

# OH, DANNY BOY

DANNY BOYLE HAS, OVER THE PAST 30-PLUS YEARS, BECOME SOMETHING CLOSE TO A NATIONAL TREASURE, WITH A LITANY OF MOVIES THAT ARE AS CHERISHED AS THEY ARE ACCLAIMED. WE PAY TRIBUTE TO ONE OF CINEMA'S MOST THRILLING AND IDIOSYNCRATIC FILMMAKERS

**T**here are few directors with CVs as wildly eclectic as Danny Boyle's. This is a moviemaker whose filmography ricochets from chamber piece thrillers (*Shallow Grave*) to candy-coloured fantasies (*Millions*) to philosophical sci-fi (*Sunshine*) to toasty-hearted crowd-pleasers (*Yesterday*) to lo-fi horrors (*28 Days Later*). He's helmed big studio pictures and modest indie flicks, and he's not precious enough to shun TV, directing such shows as Disney+'s *Pistol*, Channel 4's *Babylon* and FX's *Trust*. He's conquered theatre, too, wowing the West End with an acclaimed version of *Frankenstein*,

and when it came to finding an artistic director for the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games the organising committee had just one name on their list.

To say then that Danny Boyle is one of our greatest filmmakers would be underselling his importance. There aren't many directors who are name-worthy enough to sit on Graham Norton's sofa to sell their latest film, and there aren't many whose contribution to cinema – hell, to *culture* – is so immense that they've been offered a knighthood (which he declined, of course, telling the BBC, "I'm very proud to be an equal citizen").







## THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY — THE STORY OF DANNY BOYLE'S LOST FILM

*Alien Love Triangle* has never been officially released



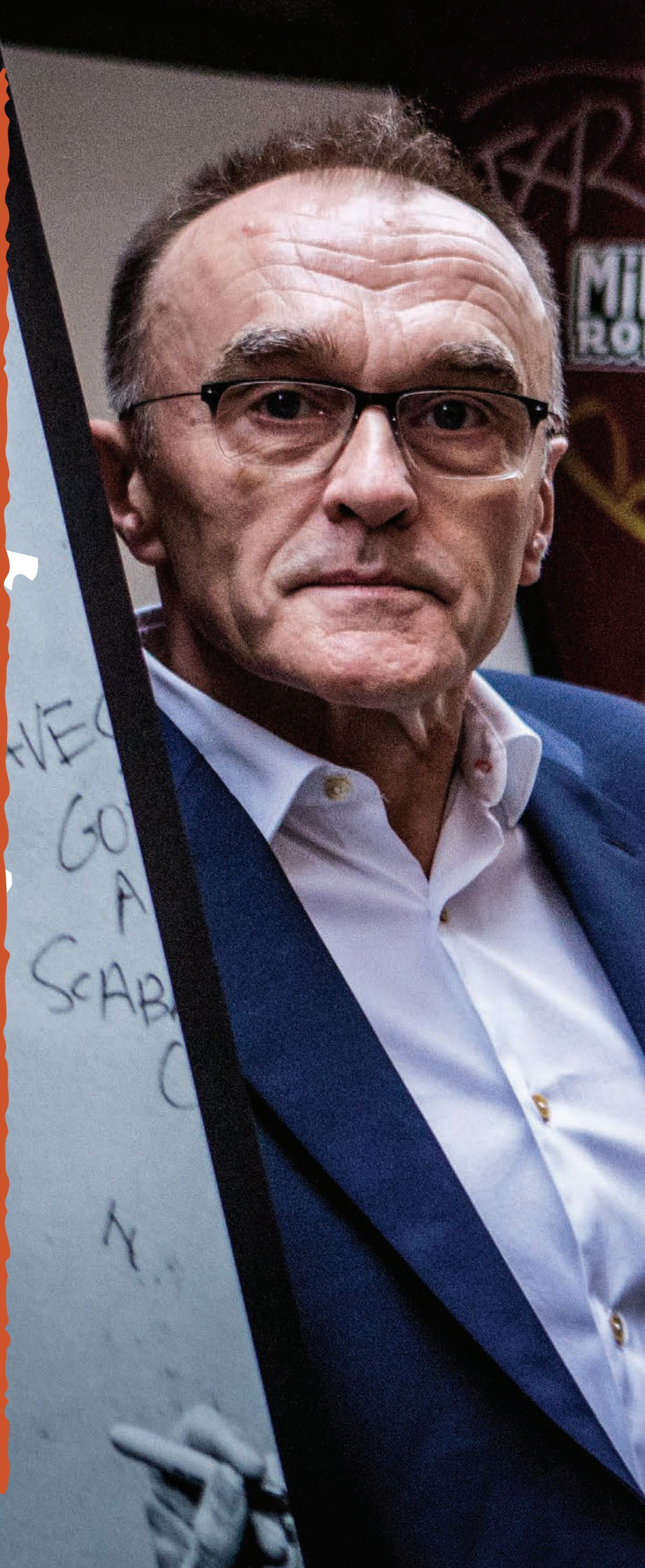
Kenneth Branagh and his alien wife in *Alien Love Triangle*.

Anthology movies were all the rage in the 1980s and '90s. Essentially one feature made up of several short films, they're often an opportunity – as for Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese and Francis Coppola in *New York Stories* (1989) – for filmmakers to tell more small-scale tales, on a more limited budget. So it was in the mid-'90s, when Danny Boyle teamed up with fellow directors Bryan Singer (*The Usual Suspects*), Gary Fleder, (*Things To Do In Denver When You're Dead*) and Guillermo del Toro (*Cronos*) for a science-fiction-themed portmanteau they called *Light Years*. Except *Light Years* never came to be. Del Toro's planned film was eventually reworked up into the full-scale *Mimic* (1997), while Fleder's was shot as a short before being padded out to the movie-length *Imposter*, which came out in 2001. Singer's segment was never made.

Boyle's film, however – titled *Alien Love Triangle* – was made, but, aside from a handful of screenings since it was lensed in 1999, it's never been officially released. Penned by John Hodge, it's a half-hour comedy about a scientist who discovers his wife is an male alien posing as a female, and boasts a pretty A-list cast in Kenneth Branagh, Courteney Cox and Heather Graham.

"It's apparently a superficial comedy," Boyle told the website *io9*. "But what it's really about, it's about the British, and what they will do to protect the apparently perfect family ideal – the lengths they will go to protect that."

After *Light Years* was shelved midway through production, *Alien Love Triangle* sat on the shelf for nine years until it premiered at Wales' smallest cinema. Organised by critic Mark Kermode, this was the first public screening of Boyle's lost movie. "After 10 years and having seen an uncompleted version of it, I'm slightly nervous about it," Kenneth Branagh told the BBC. "I hope people like it. I hope the rest of the world gets to see it." Except we never did. There were two subsequent screenings, at the National Media Museum shortly after, and a third in 2023 at the FilmBath Festival, but nothing since. Twenty-six years after it was made, there's no sign of a digital release and it's never made its way onto YouTube or Vimeo. Whether it ever gets seen again or finally makes its way onto a streaming service, we'll just have to keep hoping.





"My brain... had been sandblasted by the power of cinema"

Yet Boyle was never one of those directors, like Quentin Tarantino, whose passion for cinema started young. His first love was theatre, having studied drama at school in Bolton. It wasn't until Boyle was in his early twenties that he became a card-carrying film buff, having been awed by a screening of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. "It had eviscerated my brain, completely," he told the *Chicago Review Press* in 2011. "I was an impressionable 21-year-old guy from the sticks. My brain had not been fed and watered with great culture, you know, as art is meant to do. It had been sandblasted by the power of cinema."

But while that movie had captured Boyle's imagination, he never turned his back on the stage and, after university, joined the Joint Stock Theatre Company, later moving on to the Royal Court Theatre. His first brush with film came after he joined BBC Northern Ireland as a producer, shepherding Alan Clarke's avant-garde *Elephant* to the small screen.

Yet Boyle clearly had more to offer beyond producing. Even in the theatre, he'd been most at home on the stage floor, making the thing happen, getting his hands dirty, and, for him, it was an effortless move to directing television. He helmed three instalments of BBC anthology strand *ScreenPlay*, two episodes of ITV's *Inspector Morse* and the BBC's adaptation of Jane Rogers' novel *Mr Wroe's Virgins*. More importantly, there were two TV films in 2001 – *Vacuuming Completely Nude In Paradise* and *Strumpet*.

Watching those early efforts now, it's a strain to see much of Boyle's distinctive style. In fact, if you'd

## THE BOND THAT NEVER WAS

"The name's Boyle, Danny Boyle..."

It was news that, for film buffs in 2016, was born in big-screen heaven. "Danny Boyle To Direct Next Bond Movie" screamed the headlines, with a press release stating that Boyle was working on a 007 movie with regular collaborator John Hodge. But while the news was warmly received, there were also questions of how this would actually work. Bond producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael G Wilson were, before they ceded control to Amazon, notorious as backseat drivers with their films – would they allow a voice as distinctive as Danny Boyle's free reign? Apparently not, was the answer. Two years later Boyle and Hodge exited the film.

"[I'm] not really cut out [for franchises]," the director later told *Metro*. "I work in partnership with writers and I am not prepared to break it up." In another interview with *Esquire*, Boyle revealed his vision for 007 was set in present-day Russia, and would have given Bond a never-before-told origin story. "I remember thinking, 'Should I really get involved in franchises?'" he continued. "Because they don't really want something different. They want you to freshen it up a bit, but not really challenge it... It was set in present-day Russia and went back to his origins, and they just lost, what's the word... they just lost confidence in it. It was a shame really."



Bond 25 eventually came out as *No Time To Die*.

## BOYLE'S LOST ALIEN FILM

What became *Alien Resurrection* would have been the director's first brush with the Hollywood machine

The *Alien* franchise was built on bold decisions. The action-heavy *Aliens* was a 180 from *Alien*, while prison-planet-set *Alien 3* could never be described as safe. So it was when in 1996 Boyle met with 20th Century Fox with an eye to following in the footsteps of directors Ridley Scott, James Cameron and David Fincher.

"I loved the *Alien* movies," he told The Directors Guild Of America in a 2015 interview.



Sigourney Weaver and Winona Ryder in *Alien Resurrection*.

"There was a wonderful script by Joss Whedon, and I went to meet Sigourney Weaver, which was absolutely a buzz. But then I began to realise that the franchise was in transition between the way that Ridley Scott had done it – just old-style physical acting and effects – and CG. And I felt

I was not the guy to negotiate that transition. Maybe looking back, I could have probably said, 'No, we're going to do it in the way that Ridley did,' but the industry as a whole was in transition, and CG was inevitable. It made sense. So I decided to do *A Life Less Ordinary* instead."



## EXIT STAGE LEFT

*The big and small screens haven't been Danny Boyle's only passion over the years*

Danny Boyle began his career in the theatre, and it's a passion that's never left him. Happy to periodically return to the stage, he's been behind some of the boldest and most critically applauded productions of the last few decades. His most talked about project came in 2011 with the Royal National Theatre debut of *Frankenstein*. With its A-list cast of Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller, it made headlines for Boyle's innovative decision for its two leads to swap their roles – of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature – between shows. Raved *The Daily Telegraph*: "There is no doubt that *Frankenstein* is the most viscerally exciting and visually stunning show in town."

Also highly praised was *The Children's Monologues*. Originally planned as a one-night play at London's Old Vic on 14 November 2010, it was a star-studded affair (Ben Kingsley, Benedict Cumberbatch, Tom Hiddleston, Gemma Arterton, Eddie Redmayne et al) based around children's first-hand experiences of life in South Africa. Boyle later restaged it at the Royal Court Theatre in 2015, and again in 2017 at Carnegie Hall in New York City.



Jonny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch as creature and creator.

caught any of Boyle's episodes of *Morse*, it'd be hard to find much shared DNA with his first big screen feature. That film, *Shallow Grave*, didn't just arrive at British cinemas in 1994, it detonated. From that propulsive, Leftfield-soundtracked opening, Boyle's gonzo thriller, made in just 30 days on a budget of \$2.5 million, took no prisoners. It would become the most commercially successful British movie of 1995.

It's worth remembering exactly how barren the British film landscape was in the early to mid-1990s. The year before *Shallow Grave* came out, the most successful homegrown movie was *Four Weddings And A Funeral*. Before that, it had been *The Remains Of The Day*. When British cinema did tell stories that weren't about highborns, more often than not they were openly chasing the international market, almost always with an awkwardly injected American star (see 1993's *The Young Americans*, 1994's *Shopping* and 1995's *Jack And Sarah*). But there was something proudly British about *Shallow Grave*. It's likely Boyle could have swelled that paltry budget had he cast someone like Christian Slater or Ethan Hawke in the Ewan McGregor part, but would it have made it better, or any more realistic? As it stood, this was an assertively British movie that took a genre normally associated with Hollywood, subverting and reshaping it into something unique.

Awards came thick and fast. The movie walked away with a BAFTA for Best British Film, and scooped three prizes at the *Empire* Awards. It also earned Boyle the Best British Newcomer gong from the 1996 London Film Critics Circle. If Tarantino was American cinema's great hope in the mid-'90s, Danny Boyle, it was generally accepted, was ours.

It would have been easy at this time for Boyle to up sticks to Hollywood – there were plenty of offers, for sure. But there have been many British filmmakers who have wowed with individualistic, critically love-bombed debuts, who are then forcibly tamed by the American studio system. Boyle has had scrapes with the Hollywood machine but has always managed to extricate himself at some point in the production process.

It's Boyle's creative restlessness that makes his movie CV so unique. He rarely settles into one type of film, often bouncing violently



The cast and crew of 2022's *Pistol*, at the premiere after party in New York.

## SCREENSPOTTING

*Outside of his cinema career, Danny Boyle has been behind several TV projects in recent years...*

Even after Danny Boyle scored his first big-screen hit with *Shallow Grave*, he never abandoned TV. Over the years, he's helmed several major-league shows, including 2014's comedy-drama *Babylon* (which he co-created alongside *Peep Show*'s Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong) and 2018's *Trust*. Wrote *Empire*: "[*Trust*] is a challenging, hugely watchable series with lots of visual dazzle and plenty to say about the corrupting power of wealth."

Boyle's last – to date – TV project was *Pistol*, an adaptation of former Sex Pistol Steve Jones' memoir. It landed on Disney+ in 2022 to mixed reviews, not least from ex-frontman John Lydon, who called Boyle a "crippling monstrosity".

"You would have expected a far higher quality professional behaviour," the artist formerly known as Johnny Rotten told *The i*. "He seems to think he knows all about me without speaking to me."

For his part, Boyle only had kind words to say about Lydon. "I know he hates us for it but it doesn't really matter," the director told *Kerrang!* "They're all talented and really important in what they achieved, but he is unique. In a time where we're losing true originals because everything's copied and digitised, he is one of the originals, truly, in our lifetime."





"I know [John Lydon] hates us for it but it doesn't really matter"

between genres. There's little that bonds *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog or Millions* and *28 Days Later*, yet there is a commonality shared by all of his movies, as his producer Andrew Macdonald told *The Independent*, "Boyle takes a subject that you've often seen portrayed realistically, in a politically correct way, whether it's junkies or slum orphans, and he has managed to make it realistic but also incredibly uplifting and joyful."

At the age of 68, Danny Boyle is no spring chicken, but you'd never know that from the energy and verve of his movies. With *28 Years Later*, his 14th full-length film, he shows little sign of slowing down, with that subversive punk ethos that gave us *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting* burning just as bright now as it did three decades ago. Some national treasures are so-named because they're comforting and uncontroversial, but others are admired because they represent, in their rebellious, trouble-making spirit, the very best of this country. And long may he continue. ■

## FASTER, HIGHER, STRONGER, TOGETHER

*Boyle's four-hour extravaganza to open 2012's Summer Olympics was a spectacle that was once seen, never forgotten...*

With a worldwide audience of 900 million and a budget of £27m, it's fair to say that the opening ceremony of the 2012 Summer Olympics in London was one of Danny Boyle's biggest creative projects. As someone who had straddled stage work and cinema he was an obvious choice to helm this four-hour celebration of all things British. He accepted because, as he told *The Guardian*, "It felt weirdly more like a responsibility, a kind of civic or national responsibility."

It was a triumph. An exuberant show featuring children bouncing on NHS beds, the Queen meeting James Bond, Kenneth Branagh in top coat and tall hat as Isambard Kingdom Brunel and blacksmiths toiling away at their furnaces to forge the Olympic rings, it was memorably described as "a love letter to Britain."

"Danny Boyle has just made the biggest, maddest, weirdest, most heartfelt and lovable dream sequence in British cinema history," raved *The Guardian* in a piece printed the next day, while *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote: "Boyle's epic opera of social and cultural history was a vibrant work of unfettered imagination that celebrated a nation, but even more so, its people."



Celebrating the people and history of Britain at the 2012 Olympics.