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Howard Webster

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Kew the **CHAOS**

Howard Webster knows all about failure. Now the Kew writer is turning it into film success. Sophie Farrah enters his wacky world

It's rather early on a wet and gloomy winter morning, but Howard Webster is elated.

"I literally just got the email about three seconds ago!" he exclaims. "We've just been accepted into the *BAHAMAS International Film Festival!*"

Described as one of the 25 'coolest' in the world, this particular film festival takes place in December on a tropical beach. So my chat with Howard at this precise moment is obviously fate. Serendipity. I'll have my bags packed and be ready to go.

Alas, it is not to be: Howard is taking his wife – and, to be honest, it sounds as if she deserves it more.

"Poor woman has had to put up with misery for two years while I made this movie," laughs Howard. "When we moved to Kew she wanted a grown-up sitting room with no TV or computers – a room for a glass of wine and reading a book. Well, I've turned it into an editing suite and she hates me! But now I am taking her to The Bahamas..."

The film that has occasioned all this fuss is *Meet Pursuit Delange*. Written and directed by Howard, it is a brand new independent British musical comedy, shot

entirely on home turf in Kew.

Lead character Pursuit is a 32-year-old struggling writer living in a rundown groundsman's hut tacked onto the back of *Kew Cricket Club*. He is joined by two eccentric old school friends also on their uppers. United by their bleak prospects, the three try to make a living via a series of chaotic schemes – with hilarious consequences.

"It's a uniquely English social comedy," says Howard. "Most American movies are the hero falling in love with a girl, or the hero saving the world from an asteroid. In this film there are plot lines happening all over the place – it's messy, like real life."

Pursuit took the *Raindance Film Festival* by storm this year, earning the tag of 'breakthrough film of the festival' and an extra screening due to popular demand. It was also selected for the recent *Crystal Palace International Film Festival*. Now The Bahamas beckons.

"It was originally a column that I wrote about me," says Howard, explaining the genesis of his cinematic triumph. "Like a male Bridget Jones. Basically, everything had gone horribly wrong – I went from quite a glamorous lifestyle to absolute poverty within four years. I had to ring my father up and move

back home. One day he walked in and said: 'Right, I've had enough of this sitting around moaning and whining. I am going to golf and I want you to write a column and sell it by the time I get back.' And that was it!"

Howard's semi-autobiographical column soon gathered a firm following online and was picked up by national magazines in both the UK and US.

"Columns at that time were all things like 'how to be successful', 'how to get girls', 'how to do this and that'. The only thing I knew about was abject failure. So I wrote a column about failure being the last great English art form, with me under a pseudonym as the central character: Pursuit Delange."

In the meantime Howard continued to work as a photographer and journalist and also set up a trade magazine for the American film industry. For photoshoots he would sometimes use unknown, upcoming actors providing them with valuable

exposure. In the long run it was a policy that would pay handsome dividends.

Meanwhile, he found the time to take the material from his column and start working on a script. Several years, one pilot episode and two children later, *Meet Pursuit Delange* had grown into an all-singing, all-dancing feature-length film.

By then he had a wife with a big job in the city and young twins to look after: "The only way I could do it was to rewrite the whole thing so that I could shoot it all within five minutes' walk from my house."

Which is exactly what he did. Filming began in March 2014 and continued on and off until July this year. *Kew Cricket Club* served as the production's main location, base, dressing rooms, kitchen, dining room, production office and storage space, as well as a studio for rehearsals and building sets.

Hundreds of locals played a part in the film and the *Royal Botanic Gardens* helped by providing beautiful locations.



Ben Starr (left) with co-star Jason Fleming and Kew Bridge in the background



By name and nature: Ben Starr who plays Pursuit

"We shot for three days in Kew Gardens. We had 12 dancers dressed as air hostesses dancing across the Sackler Crossing, and then in 1930s flapper dresses in front of the Japanese Gateway. It was epic."

He called in more favours for the casting: "Many are actors I'd helped in the past (through the magazine)."

Jason Flemyng (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels, Snatch*) and Robert Portal (*The King's Speech, My Week With Marilyn, The Iron Lady*)

Howard, who engaged Grammy Award-winning musician Tim Garland as Music Director, working alongside British pop band *Right Said Fred*.

"*Right Said Fred* play angels. They are like Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*. I teamed them up with Tim, who is an amazing songwriter and a really serious jazz musician. It was a bit like making chocolate curry: it shouldn't work, but it really does."

Finally, for the dance

"Failing made me a lot kinder; more sympathetic and thoughtful"

play Pursuit's unconventional old school friends. Colin Salmon (Charles Robinson in three recent Bond films), Hannah Waddingham, star of West End hits *Spamalot* and *The Wizard of Oz*, and Tom Chambers (*Waterloo Road, Father Brown*) also feature. Pursuit himself is played by recently graduated talent Ben Starr, now busy filming the upcoming BBC drama *Dickensian*. The film also marks the comeback of celebrated actor Peter Bowles, star of iconic TV comedy *To The Manor Born*.

Musicals, of course, are as divisive as Marmite, but those who hate them should take heart: *Meet Pursuit Delange* is not a full-on musical.

"It's not a musical, but there are a few monster numbers in it. It's all part of the narrative," explains

numbers, Jason Gardiner – controversial judge on ITV's *Dancing on Ice* – came on board as choreographer. His expertise created a dance scene for Strictly winner, Tom Chambers that Howard describes as unmissable.

His passion for the film is totally infectious. Life may have had its ups and downs, but right now things are really looking up.

"Failing made me a lot kinder; more sympathetic and thoughtful," he reflects. "I think I'm a better person for having colossally failed. The film is about what happens to you when your dreams haven't come true; what defines your life. It is a film about hope.

"And the good news is that people seem to think it's funny!"

■ For more info: pursuitdelange.com

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