



NEW RELEASES

County Lines

As drug-related activity has fanned out from major metropolitan centres to provincial areas, the term 'county lines' has recently been much used in the UK media. It was perhaps inevitable that British film or television would use it as an attention-grabbing title; more surprising is the provenance of this striking feature's writer-director Henry Blake, who has 11 years' experience counselling vulnerable young people exploited by the drugs trade.

As this bracing drama unfolds, we're drawn in and held by a sense that this first-time filmmaker absolutely knows whereof he speaks, and wants to speak up for those caught in an unfolding social tragedy. What is exceptional about the piece is Blake's avoidance of well-worn cinematic paths – either the plot-heavy austere social realism of the Paul Laverty/Ken Loach school or the market-friendly urban-styled youth flick à la Noel Clarke.

Instead, he has created a distinctive stylistic context, through cameraman Sverre Sørdal's unsettling, heightened colour palette and the dread-filled droning of James Pickering's score, to illuminate the fear and paranoia experienced by those involved. The closest filmic reference point might be Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*; Blake himself suggests he looked beyond cinema for inspiration to the photography of William Eggleston and Nan Goldin and even Rembrandt's canvases, claims borne out by what we see on screen.

That said, the film's captivating quality is founded in the potent screen presence of its young leading man Conrad Khan, as the errant son Tyler. Khan convinces as a taciturn, seemingly benign outsider, but in his East London comprehensive it's impossible to lie low all the time. He gets picked on, confrontation escalates, and soon teachers and his hard-pressed single mother are struggling to get through to him. An introductory framing device has already used pointed questioning by an off-screen counsellor, but once we move back in time to explore the build-up to impending crisis, the story's patient unfolding allows us to appreciate the give-and-take between Tyler and his milieu.

The lack of a male authority figure at home is significant; so is the fact that mum Toni (Ashley Madekwe, a performance carefully calibrated between weakness and strength) works nights as a cleaner, so that the family's paths cross mainly at breakfast. That leaves Tyler with a perhaps misguided sense that he needs to be the household's patriarchal figure, and what follows is about a quest for status, for authority and breadwinning opportunities.

That's where Harris Dickinson's slick-talking streetwise 'entrepreneur' Simon comes in, sizing up the boy with promises of easy money. The trouble is that in Simon's world authority is maintained by violence, and boyish vulnerability cannot be part of the equation. As Tyler begins to earn his cut, delivering drugs to a southern coastal town, there's a palpable feeling of doom. This cautionary tale is heading in one direction – though the retribution visited on the wiry 14-year-old proves shocking in its ferocity.

The film shows profound compassion, but little in the way of heaped-on sentiment. Blake refuses either to pillory the mother and the hassled school staff, or to give any of them a free pass, instead concentrating on the

emotional and practical adjustments that might ameliorate the situation for kids like Tyler.

There is a maturity of analysis here; but the film's stylistic daring turns it from able reportage into a startling piece of pure cinema. Colours, greens especially, are sickly enough to make your flesh crawl, creating an uneasy vision from everyday environs, and this defamiliarisation delivers stomach-knotting disquiet throughout – amplified by the score's unsettling dissonances. Blake's framing too often seems wider than we would expect, leaving the viewer with a cumulative sense of powerlessness that, perhaps counter-intuitively, intensifies involvement with the material.

It takes a lot of nerve to hold everything back, as Blake does so successfully here, trusting in Khan's arresting presence, by turns pitiful and threatening, to hold the attention. It's a vindication for a truly independent production, set up outside the usual institutional support schemes, which has allowed an exciting, unexpected, unconventional new directorial voice to ring out so loud and clear.

Trevor Johnston, *Sight & Sound*, May 2020

Henry Blake's background is in youth work; before making *County Lines* he spent 11 years working with real-life victims of county lines drug operations. 'In the last five years county lines has got more attention,' he says 'but it's been going on for 15 years.'

Blake never went to film school. A child actor in New Zealand, where he was born, he got into youth work as an alternative to a bar job when he was looking for acting work in the UK. Blake discovered he had a particular knack for working with boys. 'There's that file in the storage cupboard that no one touches for years – that's what I was being given,' he says. 'I came to be known as the guy who could handle all of that.' Filmmaking remained a side ambition, though, and gradually Blake started to direct short films – with his wife Victoria, who is also a youth worker, producing them – but none were directly inspired by their line of work. ('I was scared,' he says.)

Then, in 2015, Blake worked on a case that he describes as so awful, he decided 'people need to know this'. He was also concerned that, given the growing interest in county lines, another film might be made on the subject that lacked the authenticity and scope he felt it required.

Blake rightly feels that his experience in youth work enabled him to bring a real psychological depth to Tyler's character. 'Is Tyler a victim or a perpetrator, or both?' he asks. 'If children like this are both, then I don't feel that our safeguarding systems across this country can house the complexity of that child, because the pendulum can swing from victim to perpetrator, as you see in the film.'

This nuance of character extends to the supporting roles, particularly Tyler's mother Toni (Ashley Madekwe). 'The tone of that family was very specific,' says Blake. 'I didn't want to make Toni a heroin addict or an alcoholic. She's a real mum who thinks her son is slinging some weed, but doesn't understand the depth of the exploitation. She's probably the character that I'll defend to the hilt, because I know her.'

Blake's experience also helped when it came to selecting his lead star and shaping Khan's performance. Out of 300 tapes, he and casting director Aisha Bywaters auditioned 12 boys. 'I was looking for an actor who could essentially

do two roles: pre-trauma and post-trauma,' he explains. 'We gave them the showdown scene with the mother as the audition [a violent scene that was inspired by an encounter Blake witnessed]. I wanted to see if the young actors would engage with the emotional warfare element of it, because it's a war at that time in the household.'

In Khan, Blake spied an emotional intelligence and diligence. 'Often when you're working with young people, you're having to give notes maybe three or four times before you get to that, and I didn't want that,' he explains. 'I wanted an actor who just responds. I said to him: "For 23 days of the shoot, you're going to hear two words every single day, which are your safe words, those are action and cut, so no matter what happens in between, no matter how hard that is, you're always going to hear those words." Children who are really being exploited never hear those words. He understood that and took it on.'

As for visual influences, Blake references the abstract manner in which Japanese street photographer Fukase Masahisa captured loneliness in his seminal 1980s photobook *The Solitude of Ravens*, as well as Elem Klimov's legendary war movie and tale of lost innocence *Come and See* (1985). Klimov's film was also influential on Blake's approach to filming violence, which, when it does erupt, is blurred and disorientating, something Blake and cinematographer Sverre Sjørdal helped evoke by constantly altering the depth of field (Blake felt strongly that the typical handheld camera approach of much social realism had long been overdone). 'A lot of filmmakers find violence very cinematic to shoot but I found it very distressing, because I have seen it,' he explains.

If *County Lines* does contribute to a groundswell of awareness, what outcome is Blake ultimately hoping for? 'There's currently no national response to county lines. It needs a much more substantial, national response that looks at it from the ground up and that protects those most vulnerable,' he says. 'As a front-line youth worker I have seen it get worse, year after year,' Blake continues. 'I can't do the job if you commission me for four or five weeks, just one hour a week, and expect me to tick all these educational boxes, as well as repair the family. You have to start taking what we do seriously ... and that means money. So that's what I would love, because if you look at the film, it comes back to that "acceptable loss" speech – that's when the penny starts to drop with Tyler, and change becomes possible.'

Henry Blake interviewed by Isabel Stevens, *Sight & Sound*, December 2020

COUNTY LINES

Directed by: Henry Blake

Production Companies: Two Birds Entertainment, Loupe Films

Executive Producers: Christopher Granier-Deferre,

Simona Hughes, Zoe Bamber, Pia Getty

Produced by: Victoria Bavister, David Broder

Line Producer: Dylan Rees

Supervising Location Manager: Sherylee Anne Housseib

Location Manager: Paul Harvey

1st Assistant Director: Joe Starrs

2nd Assistant Director: Sam Waddington

3rd Assistant Director: Penelope Berkemeier

Script Supervisor: Daniella Brandano

Casting Director: Aisha Bywaters

Written by: Henry Blake

Cinematographer: Sverre Sørdal

1st Assistant Camera: Richard O'Brien

2nd Assistant Camera: Ernest Tu, Joel Spence

Editor: Paco Sweetman

Production Designer: Phoebe Darling

Costume Designer: Sharon Long

Hair & Make-up Designer: Red Miller

Composer: James Pickering

Sound Designer: Ben Baird

Cast

Conrad Khan (*Tyler*)

Ashley Madekwe (*Toni*)

Marcus Rutherford (*Sadiq*)

Tabitha Milne-Price (*Aliyah*)

Harris Dickinson (*Simon*)

Anthony Adjekum (*Laurence*)

Chizzy Akudolu (*Sophie*)

Ebenezer Gyau (*Deontay*)

Carlyss Peer (*Bex*)

Stephen Leask (*Mr Matthews*)

Micah Loubon (*Khalid*)

Kashif Douglas (*Conway*)

Clay Milner-Russell (*Bailey*)

Alfie Darling (*Nick*)

Shauna Shim (*Briony*)

Chris Mamendyi (*Michael*)

Michael Oku (*Gabriel*)

David Tarkenter (*Steve Mitchell*)

Matt Piombino (*shop assistant*)

Claire Lacey (*hotel manager*)

UK 2019

90 mins

A BFI release

EVENTS & STRANDS

Member Exclusives: Booksmart

Thu 20 May 18:10

The Human Voice + pre-recorded intro and Q&A with

Pedro Almodóvar and Tilda Swinton

Sat 22 May 15:00; Tue 1 Jun 18:20

Woman with a Movie Camera: Rare Beasts

+ Q&A with writer-director Billie Piper

Sat 22 May 17:15

Sheffield Doc/Fest

Fri 4 Jun 20:15

Preview: Doctor Who: Dragonfire

Sat 12 Jun 12:00

Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump

Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10

Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire

Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10;

Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

LIFF Opening Night: WOMB (Women of My Billion)

+ on stage Q&A with Srishti Bakshi and film critic Anna Smith

Thu 17 Jun 17:20

My Beautiful Laundrette

Fri 18 Jun 20:20

The Warrior + on-stage career interview with

writer-director Asif Kapadia

Sat 19 Jun 20:30

Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless

Sun 20 Jun 15:00

Searching for Happiness...

Tue 22 Jun 20:50

Nazarband Captive

Wed 23 Jun 20:45

A'hr Kayattam

Thu 24 Jun 18:00

The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo

Sun 27 Jun 15:00

LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

UK Competition 1: I Forgot More than You'll Ever Know

Sat 26 Jun 21:00

UK Competition 3: Close Quarters

Fri 26 Jun 21:10

UK Competition 2: The Double Life Of...

Mon 28 Jun 17:45

UK Competition 4: Lessons in Survival

Tue 29 Jun 21:10

UK Competition 5: The Devil's in the Details

Wed 30 Jun 17:50

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

Ammonite

From Mon 17 May

Sound of Metal

From Mon 17 May

Nomadland

From Mon 17 May

County Lines

From Fri 21 May

First Cow

From Fri 28 May

After Love

From Fri 4 Jun

Fargo

From Fri 11 Jun

The Reason I Jump

From Fri 18 Jun

Nashville

From Fri 25 Jun

Ultraviolence

From Sat 26 Jun

Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero

and contributor Janet Alder

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