



PREVIEW

The Phantom of the Open

+ Q&A with director Craig Roberts and writer Simon Farnaby

At the age of 46, happy-go-lucky crane operator and all-round lovable family man Maurice Flitcroft (Mark Rylance) feels it's time to try his hand at something new. Deciding on a whim that golf is his new calling, the budding sportsman sets his sights on mastering the game. But Maurice is not a man to do things by halves, and in a turn of events that you just couldn't make up, he secures a coveted spot in the qualifying round of the 1976 British Open. With the enduring support of his loving wife and disco-dancing sons, Maurice borrows some books, buys the clobber and gets hold of a set of clubs. There's only one problem; he has never played a round in his life.

Adapted by Simon Farnaby from his book *The Phantom of the Open: Maurice Flitcroft, the World's Worst Golfer* (co-written by Scott Murray), Craig Roberts' film is a heartfelt celebration of an eternal optimist who never let his sporting inadequacies stand in the way of his dreams. You'll laugh. You'll cry. All hail the underdog!

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Genesis of the project

More than 14 years ago, actor/writer Simon Farnaby and producer Tom Miller first spoke about the story of Maurice Flitcroft, the crane driver-turned-golfer who pursued his unlikely dream of playing the British Open, shooting the event's worst-ever score.

Miller recalls, 'Simon told me the true story of Flitcroft and it just sounded fantastic. Not only is it a really funny story because Maurice is a natural eccentric, but I also think it had something else to say about hope and dreams. It was so much more than just a sports story.'

Miller and Farnaby made some research trips to Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, in northern England, to meet Maurice's old friends and surviving members of his family, and to learn more about the man behind the headlines. On one of those trips, sports journalist Scott Murray came along to help sniff out the Flitcroft story.

Murray says, 'Maurice's story needed to be told properly. It was in danger of being lost in the mists of time, which was absurd really; it's one of the great jump-the-rope sporting stories, a proper real-life romp – though his heroic, bittersweet battle to achieve something tangible, despite having been dealt a bad hand in life, and his desire to get the better of The Man, transcends mere sport. Maurice was bursting with humanity, and his tale does too.'

Farnaby wrote a treatment for a script, and Murray wrote a long article for *The Guardian*. Miller tried to get a film off the ground, but there wasn't much traction at that time, so Farnaby and Murray decided to use the material to write an entertaining biographical book instead: Yellow Jersey Press published *The Phantom of the Open* in 2010 and Maurice once again made headlines.

'I find losers more interesting than winners,' explains Farnaby. 'Maurice reminds me of Don Quixote tilting at windmills. It was also key that he wasn't a joke. When Scott and I did the research for the book, we spoke to Maurice's friends and asked, "Was this a joke for Maurice?" And they said, "No, no no! He genuinely thought he could do it." Then it became a really interesting story.'

Miller never gave up on his dream of seeing Flitcroft on the big screen, and when he set up his production company Water & Power Productions, he got back in touch with Farnaby, and optioned Farnaby and Murray's book *The Phantom of the Open*. This time round they were more successful with the pitch, and backed by the BFI, Farnaby started to write the screenplay.

Miller adds, 'Simon is a naturally funny guy and he's always going to bring something that's slightly quirky and offbeat to a story, but he also marries that with real heart in his writing, he knows how to connect with an audience emotionally.'

With that new script, Miller joined forces with co-producers, Baby Cow, bringing on Nichola Martin to produce and Christine Langan as executive producer. The team then secured the backing of BBC Film, sales company Cornerstone Films and Ingenious Media.

Miller and Martin also engaged independent producer Kate Glover to oversee physical production, and Water & Power's James Swarbrick joined Langan as an executive producer. Cornerstone Films' Alison Thompson and Mark Gooder soon joined, along with Ingenious Media's Peter Touche and Christelle Conan, the BFI's Mary Burke, and BBC Film's Rose Garnett and Emma Duffy completed the executive producing team.

Those partners saw the film's unique potential, Miller recalls. 'I think everyone felt that this is a story about hope and it's upbeat and it's about overcoming whatever obstacles surround you,' he says.

Martin adds, 'This just epitomises the kind of stories that Baby Cow loves telling – it's dramatic but has comedy and is so full of heart, and something just a little bit quirky and original. Who doesn't love an underdog story?'

The next task was finding their perfect Maurice, a search led by casting director Shaheen Baig. The team aimed high with their dream choice: Oscar winner Mark Rylance.

Miller says, 'The key to Maurice is that he is sincere. We were trying to think of an actor who we always believed, no matter what they're doing. Mark just has that in his eyes. You just believe it. You want to empathise with him, you want to be on his side... Although they're very different characters outwardly, I think there's a similarity with Mark Rylance and Maurice Flitcroft in that they create their own narrative, create their own worlds.'

Rylance remembers, 'The script appealed to me right away, as well as the book Simon had written with Scott. Both are written with great enjoyment and language and fun. It had a sense of respect and enjoyment of Maurice Flitcroft, and his whole family.'

Rylance also connected personally to Maurice's positive attitude. 'Maurice is one of these people who sees the cup is always certainly half full rather than half empty, no matter what the evidence to the contrary might be. And I certainly feel him in me at times. I wish he was in me all the time.'

The actor adds that the journey of the whole Flitcroft family appealed to him. ‘I like to be part of stories that I enjoy and feel like you can come out of them feeling like you’ve eaten a good meal, like you’ve gotten some nourishment, as well as enjoyment and taste.’

Production notes

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPEN

Directed by: Craig Roberts
©: British Broadcasting Corporation, Maurice Media Ltd, British Film Institute
a Water & Power Productions *and* Baby Cow Films *production*
Produced by: Spartiate Films
Developed by: BFI’s Film Fund
Made with the support of the: BFI Film Fund
Presented by: BFI, BBC Film, Ingenious Media
This production was made possible by the support of: HM Treasury & DCMS’ Film and TV Production Restart Scheme
International Sales: Cornerstone
Executive Producers: Christine Langan, James Swarbrick, Mary Burke, Emma Duffy, Rose Garnett, Peter Touche, Christelle Conan, Mark Gooder, Alison Thompson, Mark Rylance, Simon Farnaby, Craig Roberts
Produced by: Kate Glover, Nichola Martin, Tom Miller
Line Producer: Arabella Gilbert
Production Manager: Tim Leach
Production Co-ordinator: Jack Plummer
Production Accountant: John Miles
Supervising Location Manager: Chris Johnston
Post-production Supervisor: Nadiya Luthra
2nd Unit Director: Darragh Mortell
1st Assistant Director: Matt Jennings
2nd Assistant Director: Sophie Hebron
Script Supervisor: Carole Salisbury
Casting Director: Shaheen Baig
Screenplay by: Simon Farnaby
Based on the book The Phantom of the Open: Maurice Flitcroft, the World’s Worst Golfer *written by:* Simon Farnaby, Scott Murray
Director of Photography: Kit Fraser
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Sally Low
Stills Photographer: Nick Wall
Special Effects Supervisor: Matthew Strange
Editor: Jonathan Amos
Production Designer: Sarah Finlay
Art Director: Bill Brown
Set Decorator: Cathy Featherstone
Costume Designer: Sian Jenkins
Make-up & Hair Designer: Tara Macdonald
Make-up & Hair Supervisor: Sally Tynan
Main and End Titles: The Morrison Studio
Colourist: Mat Troughton
Composer: Isobel Waller-Bridge
Conductor: Alastair King
Orchestrations: Alastair King
Music Supervisor: Phil Canning
Choreographer: Jreena Green
Production Sound Mixer: Ivor Talbot
Re-recording Mixer: Paul McFadden
Supervising Sound Editor: Jon Salmon-Joyce
Stunt Co-ordinator: Tony Lucken
Unit Publicity: Freuds

Cast

Mark Rylance (*Maurice Flitcroft*)
Sally Hawkins (*Jean Flitcroft*)
Mark Lewis Jones (*Cliff*)
Christian Lees (*Gene Flitcroft*)
Jonah Lees (*James Flitcroft*)
Jake Davies (*Michael Flitcroft*)
Johann Myers (*Willie*)
Steve Oram (*Gerald Hopkins*)
Tim Steed (*John Pegg*)
Ash Tandon (*Lloyd Donovan*)
Rhys Ifans (*Keith Mackenzie*)
Ian Porter (*Dick Nelson*)
Tommy Fallon (*young Maurice*)
David Mara (*genial father*)
Nigel Betts (*Tony Marsh*)
Afsaneh Dehrouyeh (*Josie*)
Austin Griffin (*young Mike*)
Tim Berrington (*golfer 1*)
Terence Booth (*golfer 2*)
Neil Edmond (*Bruce Atkins*)
Ian Mansfield (*greenkeeper*)
Amy Alexander (*Jenny*)
Marc Bosch (*Seve Ballesteros*)
Ash Tandon (*Lloyd Donovan*)
Nigel Hastings (*starter*)
Simon Farnaby (*Laurent Laurent*)
Ebenezer Eben-Spiff (*Jim Howard*)
David Ahmad (*journalist 1*)
Michael Dobby (*journalist 2*)
Graeme Hawley (*Rory Thomson (TV Bright)*)
James Flitcroft (*drunk man 1*)
John McGrellis (*drunk man 2*)
Natsumi Kuroda (*Naoko*)
Dai Tabuchi (*Akira*)
Sadao Ueda (*Kenji*)
Orla Cottingham (*Pam*)
Bianca Tranter (*Mike’s secretary*)
Mike Capozzola (*Terry Moore*)
Anthony J Abraham (*young golfer*)
Matthew McKenna (*Barman Dan*)

UK 2021
106 mins

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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