

BERNARD AND THE GENIE



Genie In A Bottle

THIRTY YEARS AGO, BBC ONE screened a TV movie that, to this day, is recalled with a glowing smile by those that caught it on the night of 23 December 1991. The fact that *Bernard And The Genie* hasn't been repeated even once since that day makes it even more remarkable that we're still talking about it, three decades on.

CHRISTMAS NUTS

The irony of *Bernard And The Genie's* weird obscurity, though, is how omnipresent writer Richard Curtis's other Chrimbo-themed movie is. Since its release in 2003, *Love Actually* has become one of the mainstays of the Christmas TV schedules, a big warm hug of a film, festooned with tinsel and good cheer.

Of course, had *Bernard And The Genie* not been a little TV movie but a major league studio film, its moments might well be as iconic as Hugh Grant gyrating around a barren 10 Downing Street or Andrew Lincoln's creepy

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DIRECTOR PAUL
WEILAND LOOK BACK
AT A FESTIVE
FAVOURITE

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

cue cards on Keira Knightley's doorstep. As it is, few bar those of a certain vintage know the comic power of Rowan Atkinson's cries of "Enter ye, enter ye!" or Denis Lill's torrent of tall tales.

Richard Curtis had always been a Christmas nut. His favourite film was and is *White Christmas* and he'd already frolicked in the festive sandbox with *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* in 1988. A fan not only of that 1954 Bing Crosby evergreen, but of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and *Ghost*, Curtis was, he tells *SFX*, "in the mood for a bit of cinematic magic".

For such a traditionally festive flick, the origins of *Bernard And The Genie* came in the unlikely setting of Uganda, while on a Comic Relief trip alongside Lenny Henry. The idea Curtis and his travelling companion came up with involved a meek art dealer, soon to be named Bernard Bottle, who, after discovering an ancient, magical lamp, buddies up with a 2,000-year-old genie played by – who else? – Sir Lenny of Henry. →

“The role of Josephus was definitely written especially for Lenny,” Curtis tells *SFX*. “We came up with it together, or I came up with it because I was travelling with him. To have cast anyone else would have been a friendship disaster!”

Having worked with Curtis on various Comic Relief projects, Paul Weiland signed on as director, suggesting a then-unknown Alan Cumming as the titular Bernard.

“We got so lucky with Alan,” beams Curtis. “This was one of those moments that was the glory of the casting process. We saw quite a few more famous people for the part, but there’s always been this strange mixture needed for leading actors in my films – they have to be able to be funny and do the jokes, but they also need charm. The better proper actors they are, the better. Alan had done very little but was just perfect in the audition, and we didn’t have to cast ‘famous’ because we had Lenny and that was enough.”

“I absolutely loved making this film,” Cumming writes on his website. “I got to work with people I had admired for years like Lenny and Rowan, and I got to fly on a magic carpet! I also got to have breakfast in my trailer with

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Gary Lineker and to stand on Melvyn Bragg’s head,” he adds.

Gary Lineker and Melvyn Bragg are just two of the celebrity blink-and-you’ll-miss-’ems in *Bernard And The Genie* (both pop up, hilariously, as the result of Josephus’s magic). Bob Geldof, Trevor McDonald and political reporter Vincent Hanna also cameo – one of the benefits of having an address book as bulging as Richard Curtis’s.

“It was the early days of the cameo, and people were always quite flattered to be asked,” Weiland tells *SFX*. “Also, Richard was connected, so it was just a call from him, as he knows so many faces from Comic Relief.”

“Usually celebrity cameos start out as George Clooney and the Pope and you end up with two people from *Love Island*,” laughs Curtis. “Most of the people who ended up in it were friends.”

It’s the reality of Christmas movies and specials that, for all their wintery sheen and festive trimmings, they’re usually filmed far ahead of the actual holiday, with nary a real snowflake to be seen. Weiland can’t recall exactly – “it was a long time ago,” he sighs – but believes the movie was shot in September 1991.



“I’ll just give it a little rub,” said Bernard.



Henry, Atkinson and Cumming: loving life.



Kevin Allen is Keith’s brother.



“And look what popped up!”

“I remember that we were at Debenhams or one of those stores, and we had to shoot on a weekend,” he says. “So we had to dress one of the windows for Christmas.”

“I’ve always loved recreating Christmas,” says Curtis, “except the art department always makes the Christmas trees look too polished and professional, not the normal mess of normal trees. To save money, we actually shot Bernard’s flat in the place we were living in Camberwell, so that was a delight – two Christmases in one year!”

SIMPLER TIMES

Both Curtis and Weiland remember the shoot as a happy, uncomplicated one, with little in the way of interference from the BBC or annoying requests for changes.

“They just saw the cast and approved it,” Weiland says. “It’s not like that these days. I came from advertising where everyone interferes with everything, so it was a bit of a dream job, I have to say.”

"I remember it as a really happy shoot, surrounded by friends," Curtis recalls. "Paul was a really close friend and fun and funny to work with, and Lenny was his normal gorgeous self."

Although Curtis had enjoyed big-screen success with 1988's *The Tall Guy* (which he wrote), he was at the time more used to smaller-budgeted multi-camera sitcoms than something this ambitious. *Bernard And The Genie*, he says, provided "the gentlest introduction to the world of movies."

"It was a quick shoot," he continues. "No time for weariness to set in, or to put on the traditional stone of extra weight connected with too many bacon sandwiches in the morning. And I don't remember the edit as being too painful."

"We got lucky and, unlike some of my films, the first cut wasn't a throat-slitting catastrophe. It was also made at a time when TV Christmas audiences were stupidly high, so the feedback at the time was warm and friendly, as lots of people just watched it because they were watching whatever was on BBC One."

"I'm sorry it disappeared – but at least first time out lots of people did see it. I've always been so touched by anyone who remembers it properly – it must have found its way into the future at first on lots of dodgy home video tape recordings."

AMERICAN LIFE

One unlikely fan of *Bernard And The Genie* was the now-disgraced movie titan Harvey Weinstein. The Miramax heavyweight was, for a time, eager to turn this relatively obscure BBC curio into a mega-budget Hollywood film. *Variety* reported in 2001 that Miramax had optioned it, with American writer David Lindsay-Abaire taking a stab at the script.

"My memory is a bit vague on this," says Curtis, "but Harvey definitely bought the rights and there was all sorts of to-ing and fro-ing of various scripts over the years, with the plot moved to America, but it never got off the ground."



"Don't you dare close your eyes..."



This is actually a pretty good idea.

"It never really came to anything," adds Weiland. "[Weinstein] used to call it *BerNARD And The Genie*. They wanted to make it, but they didn't want to use anyone from it. They didn't want to use Lenny, they didn't want to use Alan. It was really weird. They loved it, but they didn't want to use anyone who made it successful. And they didn't want to use me as a director."

By this time, many of the main names behind and in front of the camera for *Bernard And The Genie* had made the leap to the big screen. Curtis, of course, became one of the most in-demand writers in the world off the back of *Four Weddings And A Funeral*, while Weiland was lured to Hollywood for 1994's *City Slickers II: The Legend Of Curly's Gold*.

Alan Cumming, meanwhile, upped sticks to the US in the mid-'90s and was soon the toast of Broadway, winning plaudits (and a Tony) for his role as the Master of Ceremonies in *Cabaret* and headlining the CBS crime drama *Instinct*.

Bernard And The Genie was released on VHS in the early '90s, and on a notoriously poor quality German-only DVD in 2016. For years it was almost a holy grail for TV fans, but now it's available to stream via BritBox, and its makers couldn't be more pleased that it's accessible.

"I remember it being a very nice experience and having some real fun," smiles Weiland. "Over the years, there have been a lot of fans of the Genie. It's always nice when you do something and it has longevity." ●

Bernard And The Genie is on BritBox now.



Bob Geldof: give him your money, for god's sake.

RICHARD CURTIS BACK AND FORTH

Some of Richard Curtis's other excursions into fantasy



Blackadder Back And Forth (1999)

Ten years after Edmund Blackadder met his maker in no-man's-land, the *Blackadder* team reconvened for this 33-minute special made specially for screening in the then-brand new Millennium Dome. Curtis described the film, which had a 1999-era Lord Blackadder travelling through time in a specially-built time machine, as "an irreverent trek through British history – a time travel adventure story consisting entirely of people who are either rude or stupid."



Doctor Who: "Vincent And The Doctor" (2010)

Richard Curtis was Steven Moffat's big signing for his first season as *Doctor Who* showrunner. Curtis previously exec-produced Moffat's Comic Relief *Doctor Who* skit "The Curse Of Fatal Death". His script for Matt Smith's Doctor is an unflinching but ultimately uplifting examination of depression – in this case, Vincent van Gogh's (poignantly played by Tony Curran). More archetypal Richard Curtis than a typical *Doctor Who* episode, it won nominations for both a Nebula (Outstanding Dramatic Presentation) and Hugo (Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form).



About Time (2013)

Domhnall Gleeson headlines as a twenty-something singleton who finds that he can travel through time after his father (Bill Nighy) confides in him that it's a power the male members of his family possess. It's as big-hearted as any of Curtis's other flicks (it's a rom-com in science fiction clothing). Gleeson brings oodles of charm to the role of the lovestruck Tim Lake, with a stellar turn by Rachel McAdams as the Kate Moss-obsessed Mary. The sci-fi aspects may not hold up to close scrutiny, but in Gleeson and McAdams he found an on-screen couple every bit as charming as Hugh Grant and Andie McDowell.

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