



Film

How we made A Boy Called Christmas – Gil Kenan and Henry Lawfull unwrap their magical festive film

From casting to computer-generated co-stars, director Gil Kenan and lead actor Henry Lawfull talk us through what went into making this year's biggest Christmas film.

By James Descombes

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A Boy Called Christmas is the perfect pre-Crimble winter warmer to ease you and your family into the festive spirit.

Based on Matt Haig's best-selling novel, A Boy Called Christmas follows the story of young Nikolas (Henry Lawfull), who sets out on an adventure with his reindeer and pet mouse Miika (voiced by Stephen Merchant) to find Elfhelm, the village of elves.

The cast features big-name stars such as Maggie Smith, Jim Broadbent, Toby Jones, Michiel Huisman and Sally Hawkins, alongside a young ensemble of actors, including Indica Watson, Isabel Volava, and Lawfull, who plays the lead role of Nikolas.

[All you need to know about A Boy Called Christmas >](#)

We spoke to Henry and the film's director, Gil Kenan (Monster House, Poltergeist), about casting, battling freezing cold temperatures, bucking broncos and much more.

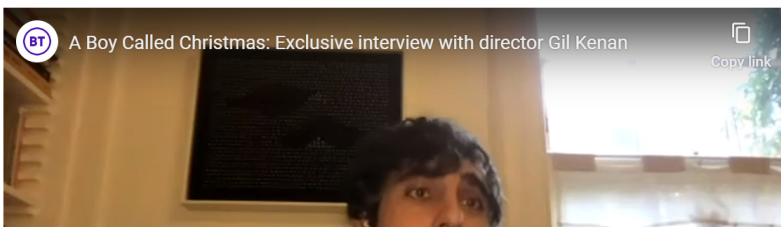


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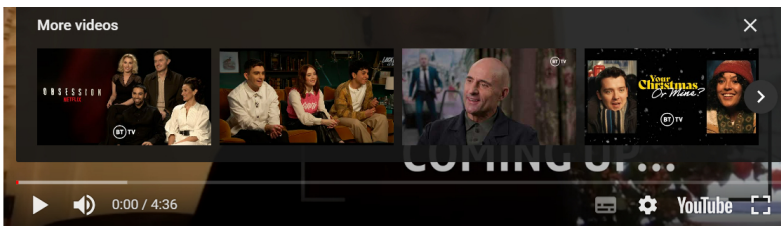
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Casting is key



A Boy Called Christmas brings together seasoned actors and newcomers alike, so casting was crucial in creating the perfect recipe for this festive film.

"Casting is everything on a film," says director Gil Kenan. "My casting director Susie Figgis worked tirelessly to get me my dream cast.

"Obviously, it makes a director's job easier to have great actors on set, but it also raises your expectations in terms of how you work with them and how you get the performances.

"Having Dame Maggie Smith, Toby Jones, Jim Broadbent, Sally Hawkins, just allowed this film to come to life in a way that gave it such breadth, such scope – I was grinning ear to ear behind the monitor every day on this film."

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Henry Lawfull coming Nikolas

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But it's the young cast, including newcomer Henry Lawfull, who are the soul of this film. Finding the right actors and actresses for these roles was vital.

"They were able to create characters which I hope an audience will see as having a grounded-ness, a sort of emotional reality that should make the entire enterprise meaningful," Kenan explains.

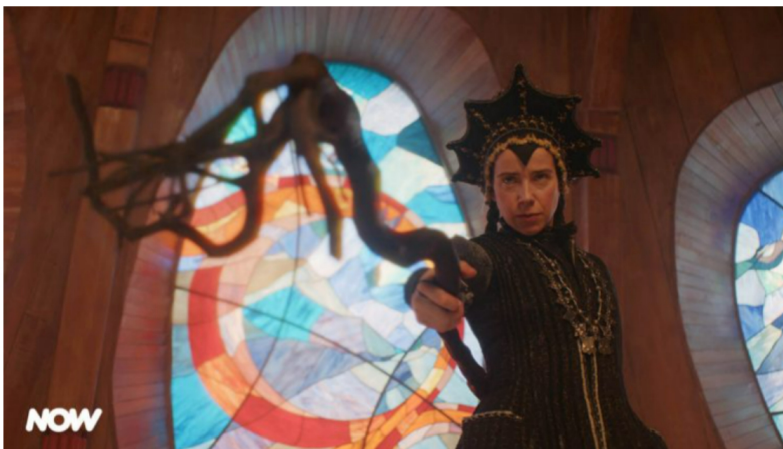
"You feel the magic more, you feel the emotions more, because of the honesty, the naturalism and the accessibility of their performances."

So, finding the perfect actor for the lead role of Nikolas must've been a long, hard struggle, right? Absolutely not.

"Sometimes this takes months and you see thousands of young actors, but in this case Henry was in the very first round of actors that I saw. I remember after his tape ended, I turned to Susie (casting director) and said 'I think we just saw Nikolas. But that's too easy, it can't happen like that!'" Kenan recalls



Bringing the book to life



A Boy Called Christmas is based on the best-selling book by Matt Haig. The story inspired Kenan to transform it for the screen and Haig's writing helped guide Lawfull's stellar performance.

"I love Matt's voice. His writing, his tone," says Kenan.

"It felt like a modern way to approach what I love about Roald Dahl stories as a story lover, as a fan of the full breadth of human tone; the joyous fun parts, the adventurous parts and also the bits that make you feel a little bit more human – the base notes to life. I felt like Matt captured all of that in his writing and I felt like I had an opportunity to be the steward of that idea and bring it to the screen," Kenan explains.

"My sister had the book, so I thought to give me an advantage I'll read it. That's when I first felt a connection to the character," adds Lawfull.



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A bucking bronco and a metal mouse





Nikolas's best friend in the film is a mouse called Miika, voiced by Stephen Merchant. So how was it for young lead Henry Lawfull working with both a computer-generated mouse and a comedy genius?

"He's like my best mate in the film, but I've never actually met him," Lawfull says.

"It was less working with him and more working with a little metal pin on my shoulder, with a little green tape around the top of it. And Gil, the director, would do his lines.

"Funny story - the first time I actually met Jim Broadbent was on this bucking bronco doing the scene flying through the sky as if we were on a reindeer," he chuckles.

Never work with computer-generated trolls and animals...



It's not just the experienced actors and younger cast that steal the show. The computer-generated characters play starring roles too. So how challenging was it working with their not-so-present co-stars?

"I love those sort of challenges because world-building is why I get out of bed, so part of that is just environment, but of course, bringing that character to life... I had a start in animation and I love the idea of creating a seamless blend between human and animated performances," says Kenan.

Giving us a glimpse beyond what we see on the screen, Lawfull explained the filming process.

"The troll - I remember they built a massive puppet out of polystyrene, and then I'd be on wires lifted up as if I was going into his mouth," said the young actor.

"It was weird, but amazing now how it's all come to life."

Creating a warm film in the freezing cold

While polystyrene trolls and bucking broncos sound somewhat challenging, perhaps the biggest hurdle to making the film was the harsh conditions on filming locations such as Lapland and Slovakia.

"It brought about challenges that I've never had to encounter before," says director Kenan. "Walking out of the plane in the Arctic Circle, I felt my breath freeze in my lungs. I saw light I've never seen before; I saw colours my eyes have never seen before.

"I was totally inspired to shoot one of the scenes in Slovakia. We had our cast and crew shooting on top of a mountain that we reached by snowmobile, shooting on a frozen lake

shooting on top of a mountain that we reached by snowmobiles, shooting on a frozen lake in the middle of a snowstorm. We wanted to be able to capture all of that weather on camera, but it meant extraordinary challenges for us in just being able to move the camera.

“So a new type of camera rig was invented that was supported by three camera operators but allowed it to have full handheld freedom of movement because there is no track or crane, or anything that we can have on a frozen lake. It brought up lots of challenges but also lots of cool ways to solve those problems.”

And how did young Lawfull cope with the cold? “He’s fun, he’s funny, and he also doesn’t mind the cold, which was a nice plus because we had some proper bits of adventure filmmaking in very wild conditions,” says Kenan.

A Boy Called Christmas is in cinemas and on Sky Cinema and NOW from November 26

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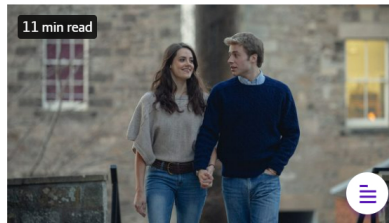
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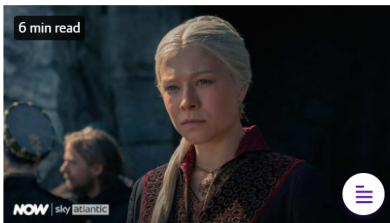
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