

Guy Jenkin & Andy Hamilton interview: What We Did on our Holiday



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The team behind What We Did On Our Holiday tell us about the film, fake motorways, and the art of voicework in Peppa Pig...

What We Did On Our Holiday is the feature debut from the brains behind *Outnumbered*, Guy Jenkin and Andy Hamilton. It's a bold film, that stars David Tennant, Billy Connolly and Rosamund Pike. And we got to spend some time with the pair to chat about the movie. Here's how the conversation went...



I've just been reading about your film on the BBFC website. The extended guidance it gives to parents is as worth a look as always, but it did get me thinking if you had a family audience in mind when you wrote the film? And did you have to tune anything with the BBFC?

GJ: We haven't been in any negotiation! We don't really think about positioning the film when we're writing it. I suppose we think of it as a family film, in the sense that one of the starting points was this couple breaking up. But in a comic way, and from the kids' perspective. It's a big, modern problem. Lots of children have single parents, but we wanted to do it in a comic way. It tends to be dealt with in dark and heavy way usually. We wanted to deal with how parents who are breaking up come to deal with it in a grown up way.

Have you seen the film *Pride*? Or Chris Morris' *Four Lions*? They're both interesting parallels, given that they mine comedy from unexpected places. That you can get comedy from anything, and you should.

GJ: *Four Lions* is one of my favourite films of the last few years.

AH: It's true. Especially serious things are up for comedy. Because that's what life is like. Even in the darkest crisis, what you often remember is the moment of absurd comedy that broke through it. So we think it's actually a very good thing.

But going back to your original question. We are always confounded - whether it happens in film or TV - when somebody says to us 'what kind of person will watch this'? And we kind of go, well we would! Because we don't make those kinds of distinctions, and I don't know many writers who do.

I don't know of writers, but I've heard it from directors who end up forced down a particular road.

AH: Yeah.

GJ: It happens. But that wasn't our experience. Nobody said that we needed to change anything to go for a 12A audience.

AH: We were given a lot of freedom.

GJ: I think we think it's more honest, true to life, to write about serious matters. And also not to do something that's gentle. We like to put, ideally, belly laughs on one side, and really serious moments on the other. So they kind of come up against each

other.

I remember when I was younger, watching *Mrs Doubtfire*. And the ending always got me. It was the first big film I'd seen that dealt with divorce in a realistic way, talking to children. I'm taken with the idea that you've tried to do this from the kids' point of view. Was that based on experience of friends of yours? Why did you choose that perspective?

GJ: It's not specific friends' experience, I don't think. Just because it seems to be something that percolates. And I think children, younger children, often have a fear of it. They do discuss it at school. And because they see other children whose parents are getting divorced, there is that fear. The lack of security. It is a big problem.

AH: It's a potent fear I think for young children, so we wanted to write a film that showed the adults behaving in an absurd and ridiculous way, from the children's point of view.

I like that the film has lots of adults in it but not many grown-ups.

AH: Yes!

GJ: And the children, even when they do things in the film, it's logical, from their point of view.

AH: There's a real logic to what they do, which we won't mention. But none of the children, the character of Lottie, have found themselves cast in the role of the glue in the family. To be the most adult one. I think the other characteristic of our writing is that we quite like pushing and observing adult behaviour when people get at their most absurd and ridiculous. Because it is funny, and it is universal. We all do it, we all have moments where, in retrospect, we think I really let myself down there.



I'd like to talk about two of the female characters in the film, who I thought were really good in different ways. It's the characters of Abi and Margaret. In the case of Abi [played by Rosamund Pike], in days gone by hers would be the 'nagging wife' role, and I think many still fall into that trap. That the man is seen being the fun one, and gets all the attention and empathy, and she's doing the logical stuff, and comes across less likeable for it.

That doesn't happen here though.

Also, there's the excellent character of Margaret, who you build throughout the film and I don't want to spoil. But it's a far more interesting character as a result of where her path leads.

Can you talk about capturing those two characters in particular?

AH: We talked about it a lot. The problem with women roles in social comedies is that they're often cast as the voice of reason. And so quite often you have a dynamic where the male is being infantile, and the female is being reasonable. Which means that for the actresses, there's not much comic elbow room.

We did a count up, in terms of unreasonable behaviour, and across the whole movie, they [David Tennant and Rosamund Pike's characters] come out equally. They behave in equally childish ways towards each other.

GJ: It's important for the children's point of view. That they have parents who are equally unreasonable, but in different ways. I'm glad you picked out the character of Margaret, because some people have skated over her a little bit.

AH: And it's a fantastic performance from Amelia [Bullmore]. She's suggested [redacted for spoiler reasons] fantastically. We talked about her a lot, and how much we should show. And in the end we decided that she should show very little, apart from in a couple of moments.

Just enough crumbs?

AH: Yeah. I'm pleased we did that. It gave Amelia room. She did a brilliant job of communicating.

How brutal was the edit?

AH: Not that brutal. I think our first cut was 110?

GJ: Our first serious cut anyway!

AH: Well, you have the first sprawling cut that you think we'd better not show this to anyone! The first serious cut was about 110, 112 I think. Then we came down to 94, whatever it was.

GJ: I like watching films that are 94 minutes as a spectator. I think it's rare that you don't come out, even from a good film, thinking I wish it could have been a little bit shorter.

There are two things about filming it that struck me. Number one, can you talk about the logistics of filming a traffic jam on the motorway?

AH: It's built! Our CGI guys will be thrilled to hear you ask that!

Ha. Did you watch *Locke*? A film about a drive down the motorway and they did it for real. They did that at night, and the logistics were scary!

GJ: The wide shot is CGI. It has a motorbike moving in it, so you buy it! For the tighter stuff, we took over the car park near a motorway in Glasgow!

You're one step away from getting a Spider-Man movie here, y'know...

AH: [Laughs] Yeah! But I tell you, you're right. One of the hardest things, and we've come against the problem loads of times, is it's very hard to predict where there'll be a traffic jam! We've been in situations where we've said that junction there! Half five! That's always rammed! And you turn up on Bank Holiday Friday, and it's flowing perfectly. You can't afford to gamble on it.

Come to the Midlands, we've got tons of them there.

AH: We've even toyed with causing traffic jams! Just breaking down in the middle of a road somewhere!

The other thing about filming: can we talk about the way you light your film too? You don't use make up on children, for instance, and want the film to look as natural as possible. But how does that play out when you're outside? When you're on a Scottish beach for a week or two, how does that change things?

AH: I think they did use a bit of make-up then, when the kids would get a bit red in

the sun. They occasionally dampened them down a bit. To be fair, a lot of films won't use make-up on kids. They have a natural colour and they don't need it. We used a very good DoP. Martin [Hawkins], who worked on *Outnumbered*. He's a very good problem solver, has a lot of ingenuity.

GJ: We use cameras that are more forgiving in focus So that we knew the children were going to move, and I think that was really important, to give us that leeway.

Andy, can I ask you about your work on *Peppa Pig*?

Emily Elephant is the same size as Rebecca Rabbit, who is the same size as Kylie Kangaroo, who is the same size as Doctor Hamster. You play Dr Elephant the dentist in *Peppa Pig*, but do you not get biological input into your *Peppa Pig* character, and more pertinently his offspring?

AH: No! I get no creative input whatsoever! I go in, I try and think elephant! I spend a few minutes beforehand working on my backstory. I think my mother may have been shot by ivory poachers.

I get the impression you've been asked this question before!

AH: Do you know what, I genuinely haven't!

I go in, and I'm purely a voice artist. It's actually strangely relaxing, because they will give you very specific notes. Can you just make the 'but' at the beginning a bit louder and longer, then be quicker on the next four words, and at the end, can you just do a little laugh? And you do it, and they go yeah, but can you make the 'but' a little bit shorter and a fraction less loud, and then instead of a laugh, make a harumph sound?

It's highly technical, and you kind of surrender yourself to the process. And it's quite good, because me and Guy have spent our lives driving actors mad, and to be on that end... You just go listen, I'm a technician here. The guys there are great, they've got it in their heads how it will be.

But there was a study that showed the elephant dentist had been constructive in overcoming childrens' fear of dentists!

Is that right?

AH: I don't know, but someone showed it to me! I don't see how!

GJ: People would be disappointed to go to the dentist and found a human being rather than a large elephant!

AH: I'm not aware of him handling any dental equipment! It'd be a great scene, watching him trying to pick some of the stuff up!

You've got a David Lynch *Peppa Pig* spin-off coming here.

AH: *The Elephant Man Dentist!* Yeah!

Before I get chucked out, can I just find out what you're up to next? Are you looking to do more film work?

AH: I'd love to do more film work. As always, it's whoever says yes. We always have six or seven projects out there swimming around, and you're just waiting for one to get picked up. So we don't know!

GJ: Our careers depend on someone saying we'll make that, in which case we do that one, rather than one of the others!

Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin, thank you very much!