EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Ready to Play Until Someone Shouted Stop

Joel David Smallbone, India Brown and Lucas Leach on Drummer Boy—three weeks of drum lessons in the Irish countryside, a first day that was really the last scene, eight years of pushing a musical uphill, and why "my best will be enough."

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

The last time Paul Salfen saw Joel David Smallbone, the for KING & COUNTRY frontman had a beard. "Great to see you again, buddy," Salfen said when the Zoom window opened. "Hey—you clean shaven?"

"Well, I know," Smallbone laughed. "I'm trying to clean up my act a little bit."

He has reason to look sharp. On Friday, November 6, Angel Studios releases *Drummer Boy*, a Revolutionary War musical that Smallbone co-directed with his brother Ben Smallbone, from a screenplay by Richard L. Ramsey. He also stars in it, co-wrote the music, and is now promoting it. Next to him on the October 29 virtual junket were his two young leads: Lucas Leach, the English actor known from the BBC series *Crookhaven*, who plays the title drummer, Benjamin Clem; and India Brown, of Apple TV+'s *Invasion*, who plays Emmaline.

Salfen started with a confession. "Oh my gosh, what a great surprise," he said. "I went into this totally blind. Didn't know it was a musical. What a pleasant surprise. I can't wait for people to go in the theater and see this on the big screen. You could just feel the joy that came from it."

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. Smallbone plays the older brother, Jeremiah Clem, and Leach plays young Benjamin. Melora Hardin and Ioan Gruffudd play their parents, Rachel and Nathaniel Clem. Beth Easdown, Beverley Knight, Charles Esten and *Game of Thrones* veteran Iain Glen round out the cast.

THE DRUMMER BOY SEQUENCE

Salfen asked each of them to pick one day from the set that stood out. Leach went first, and his pick was obvious.

"I literally spoke about it, but I'm going to say it again," he said. "The Drummer Boy sequence was something that we had been building up to, mentally and physically."

The training started almost as soon as he arrived in Ireland, where the film was shot. "The first thing we did when I landed was, I had a day or two to settle, look at the beautiful Irish countryside," Leach said. "And it was like, right—drumming lessons begin now."

The lessons took up a big part of his day. "It was around two hours, three hours a day," he said, "and I had a fantastic coach, Garrett." The job was "to build that song from scratch: learning how to drum, learning how to march and sing, all at the same time."

> *I was ready to play until someone shouted at me to stop. — Lucas Leach*

By the time cameras rolled on that scene, he was ready, and he knew it. "Being out there was one of those moments where I recognized I'm so lucky to say this is my job," Leach said. "I'm so lucky to be here. But also, I'm ready for this moment. We're prepared, and we worked hard."

He described the day itself in a few words. "Being out there in the snow, in this vast open field, with the drum and the sticks in my hand—I was ready to play until someone shouted at me to stop. So that was a really, really exciting day for me."

A FIRST DAY THAT WAS THE ENDING

Brown was on set for Leach's big day too. "I love what Lucas just said," she began. "I was there that day, and it was so, so special."

But the day that stayed with her was her very first, and it came with a twist that actors know well and audiences rarely hear about. "I have to tie it back to my first day of filming," she said. "I actually filmed my final scene."

Films are almost never shot in story order. Schedules are built around locations, weather and actor availability, so a performer can find herself playing her character's ending before she's played anything else. For Brown, that meant arriving at Emmaline's last moment after weeks of preparation but no shooting at all. "We had done all this prep, and we had done our table read, and we had been in our fittings," she recalled. "And that first day, walking on set—I'm not going to spoil it for anyone—that first day walking on set in that character, and it was a song."

Instead of nerves, she felt grounded. "I felt so empowered and ready to go," she said. "I felt supported, and I felt love, and I felt like we were really going to make something special together."

> *I felt supported, and I felt love, and I felt like we were really going to make something special together. — India Brown*

"I'm so glad that we're all together now talking about this film," she added, "because I do really, truly believe it's so special."

DOUBLE DUTY—AND THEN SOME

Salfen pointed out that Smallbone had been doing "double duty—actually more than that" on *Drummer Boy*: co-directing, acting, singing and working on the songs. Was it still a joy?

"Oh, it's still a joy," Smallbone said. "I don't know anything else, Paul."

His explanation comes straight out of how he's made a living for years. "In music, you're all the things," he said. "You write the song, you perform the song, you produce the song, you promote the song. And so I just sort of applied—it's a bit of a simpleton moment—but I applied the same rule to movies. What if you could help write it, and help perform it, and produce it, and promote it? And here we are, promoting it."

That do-everything approach is how for KING & COUNTRY has worked since Joel and his brother Luke started out in Nashville. The duo has won multiple Grammy Awards, and their arena shows are elaborate productions. In recent years the Smallbones have brought the same habit to film. Joel co-directed and starred in *Unsung Hero* (2024), the true story of the family's move from Australia to Nashville, which Ramsey co-wrote and co-directed. He also played King Herod in the musical *Journey to Bethlehem* (2023). *Drummer Boy* brings both strands together: a full movie musical that he co-directed with a third brother, Ben.

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What he likes best, he said, is building the team. "I love all the pieces," he said, "and to me, the holistic nature of sort of pulling the ensemble together, and creating—as India well said, which I take as such a high compliment—creating an environment for them to thrive."

THREE AND A HALF WEEKS TO A DRUM SOLO

Then Smallbone told the story of how Leach got the part, and he made it clear how much his young lead had earned that drumming scene.

"I remember when we met Lucas for the first time," he said, "and our casting director was like, there was not a man in this audition that would work harder than Lucas."

The surprising part: Leach couldn't play. "He'd never played a drum in his life," Smallbone said. "And yet, in three weeks, three and a half weeks, he was—you flash forward to that battlefield and he's just slaying it, and overcoming so much. You've got to walk and drum, and he's got the splint on, the whole thing."

That lines up with Leach's own account: two to three hours a day with his coach, starting the moment he landed in Ireland, until he could march, drum and sing a full number at the same time, in the snow and in costume, with a splint on.

Smallbone said the same about Brown. "It's like she was just—I said to her, the fear in me of making this film at any other time," he said, "because Benjamin wouldn't have been Lucas, and Emmaline wouldn't have been India."

EIGHT YEARS UPHILL

Then Smallbone revealed how long the project had been in the works. "I've spent eight years trying to get this thing off the ground," he said.

Eight years is a long time to push an original musical with no well-known source material, set in the 1770s and made outside the studio system. But Smallbone has decided the delays were part of the plan. "I feel this real beautiful release, and relief, Paul," he said, "in going, like, well—this was it. And this was the time. And this was the crew that we were meant to sort of go to battle with."

> *I've spent eight years trying to get this thing off the ground... This was the time. And this was the crew that we were meant to sort of go to battle with. — Joel David Smallbone*

"And yeah, I'm just very proud," he said. "Proud of them, proud of myself. I'm proud of the film."

ONE MORE DRUMMER FOR THE TOUR?

Salfen couldn't resist a follow-up for Leach. "Lucas, you might find yourself on tour with them."

Smallbone was already thinking about it. "I did say that the other day," he said. for KING & COUNTRY is heading out on its annual Christmas tour. "I was like, if the film really hits, I'm going to have to start making calls to England, like, you've got to get on a plane over here."

Leach is all for it. "The opportunities are limitless, man. Who knows what's going to happen? I'd love to," he said. "Any excuse to get on the drum."

He's still drawn to the instrument. "There's actually a drum shop down the road," he said, "and every time I walk past, I see the snare drum, like the one in this film. I'm shooting something else at the moment, so I haven't been back home for a while. So I'm looking forward to picking up the sticks again, for sure."

FAITH THAT YOU'VE DONE THE WORK

For his last question, Salfen came back to the battle imagery. "Like you were saying, going to do battle," he said. "When you're going into a set like this—the story is very special, and I know it means so much to each of you—you've got to put yourself in the right mindset, in a different time and a different place. What do you say to yourself when it's go time? Time to go to war. I'm sure it has a bit to do with faith, too, right?"

Leach answered by talking about preparation and how it carries over into everyday life. "In everything, all things in life, you can prep as much as you want," he said, "but you have to have the faith that you've done the work and that you're ready to contribute."

"That's one thing as an actor, and in any aspect of life," he continued. "You have to have faith that you've done the work, that you're ready for this moment, that you're going to go there and hopefully be free and available to find new things in the moment as well."

That's where the surprises happen, he said. "You can spend all your life planning exactly how you want things to go. It rarely goes that way. It's the exact same on a set. Some of the most magic moments are oftentimes when a mistake happens. How do you react to that mistake, and how do you find something new? Or a bird flies in a weird direction and it gives you inspiration."

> *You have to have faith in yourself that you're available to receive everything that's happening around you, in life and on screen. — Lucas Leach*

"I think that's it," Leach concluded. "You have to have faith in yourself that you're available to receive everything that's happening around you, in life and on screen. And I feel so lucky that the actors and the team I worked with had such a consistent amount of faith in me, and faith in everyone, to add their own spark to this."

Salfen's connection dropped for a moment. When he got back, with the clock almost out, he asked for one more answer to the same question. It came from Brown.

"For me, approaching this film—and the faith and the freedom and all the lovely themes throughout the film—I just asked God every single day to just give me the skills and the wisdom that I need to tackle the day," she said. "And that will be my best. And my best will be enough."

> *I just asked God every single day to just give me the skills and the wisdom that I need to tackle the day. And that will be my best. And my best will be enough. — India Brown*

SEE IT LOUD

Drummer Boy is the kind of movie that seems to come from the people who made it. A young actor who had never touched a drum ended up leading a battlefield march in the snow. An actress started her shoot with her character's final song and felt nothing but support. And a songwriter-turned-filmmaker spent eight years carrying a musical before he found, in his words, the crew he was meant to go to battle with.

Salfen walked in expecting a war movie and found the joy he described in his first question. Leach was ready to play until someone shouted at him to stop. Starting November 6, it's the audience's turn to listen.

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.
