



PREVIEW

Boxing Day

+ Q&A with writer-director Aml Ameen

The first ever Black British rom-com, *Boxing Day* marks the ground-breaking directorial debut of acclaimed actor Aml Ameen.

After making a splash in 2006's *Kidulthood*, and as the headstrong PC Lewis Hardy on ITV's *The Bill*, Ameen made the move to America in 2009 where he starred in David Kelly's legal drama *Harry's Law*, the George Lucas-produced WWII feature *Red Tails*, opposite Oprah Winfrey in Lee Daniels' *The Butler*, and the hit YA adaptation *The Maze Runner*.

In 2018, Ameen returned to the UK to star in Idris Elba's directorial debut *Yardie*, which premiered at the Sundance film festival. More recently, he starred in the science fiction thriller *Parallel* and played Simon in Michaela Coel's award-winning TV series *I May Destroy You*.

But even as his acting career was taking off in the US, Ameen had his sights set behind the camera and in 2018, was all set to make his feature directorial debut with *A Night Worth Living*, based on his 2011 short, *Drink, Drugs & KFC*. Three weeks before filming was due to start, however, the financing fell through, and the movie collapsed. Fueled by the disappointment and encouraged by his close friend and creative collaborator Bruce Purnell, Ameen channeled his frustrations into another script, one loosely based on his own life, family, and friends.

'It took me the best part of a decade to get the opportunity to write something that people would be willing to take a chance on me directing,' says Ameen. 'And when that film went down, I said, "I need to make a film. I will pay for it myself if I have to!" So, I wrote *Boxing Day*, about a guy coming home to London from Los Angeles for Christmas and based it on my family. Though we're not all religious, we always get together on Boxing Day to have a big party to celebrate our family.'

Ameen says his family's Boxing Day celebrations start small. 'It's 20 people, having a drink, no one sees each other throughout the year, so it's the family coming together. But I have five sisters, so my youngest sisters will bring their friends. Then my younger brother brings his friends. And I bring my friends. And it turns into a big party.'

It was during his family's 2016 Boxing Day celebrations when something happened that made Ameen sit up, take note, and think his family has the material needed to be a movie. 'I have the exact moment on video. We're dancing to a song called *In Her Heart*. It's a Jamaican dance hall song, and my cousin Joshua, who is in the movie as Jermaine, is dancing it as if he's resuscitating someone, and at that moment, I was like, "That's how I'm starting my movie." It's not how I started it in the end. But it was Josh who prompted it. And I remember thinking, my life is fantastic. No matter how far I go, my career or whatever happens in my life, I'm so rich at home. I have such a wealthy home life with my family.'

For Ameen, the script was both a way to celebrate his family's joy, as well as an opportunity to reflect his cultural and sociological background on the big screen — something he hadn't seen before. 'As I grew older, I was like, I

really want to see something that represents how I grew up. Cause I didn't grow up in the streets. I grew up in a middle-class background. My mum's a psychologist, my dad's a businessman, so I grew up very differently to what was being represented in films or TV, or what I had the opportunity to represent as an actor. And so, I was, "want to see *my* story." I also come from a multicultural family, there's Africans, Caribbean, Jamaican, Eastern Caribbean. My dad is Vincentian, my mum is Jamaican. And then there are other cultures, be it English white, that are a part of our family. We've got quite a mixed batch. But the thing that, ultimately, made me want to make a movie was the joy of what those parties mean to our family every year.'

And so, as Ameen sat down to write the script, he began mining his own life for characters and inspiration, drawing from 'the diary of my life'. 'Initially it was coming from writing from the heart, writing about my family and my experiences,' he admits. 'My experience of love. My experience of being British but having American girlfriends. And then my American girlfriend comes and meets the family. These are all my experiences. From a romance perspective, I don't have an ex-girlfriend who's a famous pop star. But I did draw from an ex-girlfriend who is a famous actress. I just played around with the truth a little bit and drew from moments of my life.'

The lead character, Melvin McKenzie, as played by Ameen, is a Londoner living in Los Angeles, who returns to London for Christmas. Unlike Ameen, Melvin is a novelist, not an actor. But the family he visits is very similar to his own. Melvin's mother, played by Academy Award nominated actress Marianne Jean-Baptiste (*Secrets & Lies*), is named Shirley after Ameen's grandmother; Melvin's father, Bilal, played by his *Yardie* co-star Robbie Gee, is named after Ameen's own father; while Melvin's sister Aretha, aka Boobsy, played by Tamara Lawrance (*Small Axe*), is modelled on his own sister.

'I think the characters that are closest to the people in my life are Boobsy and Bilal. They literally draw from the real people,' says Ameen. 'All of the uncles and aunties are representative of actual uncles and aunties in my family. Boobsy is my pet name for my sister Aretha. My mum's best friend is a white, English woman. She was married to a Nigerian man. So, from a character perspective, I drew closely from people I know, and it was really fun.'

Significant events in Melvin's life were also pulled from real-life but scrambled up for the benefit of the story. 'My parents got divorced when I was like 15. They didn't get divorced when I was an adult like Melvin's did.'

And while the film's structure is pure rom-com – with his character, Melvin, torn between his American girlfriend and his ex, Georgia – Ameen sprinkled into the script a lot of home truths about racism, relationships, and fatherhood, with some of the conversations drawn from real-life and some imagined, representing his worldview. 'I've been writing a lot for the last ten years, and I always ground in a bit of truth about my world, my life, and the lessons I've learned. And often, it's the characters I am not playing who speak more closely to how I view the world. My dad and I have never had that conversation that Melvin and Bilal have about fatherhood. So, it's grounding the story in the truth of people and family, but also, and importantly, offering an alternative perspective on what *could* have happened.

'One of the most important speeches to me in the film – and it's a rom-com, so it shouldn't really be there – is the conversation that Shirley, Marianne Jean-Baptiste, has in the car with her white boyfriend Richard, played by Stephen Dillane, about being a woman, growing up with black children in the

late eighties and nineties and what that meant,’ Ameen continues. ‘I feel in a way I am representing myself, because her kids don’t really care, cause they’re a new generation. But she is holding on to a lot of that baggage, and rightfully so, from the past. And so, to me, those conversations are important. They’re me being a writer and having my hand on my thoughts and opinions about life.’

For Leigh-Anne Pinnock, who plays Melvin’s ex, Georgia, the fact that *Boxing Day* is the first all-black, British rom-com is hugely significant. ‘This is something that’s never been seen before, and it’s just so important to have these things on our screens,’ she says. ‘Black culture is not celebrated enough on our screens, so to be part of something that’s going to create history is incredible. And the fact we’ve got West Indian families, we’ve got African families, it’s so vibrant, it’s so beautiful, it’s so exciting.’

‘We say black rom-com, and it is, but it’s also a universal story,’ insists Ameen. ‘Everyone can relate to it, cause it’s about family and love and friendship and set at that time of year we all enjoy. It’s also a particularly British story. Because, having lived in different countries for the past decade, there’s no place like London when it comes to representing deep and dynamic multi-cultural influences.’

Production notes

BOXING DAY

Director: Aml Ameen
©: Boxing Day Productions Ltd, Channel Four Television Corporation, The British Film Institute
A DJ Films and Studio 13 production
In association with: Warner Bros. Pictures
This production was made possible by the support of:
HM Treasury & DCMS’ Film and TV Production Restart Scheme
Developed in association with: Film4
Made with the support of the: BFI’s Film Fund
Presented by: Warner Bros. Pictures, BFI, Film4
International Sales: Rocket Science
Executive Producers: Lauren Dark, Thorsten Schumacher, Ollie Madden, Daniel Battsek, Farhana Bhula
Produced by: Matthew G. Zamias, Aml Ameen, Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor, Damian Jones, Dominique Telson
Producers: Damian Jones, Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor,Matthew Zamias
Co-producers: Bruce Purnell, Dylan Rees
Production Manager: Juliette Cerceau
Production Co-ordinator: Shane Abbott
Production Accountant: Jade-Elizabeth Masters
Unit Manager: Paul Young
Location Manager: Ben Lee
Post-production Supervisor: Hashim Alsaraf
1st Assistant Director: Jeroen Bogaert
2nd Assistant Director: Erin Morris-Large
Script Supervisor: Annetta Laufer
Casting by: Isabella Odoffin
Written by: Aml Ameen
Screenplay by: Aml Ameen, Bruce Purnell
Director of Photography: David Pimm
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Alistair Little
Steadicam Operator: Junior Agyeman
Stills Photographers: Rekha Garton, Laura Radford
VFX Created @ Frame by: Frame Rome
Edited by: Rebecca Lloyd
Production Designer: Gini Godwin
Art Director: Jack Paul Hawthorn
Set Decorator: Jessamy Hadfield
Graphic Designer: Graeme Peacock
Production Buyer: Sakara Dawson-Marsh
Props Master: Andie Vining
Costume Designer: Buki Ebiesuwa
Hair and Make-up Designer: Nora Robertson
Make-up Supervisor: Amy De Rees
Hair Stylist: Joyce Iwuzo
Colourist: Duncan Russell
Music by: James Poyser

Orchestrations: Ella Feingold
Music Supervisor: David Fish
Production Sound Mixer: Sara De Oliveira Lima
Re-recording Mixers: Simon Hill, Jonathan Rush
Supervising Sound Editor: Lee Herrick
Stunt Co-ordinators: Frank Faulkner Henson, John Street
COVID Supervisor: Mel Brown
Unit Publicist: Laura Petit

Cast

Aml Ameen (Melvin McKenzie)
Aja Naomi King (Lisa)
Leigh-Anne Pinnock (Georgia, ‘Miss Pocahontas’)
Tamara Lawrance (Boobsy McKenzie)
Sheyi Cole (Josh McKenzie)
Robbie Gee (Bilal)
Samson Kayo (Joseph)
Stephen Dillane (Richard)
Marianne Jean-Baptiste (Shirley McKenzie)
Joshua Maloney (Jermaine)

The Aunties:
Lisa Davina Philip (Auntie Valerie)
Claire Skinner (Caroline)
Martina Laird (Janet)

The Uncles:
Frazer James (Billy)
Derek Ezenagu (Clint)
Ricky Fearon (Kirk)

Tim Ahern (Dave)
Melvin Gregg (Ian Gorgeous)
Caroline Langrishe (Brenda)
Harry Long (conciierge)
Chris Nørskov-Jensen (busker)
Solly Mcleod (bellman)
Zeze Millz (herself)
Yasmin Monet Prince (Alison)
Alibe Parsons (Mrs Sherman)
Rochelle Rose (Ms London)
Karl Wilson (driver)
Jason Barrett (Georgia’s driver)

UK 2021
110 mins

Courtesy of Warner Bros

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Doctor Who: City of Death
Sun 5 Dec 12:00
Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI
Mon 6 Dec 18:10
Preview: Titane + Q&A with director Julia Ducournau
Mon 6 Dec 20:30
TV Preview: The Mezzotint + Q&A with director Mark Gatiss
Tue 7 Dec 18:10
TV Preview: The Tourist + Q&A with actors Jamie Dornan, Danielle Macdonald, Shalom Brune-Franklin and creatives
Tue 7 Dec 20:30
Exclusive Preview: Swan Song + Q&A with director Benjamin Cleary and actors Mahershala Ali and Naomie Harris
Wed 8 Dec 17:15
TV Preview: Ghosts Christmas Special + Q&A (guests TBA)
Thu 9 Dec 18:10
Patti Boulaye
Sun 12 Dec 15:30
Woman with a Movie Camera: Bridget Jones’s Diary at 20 + Q&A with director Sharon Maguire
Thu 16 Dec 18:00
Preview: Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy (Guzen to sozo)
Wed 29 Dec 18:00

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Member Picks: The Witches of Eastwick
Thu 2 Dec 20:45
Art in the Making: Kites, Paper Aeroplanes and the Allure of Flight
Fri 3 Dec 18:15
Projecting the Archive: Hunted (aka The Stranger in Between) + intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting
Tue 7 Dec 18:20
Bogarde at 100: The Servant
Thu 9 Dec 18:15; Thu 16 Dec 20:45; Mon 20 Dec 14:00 (Seniors’ matinee + Q&A TBC); Tue 28 Dec 18:30; Wed 29 Dec 17:55
African Odysseys: Billy Bang Lucky Man + intro by author Kevin Le Gendre, and Q&A with directors Markus Hansen and Jean-Marie Boulet (work permitting)
Sat 11 Dec 17:30
Silent Cinema: The Virginian + intro by BFI Curator Bryony Dixon
Sun 12 Dec 13:00
Seniors’ Free Archive Matinee: So Long at the Fair + Q&A (TBC)
Mon 13 Dec 14:00
Relaxed Screening: The Black Balloon
Tue 14 Dec 18:10
Projecting the Archive: I Could Go On Singing + intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting
Thu 16 Dec 18:15
Terror Vision: The Shout
Thu 30 Dec 20:50

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