



Seniors' Paid Matinee

Pillion

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Directed by: Harry Lighton

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An Element Pictures production

Presented by: BBC Film, BFI

In association with: Fremantle,

Picturehouse Entertainment, September Film

Executive Producers: Eva Yates, Louise Ortega, Christian Vesper, Alexander Skarsgård, Clare Binns, Pim Hermeling, Alison Thompson, Mark Gooder

Produced by: Emma Norton, Lee Groombridge, Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe

Line Producer: Savannah Power

Additional Photography Line Producer: Liz Small

Production Manager: Esme Lucas

Additional Photography Production Manager: Jason Kirk

Production Co-ordinator: Jennifer Lane

Production Accountant: Jessica McCausland

Unit Manager: James Galvin

Location Manager: Mark Lambert

Post-production Co-ordinator:

Stephen Thomas Walsh

Additional Photography First Assistant Director:

Sophie Kenny

2nd Assistant Director: Sophie Kenny

Additional Photography Second Assistant Director:

Georgi Wronska

3rd Assistant Director: Ben Wicks

Additional Photography Third Assistant Director:

Alex Tawney

Script Supervisor: Sara J. Doughty

Casting Director: Kahleen Crawford

Written by: Harry Lighton

Director of Photography: Nick Morris

Camera Operators: Lou MacNamara, Ailsa Aikoa

1st Assistant Camera: Joshua Higgins, Eve Careño

Additional Photography First Assistant Camera - B

Cam: Rory Hern

2nd Assistant Camera: Laura Jean Healey

Additional Photography Second Assistant Camera:

Ashton Born

Digital Imaging Technician: Reece Franklin

Additional Photography Digital Imaging Technician:

Ricardo Battaglia

Gaffer: Helio Roberto Ribeiro

Key Grip: Ed Livesey

Video Operator: Charlie Pride

Stills Photographer: Chris Harris

Visual Effects by: LOC Studios

Special Effects Supervisor: Neil Gawthrop

Special Effects: Machine Shop

Editor: Gareth C. Scales

Production Designer: Francesca Massariol

Art Director: Katherine Black

Standby Art Director: Kalliopi Ismini Xekalaki

Graphic Designer: George Sopwith

Additional Photography Graphic Designer:

Louis Bailey

Prop Master: Mike Del Forno

Costume Designer: Grace Snell

Costume Supervisor: Louise Holsgrove

Additional Photography Costume Supervisor:

Sarah Deans

Hair and Make-up Supervisor: Sorcha Fisher

Hair and Make-up Designer: Diandra Ferreira

Hair and Make-up Artist: Charlotte Brooks

Daily Prosthetics Artist: Adrian Rigby

Prosthetics: 13 Finger Effects

Colourist: Toby Tomkins

Music by: Oliver Coates

Vocals: MI Buch, Chrysanthemum Bear, Nick Roder

+ intro by Diana Cipriano, BFI Flare Programmer

The coupling up of a six-foot-four Swedish sex god with Harry Potter bully boy Dudley Dursley may sound like a lurid work of fan fiction but that is the basis of assured British romantic comedy drama cum biker movie *Pillion*. An adaptation of Adam Mars-Jones's 2020 novel *Box Hill*, starring Alexander Skarsgård and Harry Melling, it is the first feature by Harry Lighton, a self-taught writer-director with a fistful of shorts under his belt, including the award-winning *Wren Boys* (2017), the story of a gay marriage in an Irish prison.

When we meet to discuss the film, Lighton still seems a little dazed by the breakneck speed of *Pillion*'s success, including a North American distribution deal with A24 and a world premiere at Cannes where it won the Un Certain Regard Best Screenplay award, powering a whirlwind tour of festivals. 'The whole thing has been like, "Pinch me, pinch me, pinch me!"' he says. The Cannes reviews praised the director's light touch and the skill of his actors, with plaudits ranging from the *Guardian*'s delirious headline '50 shades of BDSM Wallace and Gromit in brilliant Bromley biker romance' to David Rooney's fulsome appreciation of 'a cheeky delight, not to mention a unique queer love story' in the *Hollywood Reporter*.

Pillion is a fresh take on the romcom by a new young filmmaker. But it also feels like an 'old soul', evocative of cinema more familiar to previous generations, including dom/sub classic *The Servant*, written by Harold Pinter (Joseph Losey, 1963); Stephen Frears's interracial gay romance *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), written by Hanif Kureishi; and the naughty but nice suburban brothel biopic *Personal Services* (Terry Jones, 1987).

The Britishness of *Pillion* is also shot through with what was once thought of as 'continental' – sexually bold characters and situations that were the result of historically more relaxed European censorship laws. It reminded me of Frank Ripploh's affable and explicit German film *Taxi zum Klo* (1980), whose scenes of fellatio and golden showers crossed over from the gay underground to find a wider audience. In the 1970s-set *Box Hill*, Ray and Colin are both English, and their differences are physical and class-based. In *Pillion*, set in the present day, Brexit is an unspoken backdrop and there's something charmingly old school about the imposing and otherworldly dominant biker Ray (Skarsgård), who is reimagined as Scandinavian. Colin (Melling) is a nerdy young traffic warden who still lives with his parents and when mum Peggy asks Ray where he's from, the Swedish-American-accented reply is, 'Chislehurst'.

'The novel had this narrative voice which felt totally original in terms of the rose-tinted attitude the main character [Colin] had toward events which might be received conventionally as mortifying,' Lighton says. Mars-Jones, a well-known critic who in his film-reviewing days would often arrive at press shows in his biker leathers, gave Lighton carte blanche for the adaptation, resulting in initial ideas for settings as far afield as a cruise ship and Ancient Rome before returning to suburbia. Lighton's script dispenses with the book's wryly humorous first-person narration but captures an equivalent overall tone that benefits from laugh-out-loud dialogue and physical comedy to offset the frank sex and exquisite pain of the romantic power games between dominant and submissive. 'I wanted to show the capacity for contradictions in atypical relationships – for brutality and tenderness to co-exist,' he says.

The film's good humour also balances its underlying sadness and theme of loss. With hints of a broken heart, Ray reads a volume of Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* in bed while Colin obediently sleeps on the floor. Whereas *Box Hill* had an emotionally distant father with dementia, in *Pillion* Colin's mother has cancer. 'I wanted to place that in dialogue with Ray and Colin's super-abnormal

Contrabass Clarinet: Tom Lessels
Piccolo: Kathryn Williams
Orchestrations by: Oliver Coates
Music Supervision by: King Lear Music & Sound
Music Supervisors: Sarah Giles, Kaya Pino
Score Mixer: Christopher Elms
Audio Post Producers: Max Norwell, Marie Valentino
Production Sound Mixer: Adam Fletcher
Senior Re-recording Mix Technician: George Elliott
Re-recording Mixers: Christopher Wilson, Gunnar Óskarsson
Re-recording Mix Technicians: Itzel Gonzalez Estrada, Stefano Carnera
Supervising Sound Editors: Christopher Wilson, Gunnar Óskarsson
ADR Mixer (750mph, London): Tristan Rose
ADR Mixer (Lydbor, Copenhagen): Bobby Johanson
ADR Mixers (Hyperbolic Audio): Nate Brailer, Andrew Rolfsen
ADR Mixer (Bleat): Barry Donnelly
Foley Services by: The Foley Farm
Foley Mixer: Matthias Radcliffe
Foley Artist: Franziska Treutler
Intimacy Co-ordinator: Robbie Taylor Hunt
Animal Wranglers: Amazing Animals, Dog and Bone, Dogs on Camera
Unit Publicity: Premier Comms
EPK [Electronic Press Kit]: Organic Publicity
Digital Lab Supervisor: Stephen Hedley
Digital Intermediate: Harbor
Cast:
 Harry Melling (*Colin*)
 Alexander Skarsgård (*Ray*)
 Lesley Sharp (*Peggy*)
 Douglas Hodge (*Pete*)
 Jake Shears (*Kevin*)
 Mat Hill (*Steve*)
 Nick Figgis (*Don*)
 Zoe Engerer (*Don's wife*)
 Jake Sharp (*Chigs*)
 Jacob Carter (*Cousin Roy*)
 Christina Carty (*colleague*)
 Zamir Mesiti (*usher*)
 Rosie Sheehy (*Megan*)
 Miranda Bell (*elderly local*)
 Monica Purcell (*elderly local friend*)
 Anthony Welsh (*Darren*)
 Miha Kavcic, Mike Jones, Ian Wilson, Billy King, Jack Genevois, Paul Tallis, Ross McRae, Kevin Bazeley, Ben Hodgettes (*featured bikers and pillion*)
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 106 mins
 Digital

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SIGHT AND SOUND

relationship,' Lighton says, 'to put that which might alienate an audience member alongside the identifiable so they wouldn't be able to disregard Colin's experience as something totally out of their life experience.'

Over the decades of out gay filmmaking, Aids has reared up and then receded into the narrative landscape, with societal and parental roles now more often defined by loving support than disapproval that needs winning over. Colin's parents Peggy (Lesley Sharp, evoking Mike Leigh's domestic comic dramas) and Pete (Douglas Hodge) are as keen as Aunt Ida in John Waters' *Female Trouble* (1974) to find their son a nice boyfriend. 'It was a personal thing to make Peggy really supportive of Colin,' says Lighton. 'My mum is very different from Peggy, but it can be hilarious, the ways in which she encourages my romantic life. Sometimes she'll cut out a magazine article if she thinks there's someone who looks attractive and nice, who I should be dating.'

There was surprise among the cast and crew – shared by Harrys Melling and Lighton – that the actor famous for his role as the vampire Eric Northman in the HBO series *True Blood* [2008-14] had agreed to play Ray, but Skarsgård was captivated by the unique script. 'It's a relationship story unlike anything I'd read before. The fact that it was so unpredictable and exhilarating at every turn excited me,' Skarsgård explains in the press notes for *Pillion*, where he sums up the film in three words: 'Lube, sweat and leather.'

I ask Lighton how he directed such experienced leads. 'I made sure that I got to spend time with each of them as part of the prep. I had dinner with Harry, and I went to an Arcade Fire concert with Alex and to Stockholm to spend a day with him. I want to feel comfortable with the person I'm directing once they get on set. I don't want to feel like I'm trying to work out how someone ticks the moment they arrive on day one. The other thing I did was give them both what I call a starter pack, a page of thoughts on what maybe the character could be or shouldn't be. With Harry, we talked a lot about the idea of stubborn optimism. This is true, I think, of the narrative voice in *Box Hill*; Colin is someone who processes events with a stubborn optimism which other people might feel victimised by or downtrodden.'

Lighton asked Melling to watch the 19th-century-set Icelandic drama *Godland* (Hlynur Pálmason, 2022), feeling there was something in the lead performance that would translate nicely to Colin, a way of juggling realism and caricature. 'With Alex, our discussions were about how to make Ray feel of this world, even though he's so out of place in Bromley. How to give the look and feel of him a real-world texture and how to not overdo his superhuman qualities. With actors on set, a lot of the time it's about creating an environment where they can try things out and then getting out of their way. Not giving them too many notes. They're both great actors and I'm driven by curiosity to try things out, rather than by any preconceived idea of what something should be.'

In casting the roles of Ray's motorcycle club cohorts, Lighton and the producers enlisted the ranks of the Gay Bikers Motorcycle Club, the UK's largest LGBTQ + bike club, attending an annual meet-up at which 80 riders were present. 'I spent the weekend riding around on the backs of bikes, asking them questions,' Lighton says. 'I discovered that the club isn't centred on sex at all – it's just a community for gay bikers that sometimes spans sexual subcultures. They were a real resource for me, so I cast a bunch of them in the film.'

None of the club members had acting experience, but they loved being on set and fell effortlessly into their roles. 'Traditional depictions of bike clubs in films focus on violent outlaws beating up people,' says Lighton. 'I wanted to show there is the capacity for communion, friendship and personal growth among a group of guys who also participate in sexual activities that some people might find alienating.'

Jane Giles, *Sight and Sound*, December 2025

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

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Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk