan to use tungsten lighting and practical lighting to create a welcoming but artificial atmosphere. The warm tones in this scene aid in the depiction of a "happy" ending between New Martin and Denise.







FRAMING

MARTIN & DENISE

Martin and Denise don't have the prefect relationship. I plan on using camera framing and composition to further illustrate this. I will use, single shots to highlight the disconnect between Martin and Denise and dirty shots to convey a rough and distant relationship between the two. The only factors that connect Martin and Denise in shots will be their son Oscar and The Neighbours.

THE NEIGHBOURS

The Neighbour's sharp proper presence will not only be conveyed through acting and costume but through camera framing and composition as well. The framing will be uniform and symmetrical to further illustrate the structural order and demeanour The Neighbours possess.





CAMERA MOVEMENT

STATIC

Static shots will be used when there is a halt in the story. Whether it's to convey an interruption between characters or to communicate a calm before the storm scenario.

TRACKING

Tracks will be used to follow Martin and Denise's conversation up to the house. The tracks are a tool to lure the characters and viewers to the turning point of the film.

CRASH ZOOM

A crash zoom will be used for the introduction of New Martin. It will change the pace and add to the comedic but tense elements of the film.

DOLLY ZOOM

A dolly zoom has a harrowing effect and will be a perfect tool to utilise when there is a change in atmosphere.

FOCUS/ LENS WHACKING





FOCUS

In the beginning of the film, focus will more or less be deep to reveal the uniform housing estate surrounding the character and narrative. The deep focus also suggests the main character's openness. As the story progresses, the focus becomes shallower to convey a sense of panic and confusion Martin is experiencing.



LENS WHACKING

Lens whacking will be used on Martin during The Neighbours confrontation. The blur and disorienting look from the lens whacking is to convey Martin's confusion and shock to the idea of him being replaced. It will isolate Martin from the other characters and add some texture to the film overall.

Sound Designer's Notes - Dan Seymour

In The Better Half the sound design will chiefly be used to establish what's really going on beneath the surface of the estate and let the audience know on a subconscious level that it is more dystopia than utopia.

As Martin, Oscar and Denise walk home through this idyllic if uniform housing estate, everything looks right but what we hear tells us something else. There are no birds chirping, no lawnmowers going, no distant chatter from families in their perfect gardens. In short: no life signs. Even as they approach their own house, to find Vivian and Jerry waiting for them, we do not hear any murmured conversation between these two neighbours. It is as if the whole estate was lying dormant, waiting for the family to come home to spring to life.

As the scene with Vivian and Jerry goes on, and Martin slowly begins to understand that there's something not quite right afoot, we the audience reach this same understanding as the lightest score of strings rises up in the mix. In this way, the sound design and music should ensure the audience are always on the same wavelength as Martin and never too far ahead of him in the knowledge of what's going on.

As the house is being swarmed by hordes of friendly neighbours, and Martins family retreat inside, the background noise should evoke the feeling of some faceless zombie horde passed through the filter of polite society. The door bell rings with a seemingly unique rhythm but then all the neighbours assume this exact rhythm as they gently tap on the walls on windows, politely insisting to be let in. This repetition of the door bell sound should drive home the idea that there is nothing natural or unique in this estate, like the residents, it is all desperately uniform. The house provides a temporary buffer from the horde noise outside while Martin and his family try to figure out how to handle the situation. The buffer is broken however when the window is opened upstairs just before Martin is pushed out and the sound of the horde floods the house, giving a heightened sense of desperation as Martin pleads with Denise.

As the now perfect family sit at the table in the final scene, we hear very serene 1950s era music in the air. It emanates from an old radio on the table, giving it a tinny, static feel as one last artificial creation of a natural sound.

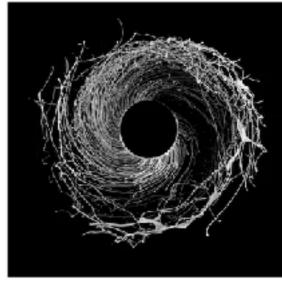
Music

When it comes to the sort of music I was thinking about for this film, it has to walk a fine line in order to hit the tonal balance of the film itself. Although the main character of Martin finds himself in a very intense situation, a lot of the events in the film play out to a humorous beat. So while I want the music of the film to convey the intensity the Martin is feeling throughout the second half of the film, I'd like the music to have a bombastic edge to it in order to represent the humorous tone to it that'll hopefully make the music stand out from the rest of horror short films in it's originality. I want to steal away from the usual horror go to of screechy strings and monotonous high-frequency droning sounds. I am currently in talks with a possible composer to come board this project to bring the story to life through the music.

As the short film is very much Martin versus the whole neighbourhood, I was hoping to look at setting Martin apart from the neighbours sonically through the music as a running motif throughout the film. At this time, I'm toying with the idea of maybe using a hint of brass instruments in the mix of the music in order to resemble the childish, slightly ignorant stand out of the crowd quality that Martin holds. Whilst when it comes to the neighbours I imagined using a music more rigid pattern of somewhat tribal drum beats to denote their mob-like mentality that they hold. As the film progresses towards the more intense nature of the situation the drum should ramp up to an intense, somewhat claustrophobic cacophony that will eventually drown out Martin's brass motif, till the brass wipers out upon Martin's tragic demise. For musical reference, I've been leaning on the likes of 'Amnesiac' By Radiohead, 'Dysnomia' by Dawn of Midi, 'Cenizas' by Nicolas Jaar, and 'Dark Matter' by Moses Boyd, all of which I believe incorporate brass instrumentation with electronic sounding drum beats to a phenomenal effect.









Editor's Notes - Ethan Jones

This is my first time editing one of Jack's films. I am excited to work with Jack because I really enjoy and see a lot of potential with the story and have a very good relationship with him.

The editing of this film will be important in terms of conveying the rising tension throughout the film but also allowing for the comedic releases when they arrive in the story. The pacing of the film will be important to show how Martin's rising conflicts with the other characters grow organically over the runtime of the film.

This film blends together elements from the horror, thriller and dark comedy genres. These elements will be woven together throughout the film to give it a cohesive feeling. We will be able to comfortably mix in another genre when the scene has moments of levity.

The second half of the film will use parallel editing to show the neighbours trying to break into Martin's house while also showing Martin's attempts at escape. This will increase the tension in the film by cutting back and forth between them. This will reach its climax at the end of the scene when Martin is pushed to the edge of the window.

The editing of this film will help the audience feel the tension of the scene and also breathe during the moments

of comedy.

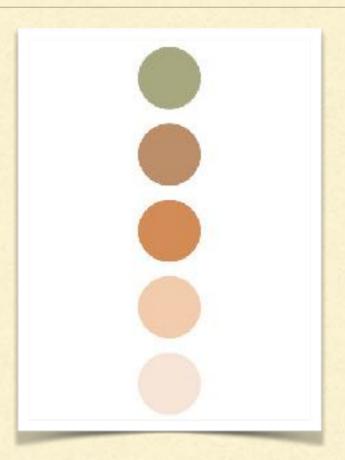


Costume Design

The design of the costumes in this film have a very important part in indicating characters' association to the suburban neighbourhood. All the neighbours wear a certain muted shade of a light brown colour that is completely inoffensive and is uniform to the whole estate. I'd like the clothes the neighbours wear seem at first quite ordinary clothes for someone to wear but only when we see all them wear almost seemingly the same clothes for it to give off an ominous yet somehow humorous look to the neighbours as a unit.

When it comes to the outfit that I want Martin to be wearing, I'd like him to be wearing a red raincoat, a pair of relaxed jeans that look like he's just thrown them on purely because he has to when going to the shop, I picture that the rest of the time when he's at home he usually finds himself in a comfy pair of tracksuit trousers. The idea behind the colour of red for his raincoat is because I'd like to use the colour red as an indication of connecting Martin to the light-up kitschy Santa on his roof. The idea being the I hope for the Santa to act as a visual motif of Martin's arc throughout the film, the Santa and Martin both noticeable being the two people and things that stand out of the estate that don't fit in with the ideals of the neighbourhood and both in the end of the film end up falling on the lawn to meet their end.

Once Martin enters his house I plan on him removing his raincoat to reveal a red and dark brown plait shirt, further distinguishing him from the neighbours, the shirt being a heavily patterned affair that would not fit in with the more monochromatic hue to the neighbours. Denise on the other hand would initially be wearing a dark brown jacket that would look different from the neighbours but when she confronts Martin in the bedroom at the end of the film she will have removed here coat to reveal her attire that now looks like it's within the same colour scheme as the neighbours, announcing her allegiance with the estate.





PRODUCTION DESIGN

When it comes to the production design of the film there aren't really any big builds involved that we need to tackle, the main element of the production design that is most important to the success of the film is making the estate as realised as possible. Now as we don't have a large budget for the project we won't be able to change much of the estate we get in the end but a lot will ride on the look and feel of the same carbon copied houses of the estate we pick as the location.

One of the main aspects of the production design that is a very important storytelling device, which a lot of the twist relies on, are the family picture frames. This would involve either photoshopping the different faces in or staging the actors in for the picture twice. The idea is to have these 'New Martin' photos dotted all throughout the house, also having the not yet sun-faded parts of the walls of the house where picture frames use to hang. The hope for the rectangle silhouettes of where pictures use to hang is to give off an unsettling air to the inside of the house as it doesn't look or feel complete, much like in the neighbour's apartment in 'Rosemary's Baby'.



THE ESTATE

The Suburban, South Dublin housing estate is almost the most important character within this film. The idea of the carbon copy houses all with a certain sense of grandiose elegance and a level of entitlement that comes with it. What we are attempting to capture with this film is the Irish version of 'The Stepford Wives'. The people that live in the estate in 'Better Half', all have a certain set of values that they all share. They all care for the perfect quality of the neighbourhood, every inch of every garden and house, must be tended to with utmost care, the whole estate must feel and look as uniform and perfect. So when it comes to casting the estate we need the estate to look as uniform and perfect and open as possible. Our number one estate we've been looking at and hope to secure permission to shoot in is Stillorgan Wood. All the houses were all built in the same fashion in the 1970's and all look the same. There are also very open and not obscured by tree or any other large landscaping that would cast great shadows over the front gardens. When walking through the estate I'm struck with the a similar sense of uneasiness to the stead consistency that I hoped the estate would bring to the film.



Casting

Now other than the casting of the housing estate, the cast of characters in the film is very important to the success of this film. Our process of finding actors to come on board this project started when we sent out a casting call on various Irish film and tv network groups on facebook in order to reach a wide spread of actors. The casting call was limited to what we deemed the four main characters in the film, Martin, Denise, Jerry and Vivian. The next part of the process was to review the showreels and CV's we received from the emailed responses of interest. We emailed the actors we were interested in auditioning for particular role and booked them in for zoom auditions. Over a three day period, myself and Stephen met with each actor and got them to perform certain audition pieces that I wrote for the actors in order to give them enough to work with to show character.

At the moment myself and Stephen are getting back to the actors who we thought would be perfect for the roles of the main characters and other actors who we thought may be able to portray some of the other neighbours within the film. We plan on opening up another zoom meeting but with the actors reading together this time in order to start the ball rolling on actors rehearsing together to start a rapport between actors and myself. Once it becomes safe to meet up with the actors outside we will begin full rehearsals with the cast so as though everyone may begin the first day of shoot on the same page.

One of the struggles we had when searching for a cast for the film, is that we were looking for two actors, playing Martin and Denise to be coming from the same household to avoid the necessary 2 metre distance rule between the two actors as we believed that it wouldn't look right for the married couple at the centre of the film to be in a constant state of 2 metres apart. With only one response we got back from two actors in the same household, it is leaving us with the more difficult task of trying to disguise the distance through camera trickery so as though it wouldn't appear odd in shot.

Marketing Strategy

The interesting and unique story of Better Half, which combines multiple genres, along with the global themes but distinctly Irish flavour, provides us with excellent opportunities for Festival entries.

Our ambition will be for the film to premiere at the Galway Film Fleadh. As Ireland's leading film festival, it will allow us an opportunity to present our film to the global industry, in addition to the market opportunities it would provide. Following our premiere in Galway, we will then be targeting top tier European festivals like Venice, Cannes and the Berlinale, alongside prestigious short-specific festivals like Clermont-Ferrand and Oberhausen, as well as festivals like Sundance, Toronto and Palm Springs in the International market. We will also look at festivals that more specifically celebrate comedy or the thriller, which will give us an opportunity to take advantage of the genre crossovers in the film.







Budget

Covid Compliance

Careful consideration will be taken regarding compliance with Covid recommendations and restrictions, and all crew members have completed Screen Skills Ireland's COVID-19 Return to Work course. At present our intention is to cast one of the principal roles of Martin or Denise along with the child role of Oscar from the same household. This will make the blocking of the actors significantly easier with the necessary restrictions. However, we are also preparing for

the possibility of casting each of Martin, Denise and Oscar from different households, and thinking of how that will affect the blocking and framing. We will also be providing more than enough hand sanitiser for all cast and crew.



