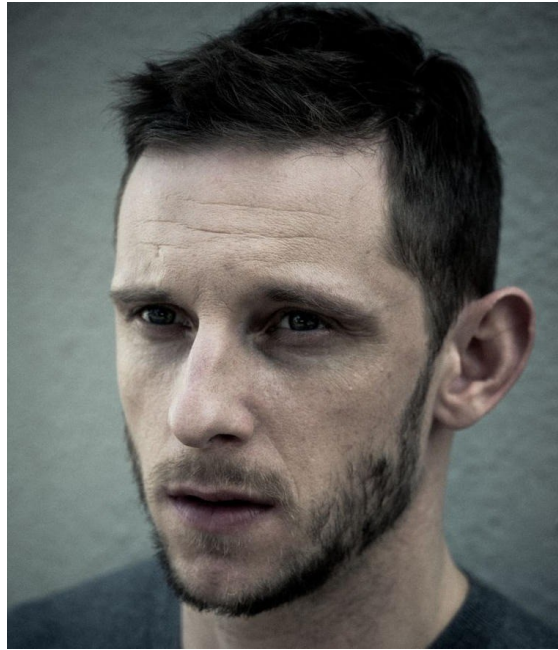


EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

What If I Don't Like the Ploughman?

*Jamie Bell on faith he does not claim, a Greengrass set with no coverage, and why *The Uprising* feels like a story we keep having to tell.*

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



*Jamie Bell. The Billy Elliot star plays radical preacher John Ball in Paul Greengrass's *The Uprising*. Photo: promotional portrait.*

The Uprising is in American theaters as of September 10, and Jamie Bell does not pretend the timing is an accident. Paul Greengrass's 1381 Peasants' Revolt epic — Andrew Garfield as a grieving farmer known only as the Ploughman, Bell as the heretical priest John Ball, Cosmo Jarvis as Wat Tyler — arrives in a culture already arguing about taxes, faith, and who gets to demand justice. Bell, speaking with AMFM Magazine Managing Editor Paul Salfen, keeps returning to the same idea: the film is period, the hunger in it is not.

"Even at the time when we were making it, we knew the themes and the temperature within the culture," Bell says. "In a way, the film is kind of timeless. It will be a story told over and over and over — this idea that there is an oppressed force who have decided that they have had enough, who need to organize, and fight back, and demand change, and demand justice. It's a tale as old as time, but one that unfortunately just kind of keeps repeating."

Salfen had just come off the finished film. He told Bell it was touching and timely in a way no one can schedule on a call sheet. Bell did not argue the point. He also did not sell the movie as a miracle. He talked about Greengrass the way actors talk about directors they actually trust — which is to say, he talked about process, not branding.

THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL

Bell has been carrying Greengrass around since he was a teenager. Bloody Sunday did it. “I saw that when I was a teenager, and it really changed my life in a big way,” he says. Everything after that — United 93, the Bourne pictures, Captain Phillips — looked, to him, like the same argument shot from different rooms.

“His films are really — the central theme of them most of the time is about the struggle for control of something,” Bell says. “Whether it’s a civil rights march in Northern Ireland, or the control of an airplane, or the control of a ship, or the metaphor of that, like the world’s economy as a whole. And the struggle against oppressive systems. And how people make decisions in the chaos of war. How human beings are tested against those systems, and how those systems can sometimes fail, or how those systems will rigidly fight back.”

Read through that lens, *The Uprising* was obvious to him on the page. A farmer who will not pay another death tax. A preacher who will not stay in his pulpit. A fourteen-year-old king and a council that treats the country like an account to be collected. Greengrass would shoot it the only way he shoots anything: as if the camera wandered into history and could not get back out.



Andrew Garfield as the Ploughman, the unnamed Essex farmer who becomes the film's entry point into the 1381 revolt. Courtesy Focus Features.

YOU NEVER KNOW WHERE THE CAMERA IS

Salfen asked the question working actors recognize immediately: was there a moment on set when Bell looked around and thought, I get paid to do this? Bell laughed at the premise and then took it seriously. There is no guarantee of a career, he said. The feeling of luck is general. What was specific was Greengrass.

“To do it with a filmmaker that you really admire, that you personally just have so much affection for, makes a huge difference, because you just trust them implicitly,” he says. “You want to see their process. You want to see how the sausage gets made. I can really say I wasn’t disappointed.”

The method is famous and still disorienting when you are inside it. “You never know where the camera is, really. There’s no coverage. It’s not like he says, okay, this is now a close-up of Jamie, or this is now a close-up of Andrew, or of Woody. You are immersed in a situation. He gives you a situation. This is, you know, the king is gonna come, you’re not sure if he’s gonna come, but you’ve heard that he might come, and you’re waiting. And what would you do? And then the actor was just given free rein to interpret that as you would.”

That is as close as Bell figures he will ever get to 1381, and he knows how many stages removed even that is. “That’s the thrill of an actor — you’re getting these experiences that you wouldn’t ordinarily have. In that sense, yeah, absolutely, it was incredibly thrilling to be on the stage.”

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— Jamie Bell

WHAT IF I DON’T LIKE THE PLOUGHMAN?

Ask Bell for advice and he flinches first. He is loath to give it. Then he gives the only advice that actually travels: get near people who love you and people who love the form. His first manager stayed twenty years. She loved filmmakers the way some people love saints. Movies of the seventies. Foreign pictures. Indie pictures. Dogme 95 arrived as homework when he was still a kid.

“Lars von Trier — dogma as an idea was given to me when I was a teenager, and I was just blown away by it,” he says. “If you want to do this, you have to know where it comes from. Know who the people are who’ve changed it and who’ve challenged it. Immersing yourself within the art form is super important. Beyond just how to be an actor, you really have to love the origins of movie making.”

On the day, the job is narrower and meaner. Salfen asked what Bell keeps in mind when it is time to go do battle. Bell did not say preparation. He said surprise.

“Spontaneity. Surprising people. Doing something different. Trying to find out what is not on the page that should be on the page a lot of the time. What did the writer miss? What could I offer here? Knowing your character really well, as much as you can. Aside from the historical trappings of a character — what is this character serving this narrative, and what can I provide it? What’s missing right now that I uniquely can provide? That’s where I’m always trying to spot my little opportunity.”

On this picture the opportunity was unsentimental. John Ball is the historical firebrand, the priest who preached that things were not well and never had been. Bell did not want to play a mascot for the Ploughman's awakening.

"With this movie especially, it was like — well, what if I don't like the ploughman? What if actually this plan was a problem? And the kind of full circle of that: actually, my radicalness, or my rage, my furor as someone who is this kind of heretical preacher, could be tamed by this man. What can I learn from this man, actually? And that became the journey of my character in the movie. Just keeping your eyes and ears open at all times, and trying to surprise your director."



An army of the people on the move. Greengrass shot the revolt as immersion, not coverage. Courtesy Focus Features.

SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOURSELF

There is a lot of faith in *The Uprising* — not as stained-glass comfort, as fuel. Salfen asked whether the work made Bell think about that, for the character and for everybody standing in the mud around him. Bell is not coy about his own life.

"A thousand percent," he says. "As someone who isn't particularly faithful or spiritual in my own life, honestly — just portraying the character. Having that sense of something on your side, something bigger than yourself, is incredibly powerful. Incredibly powerful. Kind of invincible, in a way. I think that's how he probably felt, walking down to London, and in front of all those tens of thousands of people, giving his sermons and giving his speeches — that he was connected to something so much greater than this whole thing. It really did kind of open my eyes to that, in a way."

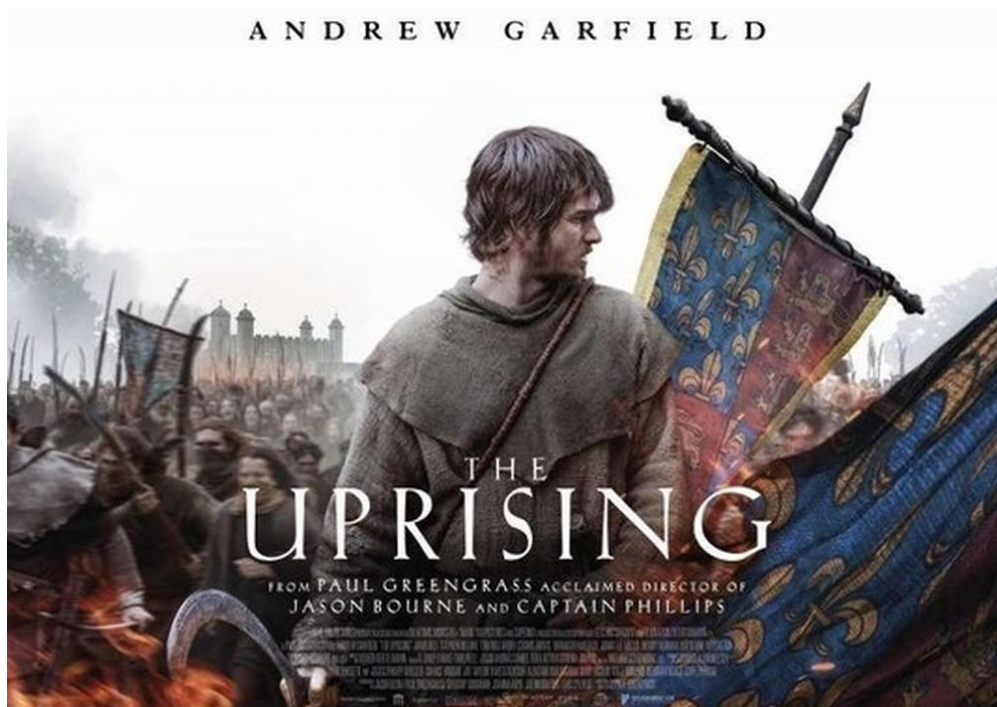
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Salfen pressed the takeaway. The picture is a great watch, he said, but it is doing more than one job. What does Bell want people walking out with?

“Through community and organization, and through great belief, that you could force change,” Bell says. “Whether that’s on a grand political scale, or on a small, minute scale in your own community, in your own family, in your own friendships. I think if you really, truly believe in something — even if it fails.”

He lets the historical wound sit there. Did 1381 achieve much? Did it fail? The coda of Greengrass’s film, as Bell reads it, refuses the clean box score. “Even some kind of action gives a seed or a birth to a new idea, which then inspires people to their own kind of form of political action. Any kind of organized political action is important, and can inspire real change — if not in that moment, but in future moments to come.”



Theatrical key art for *The Uprising*. Written and directed by Paul Greengrass. Now playing from Focus Features. Studio art courtesy Focus Features.

THE HAIL MARY

Salfen’s co-host is Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboy who caught the Hail Mary and went into the Hall of Fame. The question is a signature beat at AMFM: the moment you just had to go for it, and it worked. Bell did not reach for a premiere or a callback. He went all the way back.

“My sister is five years older than me. She’s a dancer, and I was around dancing all the time. I didn’t necessarily want to be a dancer. I was just kind of around it all the time. I remember

being on a bus, heading back from being with my sister at dance class, and I said to my mum, like, I could do that. I'm not even sure why I said that. And she said, great, I'll buy you a pair of tap shoes and you can go on Saturday."

He still cannot name the impulse. He can name the consequence. "Obviously that, for me, that led to everything that I have today — a career in films and television, and an acting career, and working with these great people, and great experiences. That kind of one cavalier moment. I'm not even sure what inspired it, but I'm certainly grateful that I spoke up that day on that bus."

Salfen told him a lot of people are grateful he did. Bell thanked him, called him brother, and sent the picture back into the world the same way he had described John Ball walking toward London: as if belief, even borrowed belief, is still a kind of armor.

The Uprising is in theaters now from Focus Features. The Peasants' Revolt is six and a half centuries old. The argument inside it is not.

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FIND JAMIE BELL

The Uprising — now playing in U.S. theaters from Focus Features (opened September 10, 2026). U.K. theatrical release October 9, 2026, Entertainment Film Distributors.

Tickets and showtimes: focusfeatures.com/the-uprising · Film site: theuprising.movie

Also starring Andrew Garfield, Stephen Dillane, Tom Hollander, Cosmo Jarvis, Thomasin McKenzie, Jonny Lee Miller, Woody Norman, Katherine Waterston. Written and directed by Paul Greengrass. Produced by Jason Blum, Paul Greengrass, Gregory Goodman, Joanna Kaye, Joe Neutrauter, Lars Sylvest.

Bell on screen: Billy Elliot, King Kong, Tintin, Fantastic Four, Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool, Rocketman, All of Us Strangers, and the forthcoming Half Man.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, September 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of *Going For It!*, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.