

## Growing Up as the “Son of Rambo” in Early 80s England

By Paul Bachleitner

The British indie comedy, “Son of Rambo,” is more than the fuzzy lightweight fare the Brits have been shipping across the Atlantic ever since “The Fully Monty” returned with a pile of gold and pop culture immortality 10 years ago.

“Son of Rambo” has some cutesy moments, but beneath the churlish grins and adorable accents lies some genuinely believable experience. Quite probably because its setting is early 80s suburban London, which is the exact time and place its two makers, Garth Jennings and Nick Goldsmith, were adolescents discovering their love for films, like “First Blood.”

In mid-April Garth and Nick spoke to me not long before presenting their film at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival (M-SPIFF). Garth relates his inspiration for the film to a very memorable experience while growing up.

“Basically,” Garth said, “when I was about 12 years old I saw Rambo, ‘First Blood’ with my friends. We thought it was amazing, so much so that we decided to make our own little action movie based on what we’d seen.”

“Son of Rambo” isn’t the movie he made when he was 12, but one about two fictionalized kids, Will (Bill Milner) and Lee (Will Poulter), who make a movie inspired, like Garth, by “First Blood.” In fact, the kids love “First Blood” so much they want to make their own sequel to the film, with one of them playing the son of the hero, Rambo. Hence the title (and the misspelling of the hero’s name), “Son of Rambo.”

Garth insists it’s more of a coming-of-age story and not just kids making films. It’s about the era, too, and “everything that came with it—about being 12 or 11 and having a blast with amazing friends and realizing that anything was possible and you never, ever consider the consequences.”

However, the film is also not a biography of Garth or Nick. Nick met Garth in art school, when they were 18 or 19 years old.

“We did have a script where it was more like the kids that we were,” Nick pointed out. “But the problem is that we had a perfectly fine, lovely childhood. And it’s a bit boring.”

The two kids in the film come from very different households. Will’s family belongs to a strict religious order, the Plymouth Brethren, that doesn’t allow its members to watch films or TV.

“I found that fascinating.” Garth had lived next to a family of Plymouth Brethren while growing up. “I was allowed to do everything they weren’t.”

For Lee, films and TV are like surrogate parents. He thinks nothing of exposing Will to a videotape of “First Blood.” So, Will’s first experience of film is a bloody action shoot ‘em up starring Sylvester Stallone.

Garth loved the juxtaposition. “The audience instantly understand, ‘Okay, that’s going to have a really big impact on his brain!’”

It’s the subjective effect of Will’s seeing “First Blood” as his first film that makes “Son of Rambow” so genuinely charming.

The point of view is that of a 12-year-old kid. Most elements of the film come to the viewer through “rose-tinted glasses,” as Garth put it, whether it’s the cinematography, the orchestral score, or the costumes.

Or supporting characters. Large than life is the aura of a French exchange student, Didier Revol (Jules Sitruk), whose poofy, 80s hair and femme red boots make him at least half a foot taller than the other kids in his class. All the girls want to make out with him and all the boys want to be him.

Garth and his fellow classmates could only dream about being a student like Didier—whether it was the great hair, moustache, or groovy outfits. “What we did was amalgamate all of the French exchange students we ever met into one, uber student.”

Although the film relies on Garth’s and Nick’s stylized flourishes for its comedy, it steers clear of becoming a farce or a romp. Its models were two much more serious dramas, “Stand by Me” and, oddly, the first-ever X-rated film, “Midnight Cowboy.”

Yes, even an “adult” film can have bearing on the similarities between childhood friends. Nick believes the relationship between the two leads from “Midnight Cowboy” is similar to that between the two boys in “Son of Rambow.”

“At the heart of it you’ve got Joe Buck, who’s this very innocent character, wide-eyed coming into the big city. And you’ve got the Ratso Rizzo character, who is a bit dodgy. And it was how those two characters came together.”

Don’t be confused. “Son of Rambow” is no “Midnight Cowboy.” But Garth’s and Nick’s philosophical approach to filmmaking is well informed enough to translate simply and clearly onscreen. And even through their child actors.

Garth and Nick took five months selecting the two leads, Milner and Poulter, neither of which had acted in anything more broadly seen than a school play. The two kids looked like their characters and rehearsed better than Garth and Nick could’ve believed.

“And then you put the two together and it’s like...” Nick held his breath and gestured to his mouth, wordlessly, then laughed. “What I was trying to say was, ‘whew!’”

The sentiment echoes the relief of a variety of art house audiences. Finally, a British comedy cute enough to take your date to and still laugh when you watch it at home alone on DVD.