



A film by Richard Bracewell

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Certificate 15 / Running time: 90 minutes

LOGLINE

Two schoolfriends in a dead-end town in the East of England join forces with a green-fingered grandad to fence a shed of weed that the old man has accidentally grown on his allotment. Together they form an alliance of age and youth, an unlikely partnership of the forgetful and the forgotten.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

The badlands of East Anglia. A young man (Jayce) is released from prison after serving time for a crime he didn't commit. Broke and looking for answers, he goes into business with an elderly neighbour (Kev) to fence a shed of weed the old man has grown on his allotment. When their activities attract the unwanted attention of some local dimwit hoodlums, Jayce and Kev are forced to confront their past mistakes, discovering a mutual respect they never thought possible.

DIRECTORS STATEMENT(S)

The lovechild of Greta Gerwig and Shane Meadows

Patrick Dalton and I wrote the script for *Chicken Town* in a place somewhere between anger and despair. You know it better as the Mulberry Bush near Waterloo Station in London. The pub is a stone's throw from BFI headquarters. We haven't measured that distance but it's tempting when they ignore your emails.

What made us angry? That the marginalisation of the young and old is acceptable collateral damage in the pursuit of power by a wheezing, scab-ridden elite. (I'm talking about *Chicken Town*.) This became our central theme: an alliance of age and youth, an unlikely partnership of the forgetful and the forgotten.

We wrote in London but conjured a far more exotic setting for the film: the Fens. This is the area in the East of England between Norfolk and Lincolnshire. I didn't have to dream the place, I just had to look out of the window: East Anglia is my home.

With the exception of Jayce, our characters don't harbour grand dreams of escape: what they're missing is a family (a word that crops up a lot in this piece). If *Chicken Town* has any kind of lesson it's about finding a different kind of family – discovering these relationships in places you least expect.

We were determined that everything about the narrative would be low-stakes. No guns, no threat to life. Our characters exist in a fantasy world: it's better than the real thing. The lads strut like gangsters but the worst they can do is poke each other in the eye – a Laurel and Hardy homage with our own invented term 'cockfinger' which my spell-checker still refuses to recognise. Please don't try it at home.

We wanted *Chicken Town* to be realistic but not realism. The ambitions and world-view of our characters would be homely and familiar. Old man Kevin Maddams is matter-of-fact when he reveals the weed he's been cultivating for a neighbour; he sells it to a buyer who's more excited by ordering a fried breakfast without being told off by his wife.

A story about the contradictions of modern family life; a film with both a heart and a conscience. If Greta Gerwig and Shane Meadows had a love-child we hope it might resemble *Chicken Town*.

Banal but not boring. Creating the world of Chicken Town

Three contemporary British photographers were the visual inspiration: Paul Hart, Iain Sarjeant, and Dan Wood.

I stumbled on the work of East Anglian photographer Paul Hart when I was looking for something to prop up my laptop during an online teaching session in lockdown. Hart's ghostly Fen landscapes are lonely, dislocating places; but one thing they're not is empty. Every inch of terrain is cultivated. It's a man-made environment, unforgiving and not pretty. If Kent is the Garden of England, we're the salad drawer at the bottom of the fridge.

Scottish photographer Iain Sarjeant develops similar themes on an urban canvas. His subjects are empty car parks and neatly-trimmed privet hedges. In the hands of another photographer these would be the backgrounds; in Sarjeant's pictures they're the source. This was a key inspiration for Holmbeach, our imaginary setting for *Chicken Town*.

A flat, abstract landscape is one of several debts we owe to *Fargo*, the major film reference for *Chicken Town*. Joel Coen has described *Fargo* as 'film blanc'. He says: 'it was shot on cloudy days – no mountains or trees – only desolate flatlands extending into the distance.' Ours is the same depopulated landscape, all function and utility. 'Banal but not boring' is how Roger Deakins describes the aesthetic.

Fargo was also an inspiration for its method. I wanted static, detached capture, favouring 50mm lenses but switching to hand-held where performance dictated it. We added OTS composition from Julius Avery's 2008 short *Jerrycan*, a key reference for cinematographer Tansy Simpson. It helped us portray our characters as being trapped in the middle of nowhere.

Into this, the exotic is introduced (Ethan Coen)

Writing in his book *Film Stories* R Boston Palmer describes 'the deliberate shock of the ordinary landscape with extraordinary characters and events. *Fargo* aims to be both homely and exotic. They accentuate the dull and uneventful nature of the mid-west against the outlandish events in the film'.

Because *Chicken Town* is a comedy rather than a comic thriller, the outlandishness of our characters is more in their language and fantasies. It's sociopath vs salt of the earth. Kevin Maddams is like Marge Gunderson – rendered invisible by identity, both with dodgy bladders.

Dan Wood is another social realist photographer from the Celtic fringe. (We're more Viking fringe in East Anglia but outsiders all the same.) The following passage from *British Journal of Photography* (August 2022) struck a chord, describing Wood's subjects:

'Often these are financially poorer, regional towns where the siren song of Brexit rang loudest, and where labels of right and wrong are tricky to assign... They are left behind by changing economic patterns, frequently causing problematic politics to take root. It is the smaller, more remote centres – whose fall from economic stability was slower, less precipitous, less fought over – where the soul of Britain is now being contested. A place in transition without a clear destination.'

About The Cast:

GRAHAM FELLOWS | Kev Maddams

Graham is the creator of the legendary comedy character John Shuttleworth, as well as being the composer and performer of the top 5 hit Jilted John. As John Shuttleworth he has played all the characters in the longest running BBC Radio sitcom THE SHUTTLEWORTHS, as well as touring extensively throughout the UK since the early 1990s.

As an actor he has appeared in CORONATION STREET (in two guises), the popular ITV series HEARTBEAT, the BBC series IDEAL and COOGAN'S RUN, Sky TV's TIME GENTLEMEN, PLEASE as well as two children's TV series BAD PENNY and DANGERVILLE. He also played Eric Sykes in the prestigious drama biopic HATTIE. Upcoming appearances include the BBC series THE POWER OF PARKER and the feature film CHICKEN TOWN. As a voice artist he provided all the voices for the BAFTA winning STAGE FRIGHT made by Aardman.

Graham is also the creator of the comedy characters Brian Appleton and Dave Tordoff and the maker of three films, IT'S NICE UP NORTH, SOUTHERN SOFTIES – both of which were released theatrically and aired on Sky Arts – and most recently the critically acclaimed documentary FATHER EARTH.

LAURENCE RICKARD | Greebo Mechanic

Larry is a BAFTA-winning comedy writer and actor. He was a principal writer and star of the critically-lauded sketch show *Horrible Histories*, which won more than 20 major awards, including two National Comedy Awards and multiple BAFTAs. His move into features followed, beginning with the Shakespeare comedy BILL (BBC Films/BFI), which led to work on such films as PADDINGTON 2 and Aardman's CHICKEN RUN sequel.

In 2019 the sitcom GHOSTS was launched on BBC1, becoming the most watched comedy on UK television, spawning five series, a best-selling book and three BAFTA nominations. The American remake on CBS has just been renewed for a fifth and sixth season, and is the most watched comedy on US television. Further international versions are in production in France, Germany, Greece and Australia.

Larry is currently co-writer of the smash hit BBC1 sitcom AMANDALAND which has recently been recommissioned for a second series.

ALISTAIR GREEN | Mr Green

Comedian and actor Alistair Green is a viral sensation with over 100,000 Twitter followers, 39,000 Instagram followers, and millions of views of his hilarious, satirical character sketches. His videos have been turned into two full-length feature films, ALISTAIR GREEN: VOLUME 1 and ALISTAIR GREEN: VOLUME 2 which have sold out multiple performances at The Prince Charles Cinema in London.

Alistair's acting credits include BUFFERING (ITV2), THIS TIME WITH ALAN PARTRIDGE (BBC), BREEDERS (Sky One), PLS LIKE (BBC3), THE GREAT (Starz), THE MASH REPORT (BBC2), FLOWERS (C4), STATH LETS FLATS (C4), and MANDY (BBC2), and the highly anticipated upcoming film THE ELECTRICAL LIFE OF LOUIS WAIN.

ETHANIEL DAVY | Jayce appeared in the award-winning Adult Life Skills and recently joined the cast of Hollyoaks as mysterious guest character 'J'. Workshop taught him the value of thinking on his feet; and it has given him the confidence to write and direct his own work.

AMELIE DAVIES| Paula says, 'I was at Workshop for three years and it really is the reason I'm an actor; the way they teach acting is eye-opening and no one does improvisation like Workshop! I'm now training at drama school in London and loving discovering so many new practices and different ways of approaching a performance.'

RAMY BEN FREDJ | Lee Matthews Jnr trained at a number of Nottingham based acting groups. He stills performs on stage but, like Ethaniel, is writing his own screenplays that he hopes to develop professionally.

HUGO CARTER | Vincenzo before Workshop, Hugo originally trained to become a dancer and move into musical theatre. One day he watched This is England and fell in love with acting and he still carries the same passion for it 11 years later.

EVERETT GASKIN | Sticks has been attending Workshop since he was 16. In recent classes he's been character-building from scratch which led to eventually taking these characters out in public and 'becoming them'. Everett says: 'It was fun! I look forward to continue acting in the future and to carry on attending these sessions to further my skills'.

THE TELEVISION WORKSHOP

The Television Workshop was set up in 1983 to train young, Midlands-based actors and to open the door to the TV industry to working class kids. In its 43 years, many of those kids have gone on to incredible success in the industry, including BAFTA and EMMY winning actors, directors, writers, producers and editors and even a couple of Oscar nominees. The success of the training reaches far and wide.

The Workshop bursary scheme allows it to audition on talent alone, an ethos it will never lose, no matter what the obstacles are in raising the funds to support it.

The Workshop may not save lives but it certainly changes lives, giving working class young people the belief that there is a place for them in the TV and film industry and in any other industry they may choose to work in.

The Workshop prides itself on ensuring that its students leave knowing that no matter what your background or circumstances, your voice counts and talent and hard work can and will pay off.

About the filmmakers:

RICHARD BRACEWELL | Director & Co-writer

I teach on the film course at Norwich University of the Arts and invited ten of my graduates to crew on *Chicken Town* as assistants and trainees. We teamed youth with experience. Production Designer Simon Scullion was just back from opening a show on Broadway. His art department team had fewer than two professional credits between them. Make-up designer Julie Nightingale was on furlough from *Gladiator 2* when she got the call for *Chicken Town*, swapping the Hilton in Malta for a greasy-spoon on the A11 just north of Attleborough. Julie's husband is a carpenter who built my house in Norwich. That's how we rolled on *Chicken Town*.

A multi-character, many-threaded comic narrative, shot in 15 days with a cast of newcomers and a crew of film school graduates. What could possibly go wrong?

It wasn't my first time. In 2005 I debuted my first feature in competition at AFI Fest. *The Gigolos* was a semi-improvised satire starring British grande dames Susannah York and Anna Massey. I directed and shot the film on 16MM short ends. BFI picked up *The Gigolos* for release on its own label. The producer remarked that it was 'nice to be working with a director who isn't dead'.

By both directing and operating I was able to give *The Gigolos* an intimacy which would have been hard to achieve with a bigger crew. We were able to take creative risks – guerilla locations in the most expensive square mile of real estate in the UK. This achieved an immediacy and fake realism described by The Hollywood Reporter as 'a provocative glimpse at open secrets'. Hard-learned, these were lessons I brought to bear in the making of *Chicken Town*. Don Siegel plus funny.

Since *The Gigolos* I've directed feature film comedies on what a fellow producer described to me as 'proper budgets', including the Shakespeare comedy *Bill* for Christine Langan at BBC Films. So I knew there was more than one way to make a movie, just as there's more than one way to skin a cat. Whether either should be attempted is a matter for debate.

But 'proper budgets' demand compromise and tact. Most of all, they take time. These things were in short supply in the land of recrimination and blame that was Lockdown Britain. Ours was a sick country still nursing its Brexit hangover, an recalcitrant drunk taking a swing anyone foolish enough to get too close. *Chicken Town* was something to make us feel, just for one moment, like someone cared.

PATRICK DALTON | Co-writer

It is a terrible burden to suddenly be given everything you want.

I'd been writing for years but talking about writing for much, much longer. Endless chats in pubs with friends about great ideas you've had for films which you'd never get around to writing are the perfect safe spaces to inhabit when it feels like there's little chance of what you've written actually being picked up. Sitting in coffee shops and other public spaces on a laptop very visibly writing a screenplay can help make you feel like a real writer. (I mean, what's the point of writing if nobody can see you doing it? It's like that old 'If a tree falls in a forest and there's nobody around to hear it, does it really make a sound?' conundrum.)

The thing is though, after setbacks, failed projects, multiple unsuccessful meetings and if you're really lucky a couple of options to your name, you can begin to feel perhaps it might not happen for you. You see it written in the faces of friends and family when they ask 'How's it going?' in tones reserved for those going through chemotherapy. You respond with something like 'getting there' or 'still plugging away' and they nod with pity in their eyes, tilting their head to one side sympathetically. You begin to feel like perhaps you might be wasting your life chasing a foolish dream. In short, you feel like a fraud.

Then one day you find yourself a week away from shooting your first feature film, in a rehearsal space watching actors saying lines that you've written, and the realisation hits you: 'I'm not a fraud. No, no, it's much worse than that. What I am is an imposter.' But let's rewind back a few years...

Mostly my writing had been confined to a moderately-successful series of what can best be described as 'toilet books'. *Shit London* focused on photographs of unintentionally funny sights seen around the city (shops with terrible puns for names, bad graffiti, strange objects left on the street) and the stories that might lie behind them. Much to my surprise the associated blog was archived in its entirety by the British Library as a piece of work that would provide a snapshot of life in the UK in the 2010s.

Director Richard Bracewell read my blog, saw god-knows-what in it and approached me to collaborate on an idea he'd had for a Christmas film. It took at least two years of knowing & working with Richard to finally shake the nagging feeling that he wasn't part of an elaborate practical joke being played on me by some unknown party. The film we wrote has yet to be made although we had many hopeful meetings with a large American distributor who shall remain nameless. Lionsgate made us jump through various hoops (not literally) before showing us the door (literally) when we refused to rework our Christmas story into a film about a wedding instead.

We had initially envisioned *Chicken Town* as a television series. Hampered only by the fact we didn't know how to write a television series, our script quickly became a mess of needlessly-convoluted plot points and lengthy monologues to explain those plot points. However, we loved the characters and the world we'd created for them to inhabit – a dead end semi-rural town on the Norfolk/Lincolnshire border – and we wanted to give them life. We reworked our idea into a feature, dialled back the scope of the story and narrowed in on the core characters.

The story follows a couple of teenagers who form an unlikely alliance with a pensioner who's somewhat lost his way in life. In fact all of our characters are a bit lost in their own ways, stuck in a boring town with no prospects and imprisoned by the limits of their own imaginations. It's a story very much of its time inasmuch as young people today face an uncertain future whilst the older generation who grew up in a very different world struggle, sometimes wilfully, to understand their plight.

Inspired by the success of Mark Jenkin's *Bait* and *Enys Men* (both shot on indie budgets and with film school crews earning their first credits) we began to wonder if we could apply a similar approach to making a comedy. The amount of comedy being commissioned in the UK at the moment is woeful, the lowest it's been for years. When you look at comedy features being made the picture is even bleaker. To borrow some words from Liz Truss: That. Is. A. Disgrace.

We set out to see if we could try making a comedy film in a new way.

SIMON SCULLION | Production Designer

In April 2023, I found myself driving across the Fen flatlands of East England with *Chicken Town* director Richard Bracewell by my side. We were location hunting, looking for key exterior sites. Inspired by the photos of this landscape taken by Paul Hart and his book *Farmed*, we were looking for places that captured the essence of this flat, depopulated and largely agricultural region. Our film is situated in this environment. A slightly liminal and alien environment. It was land reclaimed from the North Sea. A landscape created by human hands.

The key factor when designing this film was the choice of locations. This was the design process. These were the main design decisions. Along with the open countryside that would mark the beginning and end of the film, the bulk of the story takes place in a small nondescript, quiet town. An Everytown. Armed with a notion of how we wanted the film to look – composed, largely depopulated, and capturing a sense of its English setting without being either too quirky or social realist – we proceeded to gather together the locations.

Chicken Town is a comedy and the role of the design was to play it straight. No quirky décor or obvious signposts to the humour apart from the odd character prop. It's a very real and believable world. It was as much a case of deciding what not to show, what to leave out as much as what to present on screen. It's a limited world which has few characters and is generally unpopulated by extra personnel. Capturing the right tone for each setting at every location was the mission. The design approach was to allow the story to unfold and the characters to play out the humour and narrative in an environment which had a neutrality to it but at the same time was descriptive and which has its own individual and distinctive look.

TANSY SIMPSON | Cinematographer

'Want to make a movie about a weed-growing grandad?' That's how our director hooked me: I read the script and laughed out loud. I read it again and thought, hang on, he's had me here, this isn't about the grandad – this is about the kids. And that's it – the very heart of *Chicken Town*. Yes it's funny, but boy does it pack an emotional punch! So I willingly jumped aboard the adventure, excited to find a way to visually connect the audience to this world and its array of loveable characters.

From the beginning we were clear that the landscape of Norfolk was a character in itself. Something about the region is forgotten, and its depopulated expanse is key to contextualising the characters' world. In fact this environment is in many ways what grounds the comedy. We wanted this vast expanse of nothingness to feel ever present.

Early on, Richard shared with me photographer Paul Hart's *Farmed*. The work has beauty whilst evoking a sense of loss and emptiness. This is thanks to minimal and expansive frames, the tonality of black and white capture, and a compositional use of negative space. You question the opportunity of the expanse because of how it is presented. This is a duality we wanted to draw upon: the pull between vastness as opportunity and vastness as a confinement. When the audience first meet Jayce he's leaving prison. He looks out across a spacious field and toys with a sprouting plant – is this freedom and opportunity or is this place his cage?

There were two other British photographers whose work informed the look: Dan Wood's series *Suicide Machine*, and Ian Sarjeant's *Out of the Ordinary*. One influenced the way we considered people within the frame, and the other on how to find something different within the mundane.

So much of this work was framed in 4x4 which we knew wasn't our aspect ratio, but we could consider the symmetry and use of negative space in a similar way within a 16x9 frame. We also liked the slight de-saturation of the colour palette and a subtler contrast. Giving texture and a slight aged feel without removing us from the contemporary.

And so our look was developed with three guiding principles:

- Bland, but not boring
- Drama exists within the 'ordinary'
- Realistic, but not social realism

There was no question that we would use the Alexa Mini LF, so the big consideration for me was the lensing. What glass was going to really help us cut that digital sharpness and speak to the qualities we were looking for? Focus Canning in London were amazing – we went to them to test and found our winners almost immediately: TLS rehoused and speed boosted Mamiya Sekor 645 medium format lenses. These are beautiful if particular lenses! They offer vintage aberrations and a softer contrast whilst maintaining a high resolution, giving a texture and quality that was exactly what we were after.

TOM WOOD | Producer

Nodge Films is committed to bringing fresh, regional talent into the UK film industry and to tell stories about people in parts of the UK that often get overlooked. *Chicken Town* is a perfect project for both these goals.

The film gives first-feature credits to a long list of young actors and filmmakers. Seven of the cast come from The Television Workshop in Nottingham. We are certain that these actors will join others from the Workshop in establishing themselves on the international stage. A large number of the production crew were students or recent graduates from the Norwich University of the Arts, showcasing the skills that their school of Film & Moving Image is equipping the next generation of film makers with.

We are also pleased that the film's setting in Lincolnshire and Norfolk is shining a light on a part of the country which is often the backdrop for rustic, rural stories... or otherwise completely overlooked. Beautiful and soulful as this part of the world is, we also want to show that contemporary stories can be told here.

Chicken Town is part of the new movement in independent British filmmaking. It's a project that was started completely outside the film establishment, with financing and support from people who share our ideas about telling unconventional stories in an unconventional way. We are very proud to show what can be done even when a project isn't showered with budget, resources and connections. We hope it encourages other people to make films the way we've made *Chicken Town*, and to trust young people to do amazing things with their first opportunities in film.