

# “Ere, cop a load of this, Sarge!”



INTERVIEW BY MATTHEW MYERS

To ABC viewers of *The Bill*, Scott Neal is known as Constable Luke Ashton. He's the good-natured young copper who has a turbulent relationship with PC Kerry Young and who occasionally snogs his sergeant, Craig Gilmore.

But back in 1996, Scott appeared in a landmark British film about two gay boys, Jamie and Ste, living on a bleak council estate. The film, *Beautiful Thing*, has become a much-loved classic, not just with gay audiences.

Scott first joined *The Bill* in 1997. After a three-year hiatus he returned, but *The Bill* had become a much racier, soap opera-style show. Luke Ashton had a few surprises in store for the audience, including the sexual turn-arounds that provided *The Bill* with some of its most memorable twists.

And don't think it's over yet. Will Luke and Craig have one last fling... on the day before Luke's wedding to Kerry, perhaps?

Scott Neal talks about playing gay, the weirdness of fame, his love of Australia and that cop-to-cop kiss.

**Firstly, Beautiful Thing. To many people, you will always be Ste. How does it feel to have been part of that success?**

I think it's an amazing project to have been involved with. It started small but became so big. Everybody from every walk of life just absolutely adores it. To be part of something that can change somebody's life, which it has, is something I'll never forget. There were so many letters that came to me and the rest of the cast. I don't think I received a single letter that was negative or hateful. Everything was so positive, including young guys who had come to terms with themselves through the movie. Even straight guys and straight women wrote to me.

**Did you have any idea at the time you were making it that it would become such a classic?**

Not at all. Originally we shot it to go on television and then suddenly it was taken, by chance, to the Berlin Film Festival. It was sold to so many different countries and suddenly it just took off.

**Do you keep in touch with any of the cast?**

I saw Linda Henry [who played Sandra, Jamie's mum] not so long ago. She works with a couple of friends of mine on a TV show over here called *Bad Girls*, which is about women in prison. I see her every now and again.

**Before the movie, did you know much about Mama Cass?**

No. I had no idea who she was. I'd heard of songs like *California Dreaming* but I never knew who she was or what she looked like. I wasn't aware of what the tracks were at the time, but the music just lifted everyone so much. The soundtrack was such a big part of the movie, as much as anything else. It was perfect.

**Do you have one special memory of making Beautiful Thing?**

God, there are so many. I think that whole 25-day experience shooting the film was just amazing. It would be hard to pinpoint a certain moment in there because we had so much fun. Afterwards, with the promotional build up, we got to travel to different countries together. So it was kind of like a repayment for all the hard work.

**You even came to Australia.**

I did. I came over when I was 18 and I loved it – absolutely loved it! I spent about two or three months in Sydney and it's just an amazing place. I want to come over again, maybe later this year.

**There is always Mardi Gras next March.**

Oh yeah, that would be good fun. I really want to go next year but I definitely want to do a trip before Christmas at some point. To be quite honest, I'd love to live in Australia.

**These days we can see you on The Bill playing Constable Luke Ashton where, again, you have a gay story line.**

Yes. When I was thinking about returning to the show, we discussed the story and where it was going. There were a few surprises along the way that I didn't know about, but the way it was tackled really interested me because Luke came



(Opposite) Sergeant Gilmore (Hywel Simons) and PC Ashton (Scott Neal) go for the big pash on *The Bill*. Scott admits he suffered terrible stubble rash after shooting the scene. "My face was ripped to shreds!" he laughs.

back as a much stronger character. He fell in love with Kerry (Beth Cordingly) and got engaged, but he also...

**...kissed Sergeant Craig Gilmore!**

Yes!

**That kiss between you and Hywel Simons, who plays Craig, made entertainment headlines all around the world.**

Well, we obviously knew that it was going to cause some controversy at some point but we didn't know how much. I mean, here in the UK it made the broadsheets, which *The Bill* generally doesn't do. *The Times* and *The Independent* in England were writing about it and I love being a part of stuff like that. To be honest, it's quite nice.

**Well it certainly made the papers here.**

It's quite exciting though isn't it? You know, just for people to be talking about it. Yeah! Grrr!

**And, of course, two men in uniform.**

Exactly! But originally when we shot that scene Hywel was in his uniform and I was in my plain clothes. The producer saw it and decided we had to re-shoot it with both of us in uniform,

obviously for much more visual impact.

**Is it true that Hywel gave you stubble rash?**

Yeah! [laughing]. The second time around my face was ripped to shreds! It was so red and sore, but really funny though. It was great to work with somebody who didn't have a problem with it. I didn't have a problem and he didn't, so it was easier. I think the crew was more embarrassed than we were.

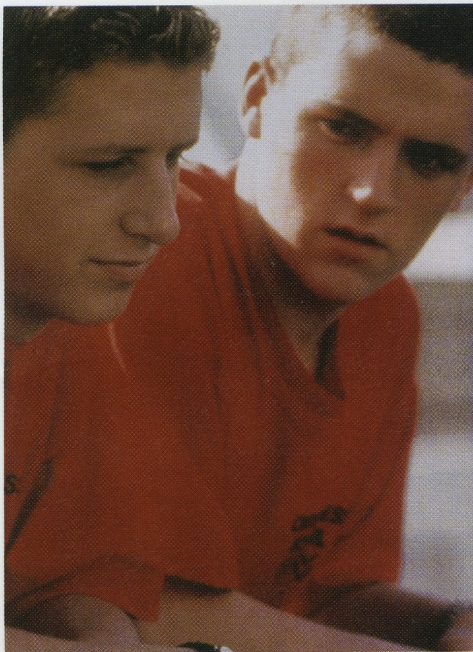
**You obviously don't have issues playing gay.**

Not at all.

**Does it ever cause problems off screen?**

No not really. *Beautiful Thing* really helped me in that respect because I've been doing interviews since I was 17 years old and that film prepared me for all the obvious questions. I got to the point where I just decided. "I don't give a shit what people think!" If people have an assumption or their own opinion of you, that's fine – they're entitled to that. But it's never bothered me.

If you play a psychotic killer, people don't assume that in real life you are also a >>



(Above) Glen Berry and Scott Neal as boyfriends, Jamie and Ste in *Beautiful Thing*. (Right) Scott and the cast of *The Bill* including Beth Cordingly (bottom left) who plays his girlfriend on the show.



>> psychotic killer. So why should they assume you are gay because you play a gay character? So would it be fair to say that Glen Berry who played your boyfriend Jamie in *Beautiful Thing* and Hywel Simons are the only two men you've snogged?

Yeah [laughs]. It's harsh. I can't deal with the stubble!

**There are other straight actors playing gay, such as in *Will And Grace* and *Queer As Folk*. Do you ever get comparisons?**

Well, the *Queer As Folk* boys are friends of mine. It wasn't long after *Beautiful Thing* that *Queer As Folk* [the UK version] first came out. So there was this idea of trying to pair the two together. I think people were just trying to match us up because both have a similar sub-

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**Are you aware that there is also a gay cop on *NYPD Blue*?**

No. I've never really sat and watched it. I tried once and got a headache because the camera moves so quickly!

**Former *Neighbours* star Daniel MacPherson has joined *The Bill*. Have you two rubbed shoulders much?**

Yeah, we worked together a lot. When Daniel first arrived he and I were paired off. He was a part of my last four or five month's of story line on the show.

**In Australia we are well behind the current UK episodes (Luke rejects Craig and contin-**

ues his romance with Kerry), what else can we expect for Luke?

Well, it gets a lot more interesting. They get married and then there's a baby on the way and it all goes wrong. It actually becomes really upsetting and ugly.

**On your website there is a chatroom that has lots of fan-talk regarding you and your character on *The Bill*. Do you ever read it?**

I hear about it. I haven't looked at those sites for ages. Obviously my agent will let me know if

there's anything that needs to be answered, but I made a decision not to look at it too much. It's people's chance to have their opinions but sometimes it can just get to you slightly.

I have friends who have gone on to their own websites and seen the way they get spoken about. It's kind of like reading negative articles about yourself or reviews. So sometimes I think it's best not to read things and just every now and again stop in, have a look and then leave. I imagine it could be a bit weird.

Well it is, because people are having conversations about you and they don't even know you. All they know is the person they have seen on television or in the newspapers. Basically the only time they really get to see you is when you're performing. They don't know you as a

person who gets up in the morning, goes out with their friends and does normal every-day stuff. I find it bizarre.

**You were once a judge at the Mr Gay UK competition. Was that fun?**

Oh, it was fantastic! I had a great time. I took my sister, her husband and about six friends with me. The company paid for a private hotel and drivers for the whole weekend. It was just a big raucous two-to-three day party! It was absolutely brilliant.

**And I understand you've had a brush with our Kylie?**

I was one of the lucky people invited to be in the celebrity audience for *An Audience With Kylie Minogue*. This was a few years ago when she was making her big comeback in Britain – and I loved it! I think she's brilliant and absolutely fantastic.

**Would you like to make more films?**

I'd really love to go back to film. I haven't done a really good film since *Beautiful Thing*. I'd love to do an Australian or British movie again. I think they are the ones that focus on the characters the best and are really well written. Both our countries are producing creative, classy films at the moment. Maybe I'll come to Australia to shoot one! 🍌

**Scott Neal's beautiful feature film *Beautiful Thing* is available from the DNA Shop this month. Go to page 70.**