

Thinking out

WE'VE NOT been short of film-related excitement in Scotland over the last few years. Epic historical movies like *Mary Queen of Scots*, *Outlaw King* and *Robert the Bruce*, as well as more contemporary offerings such as *Wild Rose* and *Beats*, have won both awards and critical acclaim. Major television productions like *The Victim* and, more recently, *Guilt*, have also ensured that Scotland's creative potential has been highlighted. And that's without even mentioning the whole *Outlander* phenomenon!

The film and television industry contributes a significant, and growing, amount of money to the Scottish economy. In 2017 that figure was around £100m and the lead body for the industry, Screen Scotland, has a target of raising that to £160m by 2022. But that growth is by no means guaranteed or straightforward despite the undoubted wealth of writing, acting and production talent in Scotland or, indeed, the abundance of screen-friendly locations. One huge disadvantage is the lack of studio facilities. Currently, Wardpark Studios in Cumbernauld is Scotland's only full-time elite film and television studio. Developed specifically for *Outlander*, Wardpark is unlikely to be available for any other use for the next few years as the time-travelling juggernaut shows no signs of slowing down. A second studio development is, however, apparently close to becoming a reality at Leith Docks, with an opening date announcement said to be 'imminent'. By the way, let's not forget that the blockbuster *Lord of the Rings* prequel, claimed to be the most expensive television series ever to be made at £1.2bn, was reportedly scheduled for extensive filming in Scotland until the clusterbough that is Brexit stymied

Shades of David Cameron and the 2014 Outlander transmission shenanigans methinks – is there a referendum around the corner?

that major investment too... and it went instead to New Zealand!

There are other, less tangible, 'hindrances' too. Many *iScot* readers may be aware of the difficulties Angus Macfadyen faced, for example, in bringing *Robert the Bruce* to the big screen. For reasons best known to themselves, the major cinema chains appeared less than enthusiastic about putting it on general release, even within Scotland – it certainly wasn't due to lack of demand from the Scottish public! Shades of David Cameron and the 2014 *Outlander* transmission shenanigans methinks – is there a referendum around the corner? Damn those rebellious Scots! Anyway... less well known are the many other film projects that never see the light of day through either lack of funding or promotion, not through lack of talent or creativity. And then there are those that have no budget whatsoever, yet still go on to win awards, such as the Peebles-based short film *The Box*, written by lead actor and co-producer Vivien Reid. She describes *The Box* as, "a psychological drama that shifts through many different worlds; home life, work life, the woods and nature, and then the unconscious or dream world". Vivien's long road to overnight success is probably typical of many actors.

"I've always wanted to be an actor – I've never wanted to do anything else. At school in Edinburgh I enjoyed taking part in plays and singing in the choir. When I was 14 I was accepted into The National Youth Theatre of Great Britain and headed off to London. It was a magical experience, but a tough one. However, my burning passion to act became even stronger. I then auditioned for the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD), now the

of *The Box*...



by Gordon
Craigie

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, 3 years in a row – I thought ‘I’m Scottish, I want to train in Scotland!’ But, each year, despite getting down to the very last pool of hopefuls, I never got in. So, at 18, I headed back down south having gained entry into the prestigious Drama Centre in London. Being accepted into that school was a huge moment in my life, as I’d been told by the Principal of the RSAMD that I would never get in there – he’d trained there himself and told me it was very academic! But I’d seen a television programme about the Drama Centre and I knew that was the training I wanted. It was an extremely gruelling experience at times. We would often start before 9am, finishing at 9pm each day, and the days were intense. But I had brilliant teachers, especially my acting teacher Reuven Adiv, and, with my fellow students, we were like one big family and many of them are still my close friends today.

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train in Scotland!’*

**Scene from
The Box.
Credit:
Steven
Cook**

LYRE PRODUCTIONS PRESENT

THE SPACE BETWEEN

VIVIEN REID, TIM BARROW AND DAVID WHITNEY
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS MARTIN
SOUND DESIGN: WILLIAM McLAUGHLAN
ART DIRECTOR: HALLA GROVES-RAINES
EDITOR: ANTHONY BUENO
1ST AD: MATT STEPHENS
MAKE UP: GILLIAN JOHNSTON
MUSIC BY: FIONA RUTHERFORD
STILLS PHOTOGRAPHY: LOUISE LACAILLE
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER: LUCY BARROW
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: J & J BARROW
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY: TIM BARROW

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The Space Between poster. Credit: Louise Lacaille

In the end it was the best school for me and the best training for me. Ironically, after graduating in London, my first professional job offer was from the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow! Philip Prowse had seen my work at the Drama Centre and asked me to come and audition for them. I went on to work there for many years in leading roles and had the most incredible education in how to be a working actor. And then, all of a sudden, the work just seemed to disappear. I was still getting bits and pieces, but the jobs were becoming sparse.

"There's either not enough work or not enough new faces being seen in the audition room, but all I know for certain is that the work wasn't coming to me. In 2013 I was living in London, temping, and becoming more and more frustrated. I felt that I had no voice within the industry, quite lost and lonely really, and just didn't know what to do to make it better. Then I had an idea, this story floating around in my head, and it wouldn't go away. So I asked my boss at the time, this wonderful Danish woman, Lise Kroeyer, if it would be OK to use the work facilities to write when I had a bit of quiet time at my desk. She said "absolutely, you must!" We were always talking about Danish filmmakers and actors who I'm really influenced by, like Lars von Trier, Nicolas Winding

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Refn, Thomas Vinterberg and Mads Mikkelsen. Lise really encouraged me to do it. She was amazing.

"I would never have previously thought of myself as a writer, especially with being dyslexic, but when the auditions are not coming it's a horrible place to be, so it was just fantastic being given the opportunity to sit and write. Allowing myself to just give it a go, never for one moment thinking I could be good at it, just giving myself permission to be creative again. If, for whatever reason, I couldn't be on stage or wasn't getting TV or film auditions, I had to find a way to be creative, to go back to that childhood quality of game playing and using my imagination. It was a way of me using my brain creatively again and that's what was so important about beginning to write that first story. To take a risk, challenge myself, do this and see what happens and not condemn myself if it didn't work out. Just to be brave. It was thrilling – I wrote that first film, *The Dice*, in 3 days. The words just poured out of me, like this unstoppable force that just had to come out. I'd always wanted to act, and never wanted to do anything else, but to be able to write characters that I was excited about, that was a revelation to me.

"*The Dice* is a love story about twin brothers who face difficulties from the moment they're born and are then separated by events – it's about what happens when they're reunited later in life. The story deals with the emotional damage the brothers inherit and inflict mutually; their obsession, love, loneliness and forgiveness. It's dark, most of my stories are dark! I think it's my Scottish roots. I'm very much into folklore. My grandfather, Charles Johnston, was the gamekeeper at Fyvie Castle and my grandparents lived in the gatehouse. I loved visiting Fyvie when I was wee and listening to all the stories about the castle – the *Green Lady*, *Thomas the Rhymer* – and just being around all of that fascinated me. Also stories like the *Lord of the Rings*, and films too – *The Last Unicorn*, *The Neverending Story*, *The Dark Crystal*, *Legend* – all these



dark fantasy children's stories. My sister and I were lucky that our mum introduced us to lots of amazing films. At that time though, I was still wee Nicola Johnston from Peebles! Vivien Reid was 'born' much later, at the Drama Centre because there was already an actor with my birth name. I chose 'Vivien' from Vivien Leigh, and 'Reid' from Oliver Reed but, me being me, I spelt his name wrong! But I know what it means to me so that's all that matters. My family still call me Nicola, but most people now know me as Vivien or Viv, and I've lived with Vivien for a long time now, so I'm used to it. I like her."

In 2008, while appearing in a play in Richmond, Vivien had a surprise backstage visit from one of her close friends and fellow Drama Centre student, Tim Barrow. The Roslin-born actor had recently written and starred in his first feature film, *The Inheritance*, alongside another (more famous) classmate, Tom Hardy. Tim was visiting because he'd just written his second film *The Space Between* – an Edinburgh love story and redemption tale – and he'd written the leading female role specifically for Vivien. "I didn't even have to read it, I just said yes! I'd always dreamed of being in films and this was my opportunity. It was an amazing experience, all shot in Edinburgh, on a really low budget. We premiered firstly at the Edinburgh Filmhouse and sold out twice, then in London at the wonderful Genesis Cinema, again selling out twice. It was an absolute joy to make and I'm really proud of it. The Filmhouse still sells it on DVD."

With the experience of *The Space Between* behind her, Vivien resolved to get one of her own projects on to the big screen too. "I've only been back living in Scotland for 4 years, but I know my roots are here. I can feel it when I walk through the countryside around Peebles and the River Tweed – that's where a lot of my stories come from, when I'm out walking by myself. Within nature I seem to find ideas come to me. I know I'm really connected to this land and to Scotland. One day, while walking round the Tweed,

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I got an idea for a short film and I'm proud to say that *The Box* is now an award-winning film! A whole ensemble of incredible people came on board to make the film, and The Film Festival Doctor, Rebekah Louisa Smith, helped me put a bespoke film festival strategy together. *The Box* recently won another award – Best Short Film in the Suspense category at the Show Low International Film Festival in Arizona. It was up against films with huge budgets, but we won! The response to the film was incredible. I went out there to support the film and loved every moment, it was such a friendly festival and I met some fantastic people. It was my first time in LA and, hopefully, it won't be the last.

"The Box was a real family affair. My dad, Angus Johnston, and his business partner, Gordon Black, were incredibly supportive. We used their cars, and their Edinburgh business premises, Angus Gordon Hairdressing in Frederick Street, for the interior shots. They became Executive Producers and chipped in financially to help me with the film festival campaign. My mum, Ann, was an Executive Producer too and my (heavily pregnant at the time!) sister Gillian was our brilliant make-up artist. Also, on any film project, but even more so when you're on a very low (zero!) budget, food is so important for the cast and crew – Forsyths of Peebles delivered delicious



Scenes from *The Box*.
Credit: Steven Cook

Vivien Reid in *The Space Between*.
Credit: Louise Lacaille



fresh, hot food to our door every single day, for free. Just incredible support!

"And our wider film family, the cast and crew, were all professionals – including people who had just been working on *Game of Thrones* – and, because it was just before Christmas, they were all able to come in their 'time off'. Everybody we asked came! We were lucky, everyone who read the script loved it and wanted to come and work. Christopher Cook, our Director, and his brother Steven, our Director of Photography, have their own production company, Little City Pictures. They know a lot of good people in the industry and called in some favours, and people answered the call! If you see the standard of film we've achieved with no money it just shows that even with nothing you can still achieve something special through love, passion, desire and lots of hard work. People getting together to make something, and making it the absolute best that they can – to me that was exciting. We shot the film in and around Peebles in December 2015 for 5 full days, long days, then picked up again in January for another 4 days. We had one more day filming in June, but this footage didn't make the film – it was too dark!

"It was so important for me for this film to have a life after shooting, and *The Box* is just having the most incredible life. It's been all over the world, it's winning awards, and every time I've done a Q&A after a screening the questions are all about the story and the characters, not about camera angles and budgets – for the writer, that's thrilling. I wanted it to be seen in a cinema and the first time I saw it up on the big screen I was so proud. It was such a huge achievement, seeing everyone's hard work up on the big screen looking and sounding so beautiful. I was so happy with the sound, and our incredible original score composed by Philip Curran. And what Christopher, our Director, had achieved in the edit was really special. *The Box* will continue to do film festivals next year, and then slowly it'll come to a natural end. Then there might be the possibility of distribution, someone has shown an interest, but we'll just have to wait and see. *The Box* was written in Scotland, shot in the Scottish Borders and in Edinburgh, with all the cast and crew either living in or from Scotland, so it would mean a lot to me for it to be screened in Scotland. I'd love my family and all the people who supported it to see it on the big screen, that would feel amazing."

This story is yet another which illustrates our recurring *iScot Magazine* theme of showcasing inspirational Scots just getting on and doing things without waiting for permission. As we've written many times previously, and will doubtless continue to repeat because we passionately believe this to be true, the words inscribed on our Scottish Parliament building sum this ambition up:

That overnight success that she's worked so hard for, supported by her family and friends, may yet be about to arrive

Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation

Vivien Reid has faced the challenges of her acting career head-on and has refused to give up on her dreams. As 2020 approaches, *The Box* continues on its journey and she's hopeful that her other feature films may be picked up too. Vivien is also currently in talks with big names in the Scottish theatre scene - Director Clare Prenton and Designer Becky Minto - which should result in her first theatre play, *The Waiting Room*, making it onto the stage. That overnight success that she's worked so hard for, supported by her family and friends, may yet be about to arrive.

iScot Magazine readers can see the trailer for *The Box* by visiting:

<https://tinyurl.com/iScotTheBox>

Breaking news... Just as *iScot Magazine* goes to press, Vivien has received confirmation that she's been selected for the Playwrights' Studio, Scotland Mentoring Programme under the guidance of multi award-winning writer Stef Smith. Remember the name for 2020 – Vivien Reid.



Vivien Reid. Credit: Chris Mann