



**AA GILL ON PORN
ON THE BRAIN**

► 'One of the least successful
televisual ideas I can remember'

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Baby, just look at you now

The former child star Dexter Fletcher wasn't the obvious choice to direct *Sunshine on Leith* — but his success with *Wild Bill* should have given us a clue, says Matt Mueller

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His moment: Dexter Fletcher (Larry Busacca)



A punchy Scottish musical about a doting Leith family, featuring songs by twin musicians who make up one of the most identifiably Caledonian bands of all time — is there anyone less likely than a dyed-in-the-wool north Londoner to tackle the assignment of directing

Sunshine on Leith?

Dexter Fletcher, it's fair to say, might be few people's obvious candidate for the task, despite his own shiny musical pedigree (once seen, his brief but memorable appearance as Baby Face in *Bugsy Malone* is never forgotten). Following his acclaimed directorial debut, *Wild Bill*, Fletcher was looking to take a hard left turn with his next big-screen gig. He passed on scripts about football hooligans, East End gangsters and kitchen-sink turmoil. "It was all flattering, but I trusted my instinct and my heart to wait until something came along where I went, 'I have no idea how I do this, but these people are taking me seriously,'" he says.

The duo behind DNA Films, Andrew Macdonald and Allon Reich, wanted an outsider's perspective for their adaptation of the smash Scottish stage musical, constructed by the writer Stephen Greenhorn in *Mamma Mia!*-esque fashion on the back of numbers by the Proclaimers. The producers had been impressed by Fletcher's handling of *Wild Bill*'s emotionally complex man-boy divide, as well as the terrific performances he extracted from a cast including Charlie Creed-Miles and Will Poulter. Fletcher made *Wild Bill* warm, touching, funny and compelling — all elements that *Sunshine on Leith* needed in spades.

He was keen to avoid a "thistles and shortbread and kilts" vision of Scotland that other south-of-the-border directors might have stamped on *Sunshine on Leith*; his infectiously buoyant personality and love of musicals were two further ticks in the plus column. The Proclaimers themselves — Charlie and Craig Reid, still best known for their rambunctious hit *I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)* — gave Fletcher carte blanche to do what he wanted with their songs. One of his first duties was to pore over the script with a copy of the brothers' lyrics beside him, to understand how Greenhorn had spun the socialist pair's often politically charged sentiments into the frothy love ditties sung by the cast.

"Letter from America is about Thatcher closing down industry, and in our story it's about a girl following her dream," Fletcher says. "But this isn't a film about their life. I'm sure some hard-core Proclaimers purists won't be happy, but it's the material that Stephen Greenhorn developed out of their songs. It's not my job to rework that; it's my job to use their songs in the most effective way in this story."

As with *Wild Bill*, *Sunshine on Leith* is all about family for Fletcher: the home-is-where-the-heart-is dynamic between the mother, father, sister and brother at the heart of Greenhorn's script. Peter Mullan and Jane Horrocks star as Leith's senior lovebirds, Rab and Jean, about to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary, with George MacKay (*How I Live Now*) and Freya Mavor (*Skins*) as their kids, and Antonia Thomas (*Misfits*) and Kevin Guthrie (the nobleman Lennox in James McAvoy's recent *Macbeth*) as their significant others.

Even with a story that begins in Afghanistan and follows MacKay and Guthrie's squaddies as they readjust to life back home, Fletcher appreciated that it was his task to put on a spirited show with *Sunshine on Leith*, even if "it's not as light-hearted as some musicals. It's hard to be frivolous when you have a man finding out he has a daughter he never knew about on his 25th wedding anniversary."

As an actor, Fletcher has appeared in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *The Bounty* and Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* on the big screen, and *Press Gang*, *Band of Brothers* and the housewives' favourite *Hotel Babylon* on the small. He has endured the giddy highs and crushing lows that afflict most actors' career paths, and he has also plumbed the depths in his personal life. He abused booze and drugs; he was declared bankrupt; and he was the Cockney quizmaster on Channel 4's *GamesMaster* in the early 1990s. Some might see that as a nadir, particularly for a young actor who had previously worked with David Lynch, Al Pacino and Anthony Hopkins. But he doesn't see it that way, chalking it all up as necessary experience that brought him to where he is now.

"I was in *Bugsy Malone* when I was nine, and everyone went, 'You're amazing!'" he says. "I was like, 'Am I? Okay!' As a child, when you get on screen, it's by luck, not design. I'm not a child now, and *Wild Bill* didn't happen by luck, it happened by design. This time, I get to be more in control of my destiny."

He credits his Lithuanian wife, Dalia Ibelhauptaite, an opera director, with extracting him, first, from an I-hate-acting funk and later instilling in him the confidence to step behind a camera and call his own shots. (Alan Rickman introduced the pair, and was Fletcher's best man at their 1997 wedding.) "She opened up my world," he says. And directing does feel like a second chance. At the Baftas earlier this year, he heard an echo in Ben Affleck's acceptance speech as best director for *Argo* of the one he had planned to give if he had won best British debut for *Wild Bill* (he lost to the duo behind *The Imposter*).

"My speech wasn't as concise but it was along similar lines, about getting a second chance," he says. "I was also going to say, 'I was holding out for a lifetime-achievement award because I've been acting since I was six, and here I am winning best debut.'"

As for what he'd like to tackle next, it will boil down to confidence and self-belief: building blocks that haven't always been firmly cemented in Fletcher's being. Even *Sunshine on Leith* brought its moments of doubt. Fletcher had to be convinced to go back to Edinburgh to reshoot the ending, delivering a bigger payoff for the audience with a crowd-belting rendition of *I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)*.

"My wife said, 'Why are you resistant?' I said, 'It's not that I'm resistant — I just feel like I failed.' She's like, 'Shut up!'" As Fletcher admits, he may have been an actor for 40 years but directing is still a learning curve, although he quickly realised he was being a tad foolish: "There was an incredible opportunity to elevate and I had to grab it. How often do you get offered the chance to shoot an extra week? That never would have happened on *Wild Bill*."

Thanks to Fletcher's two directing credits, the British film industry is now hot on his tail, and he's being courted for several projects. The risk he took in making a Scottish musical looks like the shrewdest move ever.

"I want to believe that all that time I sat in the dark at my computer going, 'One day, I want to direct something big', I was right," he says. "Maybe I'll fall on my face and look like an idiot, or maybe I'll succeed. But I might as well go for it. Now is my moment."

Sunshine on Leith is on general release and is reviewed in this section

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