EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Nothing Else to Do but Sing

Melora Hardin and Ioan Gruffudd on Drummer Boy, the Revolutionary War musical from Angel Studios and for KING & COUNTRY's Smallbone brothers—hope over dystopia, songs sung mid-battle, a corset that had to be loosened, and why a half-century in the business told Hardin this one was special.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Paul Salfen walked into *Drummer Boy* the way the best surprises are meant to be experienced: completely cold. He had no idea the Revolutionary War epic from directors Ben Smallbone and Joel David Smallbone was a musical until the characters started singing. "I went in totally blind," he told two of the film's stars when they met over Zoom during the film's October 29 virtual press junket. "Did not know it had any musical element to it. And what a joy."

On the other side of the screen sat two veterans with decades of screen experience between them. Melora Hardin, the former child actor beloved as Jan Levinson on *The Office* and Trudy Monk on *Monk*, plays family matriarch Rachel Clem. Welsh actor Ioan Gruffudd, who was Reed Richards in *Fantastic Four* and abolitionist William Wilberforce in *Amazing Grace*, plays her husband, Nathaniel Clem. On screen they are the parents whose sons end up on opposite sides of the war. Off screen they were an easy pair, finishing each other's thoughts and teasing each other about their costumes.

Written by Richard L. Ramsey and opening in theaters nationwide on Friday, November 6, *Drummer Boy* follows two brothers driven onto opposite sides of the American Revolutionary War. With love, loyalty and family caught in the crossfire, each must decide who he will become, as the fight for freedom turns into a deeply personal battle for forgiveness. The cast also includes Joel David Smallbone as Jeremiah Clem, Lucas Leach as Benjamin Clem, India Brown as Emmaline, Beth Easdown as Lady Elizabeth Balfour, Olivier Award winner Beverley Knight as Margret and Charles Esten as Lord Balfour.

A MOVIE FOR RIGHT NOW

Salfen opened with a simple premise: when they look at the finished film, they must be glad they made it.

"Absolutely, absolutely," Hardin answered. "Really great fun. And also just great themes. A great message underlying the movie."

What she wants audiences to know is that the trailer only tells part of the story. "I think people from the trailer maybe don't necessarily get how sort of transformational the movie also is," she said. "Besides the great music, and besides the great war scenes—the drama of all that, the fun cinematic excitement—it really does have a real message of coming together, and healing that divide, and a message of freedom and a message of hope."

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Salfen said what a lot of moviegoers are probably thinking in the fall of 2026: we kind of need a movie like this right about now.

"I would say so. I would say so," Hardin agreed. "It certainly is part of what attracted me to it." Then she named what she's tired of seeing. "I can't see another dystopian movie about the Armageddon of everything. I just can't really do that. I can't really embrace that."

What she wants instead is the kind of story *Drummer Boy* tells. "I need movies more like this that are really about family and about hope," she said, "and love—and love regardless. Unconditional love, even. And conversation, even when you disagree. Beautiful themes, beautiful themes."

"Well said," Salfen replied. "I feel the same way."

It's a fitting thing for the actor playing Rachel Clem to say. In a story where two sons choose opposite sides of a war, the mother is the one holding the middle—exactly the "conversation even when you disagree" that Hardin describes. And it lines up with the film's own pitch, which sells the Revolution less as a history lesson than as a family drama, a story where the fight for freedom is also a fight for forgiveness.

WHEN A SONG IS THE ONLY OPTION

Gruffudd has done period drama before. *Amazing Grace* had him leading Parliament's fight against the slave trade, and the A&E *Hornblower* films had him in Napoleonic-era naval uniform. But he told Salfen that reading Ramsey's script for *Drummer Boy* was something new.

"It was a unique experience to sit down and read this script," he said, "because alongside such a beautiful story, you had this incredible music. And the music truly sort of elevates the emotions of the characters in the moment. They don't seem out of place. They seem like an extension."

He gave his co-star credit for the best description of it. "As Melora has wonderfully put it this morning," he said, "there is nothing else to do but to sing."

> *As Melora has wonderfully put it this morning, there is nothing else to do but to sing. You're sort of bursting with emotion, and it sort of bursts out of the characters. — Ioan Gruffudd*

That's the oldest rule of the stage musical: characters sing when spoken words can't hold what they feel anymore. "You're sort of bursting with emotion," Gruffudd continued, "and it sort of bursts out of the characters."

What impressed him most is that the songs don't stop the story. "I love the fact that they're sort of singing while still acting and doing," he said. "You don't break and pause for the song. The song is part of the action—in the

middle of a battlefield. I mean, it's very cleverly done, and very, I think, unique in that sense in terms of musicals."

Singing in the middle of a battlefield is what sets *Drummer Boy* apart from the costume musicals people know. A title like *Les Misérables* tends to save its songs for the barricades and the drawing rooms. The Smallbones put theirs right in the fight—in the marching, the drumming and the mud. It's an approach that makes sense coming from Joel David Smallbone, who has spent more than a decade on arena stages as one half of the Grammy-winning duo for KING & COUNTRY with his brother Luke, a producer on the film. It also builds on the family's earlier screen work: Joel played King Herod in the 2023 Nativity musical *Journey to Bethlehem* and co-directed the 2024 Smallbone family story *Unsung Hero*, which Ramsey co-wrote and co-directed.

CAN I BREATHE IN THIS CORSET?

Salfen wanted to know what goes through their minds when it's time to go do battle, on set or in life. Is there something they tell themselves before a scene, or just to keep going?

"I think that's specific to the environment that you're in," Hardin said. "The project you're working on, the people you're working with. In this particular case, sometimes it was just: can I breathe in this corset?"

The room cracked up.

"True," she went on. "And if I can breathe in this corset, I'm going to be fine."

That's the mantra of anyone who's done eighteenth-century costume drama, and Hardin delivered it with the deadpan of someone who has worked comedy beside Steve Carell. Gruffudd came right back with a joke of his own, claiming his corset had been "nice and loose. Yeah, I was very lucky. I got them to loosen it up a little bit."

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THE LAST TWO DAYS OF THE SHOOT

Gruffudd's own time on set, as he described it, was short and very physical. "I was there for a couple of days towards the end of the shoot," he said. "I think it was quite literally the last two days of the shoot."

Those were long, demanding days. "What was wonderful about it was the warm embrace of a family atmosphere," he said, "and I think that transcribed to the screen itself." Then he described what an officer's workday actually involves. "My day consisted of not passing out because of the exhaustion of fighting the entire day, because I was in the background of nearly every scene, fighting with a very, very fit, young sort of stuntman who could do it over and over."

He admitted the stuntman outlasted him. "I was just literally marking it towards the end," he said, using the stage term for going through the motions at half power to save energy. "Please."

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That "family atmosphere" is no accident. *Drummer Boy* comes from a real family. Brothers Ben and Joel David Smallbone directed it, brother Luke Smallbone is among the producers, and it was made under the for KING & COUNTRY Entertainment banner with Angel Studios, 2521 Entertainment and Ireland's Red 56. Even an actor who arrived for the last two days of a long production noticed it. Gruffudd, who has worked on everything from Hollywood comic-book films to British prestige dramas such as *Liar*, knows the difference between a set that runs like a machine and one that feels like a family.

Gruffudd sees the finished film filling a real need. "I think it's going to be a unique experience for the cinemagoer," he said. "It's something that I think we're all craving for right now, and especially at this time of year. I'm really excited to see the response."

The timing he's talking about is intentional. *Drummer Boy* opens on November 6, at the start of the holiday moviegoing season. That's when families go to the movies together, and when Angel Studios, the company behind *The Chosen*, *Sound of Freedom* and *The King of Kings*, has learned to fill theaters with faith- and family-driven audiences.

FIFTY YEARS OF KNOWING

For his last question, Salfen asked the panel to name something they took away from the experience—a moment of looking around and thinking, *I'm so glad I did this*.

Hardin answered with the authority of someone who has been in front of cameras almost her whole life. "Well, after seeing the film—you know, I had a feeling it was going to be good," she said. "I've been doing this for over half a century. I literally started acting professionally when I was a very young child. And so I kind of can feel when something is going well."

Still, she's learned to be wary of that feeling. "Really, movies are made in the editing room," she said. "You never really know. Even if you capture the most beautiful production design and performances and costumes."

She saw that kind of craftsmanship all around her on the set. "Every creative department on this movie was really just in sync and really nailing it," she said. "I could see that. But you never know."

> *I thought it was going to be good, and it was better than good. It was really, really, really great. — Melora Hardin*

Then she saw it the way she says everyone should. "I had a feeling it was going to be good. And then I saw it on the big screen, where everybody should see it, with the big speakers—and it was better than I thought. I thought it was going to be good, and it was better than good. It was really, really, really great."

The movie got to her more than once. "I was very moved multiple times," she said. "I was very emotional and choked up, and just really, really enjoyed it. It was wonderful."

That's a lot coming from Hardin. She made her professional debut as a child in the 1970s, was famously cast and then replaced as Jennifer Parker in *Back to the Future*, survived the gauntlet of network sitcoms, and played Jan for years on one of the most rewatched comedies in television history. She has seen plenty of projects that looked great on set and didn't hold up in the edit. When she says *Drummer Boy* turned out better than she expected, she has a long career to measure it against.

SEE IT ON THE BIG SCREEN

Time was short, as it always is at a junket. Salfen wrapped by thanking both actors and promising to send AMFM's readers to theaters. "I look forward to telling everybody to see this on the big screen," he said. "It's so good."

Hardin's advice about the big screen and the big speakers isn't just publicity. The film was made to be seen that way. Shot in Ireland by cinematographer Cathal Watters, *Drummer Boy* stages its musical numbers across snowy, open battlefields. Its centerpiece, a march led by young Benjamin Clem (Lucas Leach), drum in hand, is the kind of sequence that loses a lot of its power on a phone. The cast's word for the film, over and over, was *joy*: the joy of the songs, of the family behind the camera, and of a story that ends up at forgiveness instead of the end of the world.

Asked what the movie means to them, two seasoned actors kept coming back to the same few words: hope, family, love regardless, and conversation even when you disagree. Hardin can't take another dystopia. Gruffudd found a musical where the songs fight alongside the soldiers, then fought a stuntman half his age for two days straight and still called it a warm embrace.

There's nothing else to do but sing. And, as Salfen would tell you, nothing else to do but go see it.

FIND *DRUMMER BOY*

Directed by: Ben Smallbone and Joel David Smallbone

Written by: Richard L. Ramsey

Produced by: Chip Diggins, Kristy Choo, Luke Smallbone, Justin Tolley, Macdara Kelleher

Executive Produced by: David E. Fischer, Jon Walter

Starring: Joel David Smallbone (Jeremiah Clem), Lucas Leach (Benjamin Clem), India Brown (Emmaline), Melora Hardin (Rachel Clem), Ioan Gruffudd (Nathaniel Clem), Beth Easdown (Lady Elizabeth Balfour), Beverley Knight (Margret), Charles Esten (Lord Balfour), Iain Glen (Major John Ambrose)

Director of Photography: Cathal Watters

Production Companies: Angel Studios, for KING + COUNTRY Entertainment, 2521 Entertainment, Red 56

Synopsis: In this epic musical, two brothers are driven onto opposite sides of the American Revolutionary War. With love, loyalty, and family caught in the crossfire, each must decide who he will become, as the fight for freedom turns into a deeply personal battle for forgiveness.

Release: In theaters nationwide **Friday, November 6, 2026**, from Angel Studios. Tickets: angel.com/movies/drummer-boy

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine during the Drummer Boy virtual press junket, October 29, 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.
