

# Dexter Fletcher: Walking on Sunshine

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

Musical *Sunshine on Leith* is the most uplifting film you'll see this year. It follows the lives of two soldiers, lifelong friends, readjusting to life on Civvy Street. Described by *Time Out* as, "a wet, sloppy dog-kiss of a film," it's the absolute antithesis to many of its Scottish celluloid counterparts (think *Trainspotting*), thanks also to a rip-roaring soundtrack featuring some of the Proclaimers' finest hits. That's not to say the movie – based on a successful stage play of the same name – isn't without its demons: most notably themes of war and infidelity and the broken bodies and hearts that follow. The opening scene is especially harrowing.

"I had to be careful with that because I didn't want everyone thinking that it was going to be yet another really bleak take on Scotland," director Dexter Fletcher tells me over the phone from the United Kingdom. "But the beginning gives you some context for the lead guys. It shows the audience the awful circumstances they have come home from. That they're not just happy-go-lucky lads."

*Was it tricky to weave darkness into what is, overall, such a celebratory film?*

"It's about balance. It's what keeps it grounded. Everyone knows that life isn't a box of chocolates, it's not *Forrest Gump*, but you face the difficulties and move on. We don't skip over the realities of life. I didn't want it to be cheesy with every extra in the film jumping to the same emotional state as the leads, like in *Mamma Mia!*" A conscious effort was made by the London director to leave out Scottish clichés too: "I spent a lot of time up there as the film developed and of course, it's not all about kilts, haggis and shortbread. I wanted the movie to feel contemporary."



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01 — Dexter Fletcher

02 — Scene from *Sunshine on Leith*

British reviews have been overwhelmingly positive with the flick bagging a host of four-star reviews. I ask the director if he had any inkling during filming that he was producing something with which audiences would feel such a connection. "No, I certainly don't take those things for granted," he says. "Making a good film is hard. It just kind of rises from the mist of six weeks spent in the shadows of the editing room. But the filming was such fun. There was a lot of great acting, the young cast were full of energy and there was a sense that it was all coming together."

*How difficult was it to find actors who could sing?*

"Ultimately, singing you can fake, but acting you can't. I could have replaced their voices – and you'd probably have been none the wiser – but everybody wanted to have a go. We all knew Jane Horrocks could sing anyway. Peter Mullen told me that he's no great singer, but his voice is really quite beautiful in its own way. It's soulful. The young guys could all hold a tune too. But yeah, the acting was my main priority."

*The songs were chosen in part because of their lyrical relevance in order to advance the film's narrative. The Proclaimers do make a brief cameo early on, but did they have much input into the movie?*

"No, they were very generous and trusting," says Fletcher. "They loved the stage show, said they knew nothing about making films so to just get on with

it, good luck and they'll see us at the premiere!"

*Sunshine on Leith* is only Fletcher's second outing as director, but he's been in the business forever. As a boy he starred in *Bugsy Malone* and later as rebel, Spike, in cult British youth show, *Press Gang*. Other turns include *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Layer Cake* and the HBO war drama, *Band of Brothers*. His BAFTA-nominated directorial debut, *Wild Bill*, which Fletcher also co-wrote, won the Writers' Guild of Great Britain award for Best First Feature-Length Screenplay. I ask if his acting experience took the stress from the transition to directing.

"I think it helps. I certainly appreciate what the process is for the actors and while it's different for each one, at least I have an affinity. The older actors are such masters of their craft, you learn from them and to the young ones you're able to give the benefit of your experience. It's all very rewarding."

Songs and storyline aside, Edinburgh itself is a regular scene stealer with some incredible panoramic shots of the city. "I fought for a helicopter and flew around in that for a day," says Fletcher. "We just crossed our fingers and hoped and fortunately the sun shone for us. We've seen enough of the rainy versions. It's a beautiful, beautiful city and I wanted to show that."

*Sunshine on Leith is in cinemas now.*