

WE ARE NOT ALONE

I L L E G A L

GHOSTS WRITERS LAURENCE RICKARD AND BEN WILLBOND MOVE INTO SF TERRITORY WITH

WE ARE NOT ALONE

A L I E N S

THEIR NEW COMEDY, WE ARE NOT ALONE, A UNIQUE MASH-UP OF ALIEN NATION AND *THE THICK OF IT*

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DECEMBER 2022 | SFX MAGAZINE | 59

WE ARE NOT ALONE

IT WAS ON A DISMAL, OVERCAST DAY a few years back that Ben Willbond found himself on a train bulleting through Peterborough when a thought struck him. What if aliens invaded planet Earth and ended up in Cambridgeshire? As a comedy writer he immediately recognised the rich comic promise of an alien invasion force setting up base in the middle of a quaint Cathedral city, 100 miles from London. When he got home, he shared the idea with his partner-in-laugh, Laurence Rickard.

"It just kept coming back to me," Rickard tells *SFX*. "Then, about three months later, I pitched it back to Ben: 'What about a series where we start it at the point where science fiction invasion movies usually stop?' So instead of the invasion being attempted, and the humans won, it's that we fought back, didn't win, they took over and then went, 'Ah, trying to run this place is really difficult. What do we do now?'"

Though Rickard and Willbond originally conceived *We Are Not Alone* as a series, it's as a feature-length TV film that it has landed. Already well-schooled in sitcom, the pair had penned a half-hour pilot and shopped it round a few possible homes, until UKTV proposed making it a 90-minute special instead.

"Initially we were like, yeah, we'll take that half hour and make it feature-length," says Rickard. "But it never works out like that. So we ended up putting a lot of the story of our script in the drawer and largely starting again."

CENTRE POINT

Lob *The Thick Of It* and *Alien Nation* into a blender, add a sprinkle of *V* and a dash of *The Office*, and you've got *We Are Not Alone*, a riotously funny reinvention of the alien invasion subgenre about a race of blue-haired aliens named the Goons who, having conquered Earth (now renamed Territory 78), are faced with the mundane reality of running the damn place.

What they need to know more about, they say, "is the common sense outlook of the man on the street." Enter council worker Stewart (newcomer Declan Baxter), who's tasked with giving these extraterrestrial aggressors a glowing PR make-over, while at the same time being pressured by a resistance group, the AAA (Anti-Alien Alliance), into stealing the plans to the mothership, and also putting up with a new housemate in the form of the adorably gormless Greggs (Joe Thomas).

In the film, though, it's not Peterborough that our new overlords have decided to rule from, it's the Lancashire market town of Clitheroe. "You can't run the country from here," an incredulous Stewart

Ben Willbond as Darrenth, Larry Rickard as Cirsh.



Amanda Abbington (left) stars as Greives.

tells them. "There's no motorways, the internet's crap, parking's a nightmare..."

"There's always that debate about how ridiculous it is that the country is run from this elite down in one corner and how detached we are from the north," says Rickard. "We thought, if the aliens were looking at the planet from above they'd go, it's just a series of landmasses and if you want to try and rule these people, the easiest place to do it is from the centre."

"We went down a real rabbit hole of the different ways in which mathematicians have worked out the geographical centre of the UK. There's so many ways of looking at it, but we narrowed in on about three, and they were all around Clitheroe. It just felt perfect."

Not that they're ripping the piss out of Clitheroe, Willbond insists. "The *Sunday Times* voted it one of the nicest places to live in the UK," he says. "I mean, we went there and it's lovely."

That mashing of the ordinary and the fantastic has been a hallmark of Willbond and Rickard's work since the Gilliamesque *Yonderland* and later BBC One's critically love-bombed *Ghosts*. *We Are Not Alone* is the writers' first foray into SF

waters, though, and you feel like it's been a long time coming. Willbond admits he's a "secret sci-fi nerd" and both reference *V* and *Alien Nation* as inspirations for *We Are Not Alone*. But, outside of *Red Dwarf* and *Hitchhiker's*, the SF sitcom is a rare and precious thing, especially in Blighty.

"It's easy to fall into a trap of feeling like you're not giving it due credit, to feel like you're slightly taking the mickey out of the genre and of the fans," suggests Rickard of the paucity of sci-fi comedy in this country. "And it's easy to feel like it's disingenuous and a little bit snarky. In *We Are Not Alone*, whilst a lot of it is incredibly silly, the thing that we're laughing at is human behaviour, rather than the aliens."

BLUE MOVIE

Of course the big question, when it came to filming, was what should these extraterrestrials look like? CG was off the table, as were any prosthetics that covered up too much of the actors' faces (why cast Vicki Pepperdine, Mike Wozniak and Joe Thomas just to drown them in latex?).

In the film, the aliens' ponytailed blue hair and chalk white faces have something of an inverse Andorian look about them. "Yeah, the design is a little nod to classic *Star Trek*," says





Mike Wozniak
as the
human-hating
Gordan. Boo!



If you're going
to write it, you
may as well be
in it too...



Vicki
Pepperdine
giving it some
as Trater.

Rickard. “Also, *Alien Nation*,” adds Willbond. “You look at that, and it’s quite a simple design but really practical.”

Let’s talk about the actors under that make-up. One of the film’s stand-out performances comes from Mike Wozniak, who played the starchy Brian, buddy to Greg Davies’s Dan, in Channel 4’s *Man Down*. Here he plays Gordan. That’s his adopted Earth moniker; we’re told that if the aliens reveal their actual names, because of the resonant frequency of their native tongue combined with the atmospheric pressure of our planet, we’d literally “shit ourselves” on hearing them.

He’s a psychopathic Goon who simply wants to throw every human into his airlock. “We talked about types and we loved the idea of Mike,” says Rickard. “I remember reading about Douglas Adams talking about how long they spoke about needing someone with a Peter Jones-type voice before going, ‘What about Peter Jones?’”

“He’s such a lovely man,” adds Willbond. “His showreel is playing slightly harassed men in their forties, so making him that belligerent was really fun.”

Also worth spotlighting is Declan Baxter, who plays the lead role of Stewart. It’s not as showy a part as any of the aliens, but Stewart

anchors the piece emotionally. It’s a quietly starmaking turn from the twentysomething actor. “What we were trying to avoid was going, ‘Let’s get a really well-known face, and we’ll get them to do a northern accent and play seven years younger,’” says Rickard.

“Stewart’s meant to be a young northern guy, so [we thought] we should just look at a load of young northern actors. It’s such a tricky balance with a lead character. It requires a certain amount of acting chops, but also they’ve got to be funny and that’s a tall order. But when we saw Dec’s first tape, he seemed to have got both sides of it.”

There was never any question of Rickard and Willbond casting either of themselves in the role, despite their side job as performers. You’ll recognise both of them from their various roles in *Horrible Histories* (a series they also wrote for), and from *Ghosts*, where Rickard plays caveman Robin and Willbond is the sexually-repressed Second World War army officer. They do pop up in the film though, if only in the modest roles of Cirsh and Darrenth, two slow-witted Goon security grunts.

“Because we were exec-producing we knew it was going to be a lot of work,” says Rickard,

“The thing that we’re laughing at is human behaviour, rather than the aliens”

“so there was only so much we could take on. We were still shooting this while doing *Ghosts* so we thought, in terms of the performance side, we’d just do these little cameo characters.”

There’s clearly scope for more adventures at Clitheroe County Council, should UKTV desire it. And given that it was originally envisaged as an ongoing sitcom, more is definitely something its writers are interested in.

“That’s the hope,” smiles Rickard. “We’ve talked about it with the channel. Obviously, no decisions will be made until it’s gone out and we see whether or not it works, and whether people laugh at the jokes!”

Until then, there’s more *Ghosts* (its fourth series has just screened on BBC One, while season two of CBS’ US remake – which the pair exec-produce – started airing on 29 September), while they’re also working on “two or three things, a couple which will happen and one which we hope will happen.”

More *We Are Not Alone* doesn’t seem to be part of that roster... yet, though the pair assure us they have ideas. It’s been a long while since we’ve had a British SF comedy to rival *Red Dwarf* – with some luck, *We Are Not Alone* may be the heir apparent. ●

We Are Not Alone is on Dave on 20 November.

HEY JOE

Inbetweeners star Joe Thomas plays hapless Goon, Greggs



What appealed to you about *We Are Not Alone*?

● I thought the script had so much going for it, it had a real *Hot Fuzz*, *Shaun Of The Dead*-type energy. I mean, comedy writers who are actually funny are few and far between, and this is actually funny.

Are you much of a sci-fi fan?

● A little bit, yeah. I’ve just read Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* series, and I remember I had *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* when I was younger. I watched *Red Dwarf* too when I was little. I mean, it was a comedy but there was always a poignancy to it, the idea of this big ship drifting in space. It’s a nice trigger point for the imagination of the writers, being in a sci-fi world. With this, the idea of aliens visiting is a great way of recontextualising things.

This is your first time playing an alien. How much time did you have to spend in the make-up chair?

● Considering how much there was, they were quite quick. They got it down to an hour and a half each morning. I’d never done anything like this, so it was quite exciting at first. It got less exciting as time went on, as you’re getting up really early.

Would you be up for more *We Are Not Alone* if UKTV were up for it, and, if so, what kind of storylines would you want for Greggs?

● Oh, I think he needs to be challenged, because he’s kind of inept. He’s kind of the office underling, I guess, and quite incompetent. He’s somewhere between Gareth in *The Office* and someone more childlike. I’d just like to see him put through his paces a little bit. Maybe he could be put in charge of a small island somewhere?