EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Straight to the Heart

Filmmaker Ben Smallbone co-directed Angel Studios' Revolutionary War musical Drummer Boy with his brother Joel of for KING + COUNTRY. He talks about eight years of work, the busiest year of his life, a reunion in a Vancouver mix room, and why he hopes the film sends people home for Thanksgiving.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Ben Smallbone has watched *Drummer Boy* more times than he can count, so many that, by his own admission, he has gone a little numb to it. "I've seen it way too much to fully appreciate it now," he says. But about a week before this conversation, sitting in Vancouver beside his brother Joel for the final mix, something broke through. "When you combine a story with a great visual and great music, it has a way of skipping the mind and going straight to the heart."

That is the bet behind *Drummer Boy*, the Revolutionary War musical Ben co-directed with Joel David Smallbone, one half of the four-time Grammy-winning duo for KING + COUNTRY. Angel Studios releases the film exclusively in theaters nationwide on November 6, 2026. It runs 2 hours and 7 minutes and is rated PG-13 for war violence and some bloody images. Angel calls it its first live-action theatrical musical, and the brothers describe it as eight years in the making.

Paul Salfen caught up with Ben over Zoom for a short, warm conversation about finishing a passion project in the busiest year of his life, the moment he knew the film worked, and why he hopes it sends a few people home for Thanksgiving.

A STORY OF BROTHERS, BY BROTHERS

Angel's synopsis sets the scene: as America's fight for independence begins, a young drummer boy, an enslaved woman and a divided family each search for freedom in a world built to deny it. Joel plays Jeremiah Clem, who sides with the British Crown, while Lucas Leach plays his younger brother Benjamin, who joins the Patriots as a drummer boy. Melora Hardin plays their mother, Rachel, and India Brown plays Emmaline, a childhood friend of the brothers who is pursuing her own freedom. The ensemble also includes Ioan Gruffudd as Nathaniel Clem, Charles Esten as Lord Balfour, Iain Glen as Major John Ambrose, Beth Easdown as Lady Elizabeth Balfour and Olivier Award winner Beverley Knight. The screenplay is credited to Richard Ramsey, and the music comes from for KING + COUNTRY, whose take on "Little Drummer Boy" planted the seed for the project.

"Eight years in the making. A nation built on 250 years of independence. A Christmas story that began over 2,000 years ago," the brothers said in a statement. "This is the fabric of a film created by brothers, about brothers."

Salfen admitted he had gone in completely blind. "I didn't even know there's musical elements to this," he told Ben. "I was so pleasantly surprised and so happy to see something unique and different and cool like this."

NEVER FULLY DONE

Ben was proud, he said, but quick to name the catch that comes with the job. "One of the gifts and curses of me as a filmmaker, and my brothers with their music, is it never feels like you're fully done, and it feels like you always could do a little bit more. You could always push it a little further."

He was hands-on through every stage of post-production. "I was very involved in the edit and visual effects and all of the things, down to color and sound mix," he said. "So having fresh eyes like yours on it, experiencing it, is really, really exciting."

With Angel Studios behind the release, the momentum feels different this time. "We're feeling a really good energy about this," Ben said. "This is my eighth theatrical release that I've been a part of, and so far, it just feels like there's a bubbling of excitement and energy around this thing that I haven't experienced before. So we'll see. Fingers crossed."

THE MOMENT IN VANCOUVER

Asked whether there was a moment when he looked around and thought, we've got this, Ben went straight to that final sound mix. "There was a moment listening to the final version of the film with my brother Joel sitting right next to me, where I was so overwhelmed by what I was experiencing. It reminded me of the beauty of the art of cinema," he said. "As a filmmaker that's been working on this for eight years, to feel something in here that you intimately made was powerful. And I looked over at Joel, and Joel looked over at me, and I know he was feeling the same thing."

> *"When you combine a story with a great visual and great music, it has a way of skipping the mind and going straight to the heart." (Ben Smallbone)*

Then he went further, and more personal. "Joel and I have gone through a rough patch as brothers the last few years," he said. The two used to go every weekend to see every big movie that came out, then pick it apart together: what worked, what didn't, what the filmmaker was trying to say. "But to sit in a movie theater for the first time in years together, watching a movie that we made together, that is about brothers separated on the sides of the war, sworn to kill each other. And here we are celebrating that. Man, it was a really powerful and emotional experience."

The Smallbones have spoken publicly about how a family rift fed the film. On screen, the Clem brothers are divided by loyalty. Off screen, two brothers found their way back to the same row of seats.

FROM HOMESTEAD TO HARRISTOWN

Making a movie can be its own kind of battle, Salfen noted, and he asked what kept Ben on the right path. The answer started with the calendar. "This whole last year has been the busiest year of my life," Ben said. "I was working on a TV show called *Homestead* mere weeks before going to Ireland to film *Drummer Boy*. And so it was all very overwhelming."

Homestead, which Angel has called a hit, extended Ben's working relationship with the studio. His earlier credits include directing the faith-based drama *Priceless*, and the family's previous big-screen success was *Unsung Hero*, the story of the Smallbone family's own move from Australia to America, in which Joel starred.

For *Drummer Boy*, the production recreated colonial America almost entirely on one estate in Ireland: Harristown House, a Georgian country house near Brannockstown in County Kildare. According to MovieWalks, the house doubles as Balfour Manor, an entire 1776-era American town center was built around the estate's farmyard, and nearby St Patrick's Church of Ireland in Carnalway served as another location. A ship was sailed from France to Wicklow Harbour for the water scenes, while its below-deck interior was built as a set back on the estate. "It was so cool to have a little contained area," Hardin said in an interview. "The only time we really travelled was when we filmed on the ship."

The timeline was tight. Ben said filming wrapped only about three and a half months before release, and he was finishing the 2-hour, 7-minute film while also working on eight episodes of *Homestead*. "The timing was terrible for me," he said. "But man, just vibing and stepping into the next day and knowing that God's in it. That I have my brother that I can lean into when needed. We have an incredible team on both projects, and so being able to step back and kind of let them own it a little bit more when necessary, when it all became too overwhelming, was a beautiful thing."

> *"I just kept putting one foot in front of the other and trusting that God's in this." (Ben Smallbone)*

MORE THAN ENTERTAINMENT

Salfen asked whether Ben ever just stops and says thank you. "I need to do it more, Paul," he said. "You reminded me of that, and it's a beautiful reminder."

"Look, if what we did was solely just to entertain people, I question whether it would be worth it," he continued. "But to know that the art that we're creating is going beyond us and has a bigger purpose than just us, and has a bigger purpose than just to entertain, is pretty life-changing. And to hear people be impacted by it and moved by it, and to shed tears, and to laugh and to cry, and to find forgiveness and reconciliation in their own relationships based off what they just experienced. Man, that is life-changing."

He tied it back to the oldest storytelling tradition he knows. "There's a reason Jesus told parables, because he knew the power of a good story to impact the heart and soul. And that's why we love what we do."

> *"There's a reason Jesus told parables, because he knew the power of a good story to impact the heart and soul." (Ben Smallbone)*

GOING HOME FOR THANKSGIVING

For his last question, Salfen asked what Ben hopes audiences carry out of the theater. The timing, Ben said, is no accident of meaning. The film opens days after the election and weeks before Thanksgiving, heading into the holiday season. "I look around the country and we have 'united' in the name, United States of America, but we are more divided than I would argue any time since the 1700s," he said. "We're more divided socially, spiritually, politically, racially."

"And man, I just hope that this art, this movie, brings people back together. Even if it's just to go to the movie theater to experience it," he said. "But I hope they walk out and go, hey, I have been living distantly with my sibling or my parent. What would it look like to go back home for Thanksgiving for the first time in years? And man, if that happens to just even a small handful of people, the movie was worth it."

Salfen told him it was already worth it and urged him to keep making more. "Thank you, Paul," Ben said. "Thanks for your kind words and encouragement. Needed it today."

FIND DRUMMER BOY

In theaters: November 6, 2026, exclusively in theaters nationwide from Angel Studios · Rated PG-13 · 2h 7m

Directed by: Ben Smallbone and Joel David Smallbone · Screenplay by Richard Ramsey

Starring: Joel Smallbone, Lucas Leach, India Brown, Melora Hardin, Ioan Gruffudd, Charles Esten, Iain Glen, Beth Easdown and Beverley Knight

Music: for KING + COUNTRY

Tickets and info: Angel.com · AngelStudiosDistribution.com/titles/drummer-boy

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine over Zoom, 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.