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MILITANT TENDENCIES

In Sarah Gavron's *Suffragette* Carey Mulligan plays an ordinary Victorian woman awakened to the cause of women's rights. Here the actress talks about the dearth of quality female film roles, the joys of watching blockbusters on the big screen and why Hollywood is a bizarre construction

By Isabel Stevens

In a remarkable coup at the age of 19 Carey Mulligan bypassed drama school (she was rejected), fringe theatre and television, the normal career paths for aspiring actors, and landed the part of a giggly Bennett sister in Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), as well as a role in *Forty Winks* at London's Royal Court. But it was her subsequent appearances on television which marked her as an actor of depth, most memorably in a chilling 2007 *Doctor Who* episode, 'Blink', which showed her ability to bring subtlety, melancholy and a quiet intensity to what might just have been another of Steven Moffat's Doctor-fixated ingénues. As a teenager she'd made an ally out of Julian Fellowes, though ignoring his first advice to her when learning of her acting dream: "Marry a lawyer." Now it was clear that as well as luck, she had real talent.

Her turn as another wide-eyed pretty young thing, this time as a 1960s schoolgirl in Lone Scherfig's coming-of-age drama *An Education* (2009), rightly drew Hollywood's attention. But ever since playing Gordon Gekko's estranged daughter in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) – "It didn't feel like there was any depth to the character," she told the *Guardian* later – she has been increasingly wary about the roles she accepts, pointedly picking parts that would give critics pause before calling her 'fresh-faced' and put an end to the deluge of period drama scripts she was receiving (the self-harming singer in Steve McQueen's *Shame* in 2011; the feisty, fast-talking berater of the hapless Llewyn Davis in the Coens' 2013 film).

Sarah Gavron's *Suffragette* is not just another period drama – staggeringly, nearly 100 years after women won the right to vote in the UK, it's the first theatrical feature film about the early 20th-century women's movement and the fight for electoral equality. It centres on the political awakening of Mulligan's Maud, a fictional working-class mother in London's East End, who in 1912 has everything to lose by getting involved with a militant offshoot of the movement. It is a film on a mission to illuminate a forgotten history, but one which also takes care to show the everyday reality facing women, who often worked in brutal conditions. Gavron's tale is packed with a stellar cast (including Meryl Streep, Brendan Gleeson and Helena Bonham Carter) but is grounded by a tender, understated performance by Mulligan, who helped evolve her character from a rare working-class testimony, Hannah Mitchell's autobiography *The Hard Way Up*.

Isabel Stevens: How did you get involved with the film?

Carey Mulligan: My agent called and said there was a film about suffragettes. I thought, "Oh God, it's going to be some twee costume drama about women marching the streets with banners – how boring." It obviously wasn't.

I'd never met Sarah [Gavron]. I'd seen *Brick Lane* so I knew her work a bit, but the minute I met her, I trusted her. She's really smart and they had been trying to make this film for five or six years, so it was something they were really passionate about. I'd worked with the writer Abi Morgan before on *Shame*, so we had a bit of a relationship, which was really nice.

IS: Did you learn about the suffragettes at school?

CM: No. I had just a basic understanding of women marching, and that was sort of all. So reading the script was a real eye-opener. I was like, "God, did that really happen?" and then googling it and finding out about Black Friday [when up to 200 suffragettes were assaulted by police during a protest in 1910] and the hunger striking and the police brutality, the force-feeding and all of that stuff. I thought it was so astonishing it had taken 100 years for anyone to tell the story properly.

IS: There haven't really been many films on the subject, if you exclude *Mary Poppins*...

CM: Exactly – you have that image from *Mary Poppins*.

BREAKING THE MOULD *Suffragette* sees Carey Mulligan's laundry worker Maud Watts rethink her conventional roles as wife and mother to Sonny (Ben Whishaw) and George (Adam Michael Dodd, below) when she becomes increasingly vociferous in the battle for women's voting rights (right)





You're like, "Oh, a suffragette movie – lovely." And then you're like, "Wait a second. It was a bit tougher than that." Even the least dangerous, least harmful things they did were like walking into an art gallery and slashing a famous painting. I can't imagine walking into the V&A with a knife and just slashing a famous painting. It would be the most terrifying thing and these women just did that, and that was the least of the things they did. And they put their lives in jeopardy every day and that went all the way to blowing up churches and houses.

IS: What research did you have to do for the role?

CM: Lots of it is about understanding the environment the character is brought up in. She starts off not being politically minded at all; she's a very average working-class woman in Victorian Britain. And the laundry work was brutal and very difficult physically. Lots of women died very young from working in laundries, so I had to try to understand what her life was like. But also she's brought up in a society where to defy convention is a very odd thing. She lives in a household where she's married, she has a husband and a son, and her role is wife and mother. Her role is not to be a political animal. It was getting into that mindset of apathy and accepting the social convention and not being interested at all in breaking the mould. So a lot of the stuff that I did with Sarah was just reading around everything before we started.

IS: Did you look at any photographs or documentary films from the time?

CM: No, not documentaries, but we had a lot of pictures of laundries and Bethnal Green in East London, and lots and lots of prison photos because they were being kept under surveillance.

IS: The clothes you wear in the film aren't at all like the flashy, beautiful outfits you normally see in period dramas.

CM: Anne-Marie [Duff] and I were in really shitty stuff. Most of ours were originals: they were really tatty, falling apart, horrible clothes. I had just done [Thomas Vinterberg's] *Far from the Madding Crowd*, where everything was new and made. *Suffragette* was just the opposite. That was an ill-fitting corset and very, very basic. We started actually shooting in the laundry so that was a really good way in 'cause we were in our work gear. We all had uncomfortable shoes, and all of that stuff really helps in forming a character.

IS: What discussions did you have with Sarah Gavron before the shoot?

CM: None of us wanted it to be like a period drama and we always wanted it to feel very authentic and very real, like you were in the room with these people. A lot of it was just about how we were going to approach the relationships in the film. We never wanted it to be that the men were villains and the women were the heroes. So it had to feel a fair portrayal of what was happening, so Ben Whishaw's character [Maud's husband Sonny] wasn't going to become a black-and-white villain. A lot of that stuff was in rehearsal, a lot of it was ongoing. There were millions of versions of Meryl Streep's Emily Pankhurst speech because we kept on finding really cool things Pankhurst had said where we thought, "That should be in the film." So a lot of it was conversation beforehand, but also as we went through we were constantly building things into the film.

IS: That sounds quite collaborative.

CM: It was and that was from everyone. Abi was amazing in incorporating everybody's ideas. But

None of us wanted it to be like a period drama and we always wanted it to feel very authentic and very real, like you were in the room with these people

FIGHTING TALK

Meryl Streep plays the *grande dame* of the women's suffrage movement, Emmeline Pankhurst (below), who is an inspiration to Anne-Marie Duff's Violet and Mulligan's Maud (bottom)

everyone was given the freedom to have input. And there are also things you can't account for, like our relationship with Adam [Michael Dodd], who plays my son George. You can't really over-rehearse a kid; you give them the script and for them to feel natural and give a natural performance you just have to go with it. So it was collaborative, but also each scene was never pinned down to a certain place.

IS: What was the most difficult scene for you to film?

CM: The one where Emily Davison dies under the king's horse, because it was imagined. There was nothing real to react to. [Natalie Press as Davison] wasn't really being hit by anything. All of us lined up to watch the moment of impact were looking at nothing, just a tennis ball on a stick and we had to imagine it was her being hit by a horse. Everything else, the force-feeding and laundry, had felt so real and brutal and then all of a sudden we were having to use our imaginations for the climax of the film. Also we shot it over three days and were all moving around. When you don't have an easy linear scene to do it's difficult.

IS: How does your theatre work inform your work in the cinema?

CM: When you're doing a film, you think, "It'd be great to do a play" and then the minute you're doing a play, you think, "This is awful, I wish I was doing a film again," and the schedules kind of get to you in different ways. However, the more films I do, the more they feel like theatre.



Suffragette was really free; it was like working on *Shame*, to a degree. *Shame* felt very theatrical because we were able to move wherever we wanted to and the camera would follow us. We improvised a lot and we did what we wanted, we would do long, long takes where there wouldn't be cutting. Film feels arduous when you're constantly cutting, constantly resetting and you're doing 15 takes. The great thing about theatre is that you can go on for two hours and no one says, "Cut" – you just keep going. And when you can find that in a film environment, that's great.

IS: How do you select your projects? A lot of the films you've worked on have had interesting female characters and been made by really good directors.

CM: They don't come up very often. So before *Madding Crowd* I didn't work for a year and a half. I think I'd stopped for another year a couple of years ago because of the same thing.

IS: Were you deliberately rejecting scripts because they didn't suit you?

CM: Yeah, it's a funny thing where you play something successfully and you're like, "Great, let's do that again" and then you get offered a lot of the same parts. So it's sort of a waiting game. There's that path which I've taken being like, "Right I'm going to wait until the right role comes along." Or you can start generating your own work producing things.

IS: Is that something you'd like to do?

CM: Yeah. Up until now I've felt like I've acted for hire and am not that interested in the stuff. But there's just a need now; I don't think I can sit around for another couple of years and wait for the right part. There is a book I want to adapt but I don't want to say anything because I don't want someone else to do it! I'd also like to work with Sarah again and we've spoken about it – we're looking for the right film or right story to adapt.

IS: Are there any female directors you'd like to work with?

CM: Lynne Ramsay. She's at the top of my list, I'm trying to hunt her down! Andrea Arnold. Those two would be top and those are the kind of films I'm most interested in.

IS: Do you go to the cinema often?

CM: Yeah, I go and see crap though – not crap, but I don't go and see really serious films. I kind of watch screenings of serious films and weirdly need to gear myself up for them, it's terrible. But I think with such an influx over awards season and all this pressure like, "This is amazing," I find myself shying away from them and though I'll watch the great films eventually, I generally go to the cinema for complete escapism.

The last film I saw was *Jurassic World*... Twice... It's just so great. If I'm watching a great serious film in a cinema with people talking around me it drives me insane. That's why I have to watch them at home on my own. But those kind of blockbuster films, I'm all for shouting at the screen and that stuff.

IS: Talking of blockbusters, what was Hollywood like?

CM: I think the idea of Hollywood is a bizarre construction. It's not really real. The media fill us with all this bollocks about how people in the public eye live their lives, like the *Daily Mail* saying I get paid \$6 million a movie – complete nonsense. But it's all part of the business, trying to make it into this glamorous world. ☺

i *Suffragette* is released in UK cinemas on 12 October and is reviewed on page 91

The Sound of Fury

United Kingdom 2015
Directors: Alan Byron, Mark Sloper

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

Classic-album-played-in-full reunion tours, 180g vinyl reissues, West End oldies revues and tie-in documentaries: all revenue streams emptying into the sea of rock-nostalgia big business that leaves no artist unrevived. Take the case of Billy Fury, the Liverpoolian rocker who charted 29 times in his career, mostly between 1959 and 1966, whose songbook has recently been rifled through on stage in *Be Bop a Lula!* and who is now given the bio-doc treatment in *The Sound of Fury*. Alan Byron and Mark Sloper's documentary isn't the first to tell Fury's story; I haven't seen *Billy Fury: Halfway to Paradise* (a 1998 BBC *Omnibus* programme) or *Billy Fury: His Wondrous Story*, so can't draw comparisons – though it's difficult to imagine that either is saddled with interstitial graphics nearly so unsightly as those employed in *The Sound of Fury*.

Byron and Sloper's film is a standard melange of talking-head interviews and archival footage. In the former department, the filmmakers have corralled an impressive line-up that includes family (Billy's mum Jean, his brother Albie, who died four years ago), contemporaries who worked the gruelling tour circuit alongside Billy (Vince Eager, Joe Brown), musicians influenced by Fury (Jimmy Page, Alvin Stardust, Imelda May) and various presenters and commentators (Spencer Leigh, Len Goodman, Mark Kermode). Billy himself occasionally chimes in via tape-recorded interviews, recalling, among other things, copying his haircut from Eddie Cochran in Frank Tashlin's *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956). As for the archival excavation, it's mostly standard-issue stock footage, including grim images of sooty, pre-rock-'n'-roll Liverpool, frugging kids and screaming teenage girls, with some home-movie scenes of Billy fondling his beloved pets or smoking his equally beloved spliffs on holiday in the West Indies. (He is better represented in still photographs, having graced the pages of a great many teen mags.) There are also clips of him in action that stay on screen for any amount of time, accompanied by an analysis

Credits and Synopsis

Camera Operators

Mark Sloper
Liam Ayres
Jamie Tongue
Film Editor
David Hughes
Art Director
David Palsler
Sound Recordist
Paul Kerr

Production Companies

©A2B Media Ltd
An A2B Media production in association with The 400 Company
Executive Producers
Alan Byron

Mark Sloper

In Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor

MusicFilmNetwork

A documentary about the singer Billy Fury, who was born Ronald Wycherley in Liverpool in 1940. The film tracks his rise from humble origins to nationwide celebrity in the 1950s and 1960s and his early death, aged 42, in 1983. The film also charts the birth of rock 'n' roll in the US and the UK's early attempts to produce native rock talent, encouraged by Larry Parnes, the impresario responsible for changing the teenage Ronald's name to Billy Fury. Fellow Parnes protégés, including Vince Eager, recount the merciless touring schedule and hedonism of those days, while family members and former girlfriends discuss Billy's private life, including his fondness for animals, his shyness, his dependency on marijuana and the heart condition that ultimately took his life.



You're swell: Billy Fury

of his particular loose-limbed stage presence.

The material is bound into thematic bundles, beginning naturally enough with a recollection of Billy's boyhood, continuing with a discussion of the arrival in Britain of rock 'n' roll (including proto-rock developments such as skiffle) and then spending the lion's share of time on Billy's years of chart dominance. The focus shifts between the public and private Billy: various commentators rhapsodise about the banged-out-in-a-day LP *The Sound of Fury* (one of them, Boz Boorer, the long-time touring guitarist for Morrissey, placed Fury's face on the sleeve of the 1987 Smiths single 'Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me'), while former romantic partners recall the singer's extraordinary detachment – which was, naturally, irresistible.

This checklist approach ticks off all the boxes, though it makes for a lurching progression from one point to the next rather than a fluid timeline, and the clunkiness is exacerbated by the choppy sound mix. The technical roughness is surprising, given that Byron's previous credits include *John Lennon: Love Is All You Need* (2010), *Keep on Burning: The Story of Northern Soul* (2012) and, with Sloper, *Punk '76* (2013). He is also – and I'm not making this up – the creator of *Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady* and *Queen Elizabeth II: The Diamond Celebration* (both 2012).

"It wasn't like today," Page is heard to say of the period when American rock albums were contraband in Britain, "You had to really search this stuff out." Such fervour is no longer required for fandom, and a half-assed job like *The Sound of Fury* is the sort of thing that results when the only passion behind a project is a desire to stoke the content fires. God save the music doc! 🇸

Suffragette

United Kingdom/USA/France 2015
Director: Sarah Gavron
Certificate 12A 106m 4s

See Feature
on page 32

Reviewed by Kate Stables

Ask most people about the portrayal of suffragettes in film and you'd be lucky to get a chirpy couplet from the comic *Mary Poppins* anthem 'Sister Suffragette': "We're clearly soldiers in petticoats/Dauntless crusaders for women's votes." So Sarah Gavron's solid, skilful and unabashedly stirring story of the doughty pre-WWI activism of the militant WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union), concentrated in the fictional figure of East End laundress Maud Watts, arrives not a moment too soon. Taking as its motto 'Deeds Not Words' (the slogan embroidered on WSPU banners), it's an almost self-consciously *active* film, keen to establish the suffragette movement as gender war rather than committee jaw-jaw. Accordingly, Maud's journey from dutiful wife and worker to activist outcast is traced in a tense, well-dramatised series of confrontations and violent encounters. Starting in March 1912, as Emmeline Pankhurst incites her followers to rebellion, it erupts in an unexpected flurry of broken glass with the West End window-smashing campaign that Maud stumbles into, propelling her thereafter through violent demonstrations, bombings and brutal imprisonments.

This pulse-quickening parade of direct action, told with its tough truths intact, is confident and compelling. Its grit illustrates how WSPU suffragettes were freedom fighters like *Selma's* marchers, their force-fed incarcerations as brutal as *Hunger's* on-the-blanket brotherhood. In *Norma Rae*-style, the film also laudably highlights the grim lives of sweated female labour in the steam laundries, including everything from deadly scalds to sexual assault. But *Suffragette*, with its relentlessly message-driven narrative, seems schematic and a little over-manufactured in its dedication to capturing the cause.

Maud's composite character is based on working-class suffragettes such as the socialist Hannah Mitchell. That said, she's carefully constructed to carry the viewer's sympathy as she passes from mild horror at suffragette audacity to participation in every headline-generating WSPU action. After she has dynamited postboxes, been told "Never surrender!" by Meryl Streep's Mrs Pankhurst, blown up Lloyd George's empty second home and accompanied Emily Davison on her ill-fated Derby mission, a faintly *Zelig* quality sets in, despite the film's urgent drama. Abi Morgan's highly crafted script also winds in a heart-rending domestic subplot, in which Maud's gentle husband Sonny (a subtly shamed Ben Whishaw) severs her from her home and adored small son George, in some of the film's most affecting scenes. Battered but unbowed by police hunts, prison and patriarchy, she seems the very essence of the oppressed, the Job of 'Mrs Pankhurst's undesirables', as the newspapers dub the suffragettes. Even the dialogue is burnished till it forms inspiring quotes, as when Maud flashes her defiance at Brendan Gleeson's calm, avuncular police inspector: "War's the only language men listen to."

Fine stuff but it's missing the resonance of a real life – the dash of Morgan's *The Iron Lady* (2011), the ambiguities of *The Invisible*



Fighting back: Carey Mulligan, Ben Whishaw

Woman (2013). Most short-changed is real-life suffragette Emily Davison, whose verve and recklessness are barely touched on. Played with quiet determination by Natalie Press, she's a saintly subsidiary presence until she's trampled into martyrdom on the Derby track. Gavron gets a skittering handheld camera deftly into the thick of this action, as she does for the film's shoving demonstrations and fear-drenched prison force-feedings. She and DP Eduard Grau give these scenes a sharp, jostling immediacy. The roving POV is heightened by the film's eagle-eyed take on the new role of cameras, both in the Gleeson character's new-fangled surveillance of the suffragettes and in the women's darting preoccupation with the newsreel lenses that will record their Derby Day quest.

Gifted with an extraordinary performance from Carey Mulligan, the film is kept aloft by her delicate, stripped-down playing of Maud's

journey from hesitant sympathiser to blazingly angry outlaw. Her dazed, crumpled mien in the aftermath of Davison's death wrenchingly questions every decision Maud has made along the way. In a story about collective action, Mulligan keeps her hard-fighting heroine individual, true to her own conscience.

In this, *Suffragette* is the female suffrage struggle reimagined for a time when traditional political loyalties are crumbling. Where TV's *Shoulder to Shoulder* (1974) reflected the 70s preoccupation with socialist idealism and 'women's lib', this latest take on women's history chimes with Occupy-style direct activism and the new global movements for female equality. But most of all it foregrounds self-actualisation, making Maud's journey to find herself as important as her work as a foot soldier in the battle for the vote. Even as women's stories are reclaimed, they're being remade in the image of our own era. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Faye Ward
Alison Owen

Written by

Abi Morgan

Director of

Photography

Edu Grau

Editor

Barney Pilling

Production Designer

Alice Normington

Music

Alexandre Desplat

Production

Sound Mixer

Danny Hambrook

Costume Designer

Jane Petrie

Production

Companies

Pathé, Film4 and BFI

present in association

with Ingenious Media

with the participation

of Canal+ and

Ciné+ a Ruby Films

production

Developed by Film4

and Focus Features

A Ruby Films

production for

Pathé, Film4, Redgill

Productions and BFI

Made with the

support of the

BFI's Film Fund

Executive Producers

Cameron McCracken

Tessa Ross

Rose Garnett

Nik Bower

James Schamus

Teresa Moneo

Cast

Carey Mulligan

Maud Watts

Helena Bonham

Carter

Edith Ellyn

Brendan Gleeson

Inspector

Arthur Steed

Anne-Marie Duff

Violet Miller

Ben Whishaw

Sonny Watts

Romola Garai

Alice Houghton

Meryl Streep

Emmeline Pankhurst

Finbar Lynch

Hugh Ellyn

Natalie Press

Emily Wilding Davison

Samuel West

Benedict Haughton

Geoff Bell

Norman Taylor

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Distributor

Pathé Productions Ltd

London, 1912. Laundry worker Maud Watts finds herself caught up in the action when a group of suffragettes smash shop windows in Oxford Street. She attends a radical East End suffragette group with friend Violet. Maud testifies about women's working conditions at a parliamentary hearing when Violet is too beaten by her husband to appear. Laundry owner Norman Taylor is sexually assaulting Violet's teenage daughter Maggie, as he did Maud. Imprisoned after a WSPU demo, Maud is warned off activism by Inspector Steed. After attending a speech by Emmeline Pankhurst, she is thrown out by her husband Sonny, and is pictured in the newspapers as a suffragette radical. Fired by Taylor for activism, she burns his hand with a flat iron. Steed, who is tracking the suffragettes, offers her a deal as an informer. Her

group bombs postboxes, and she refuses Steed's offer. The group also bombs Lloyd George's empty second home, though a disquieted Violet has quit. Sonny has their son George adopted, despite Maud's protests. Maud and her group are imprisoned and force-fed while on hunger strike, to Steed's horror. When released, they plan a demonstration at the Epsom Derby. Steed tracks them to the racecourse. Maud and Emily Davison fail to get entry to the paddock. Suddenly, Davison steps in front of the king's horse during the race and is killed. Steed lets a dazed Maud go free. Maud pulls Maggie out of the laundry and persuades the local MP's sympathetic wife to employ her. Along with thousands of other mourners, she attends Davison's funeral, which draws much press coverage.

SuperBob

United Kingdom 2014

Director: Jon Drever

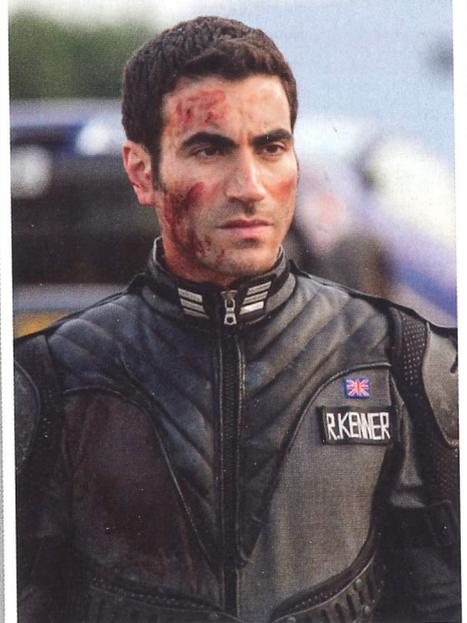
Certificate 15 82m 20s

Reviewed by Katy McGahan

Gotham has Batman, Metropolis Superman and New York City Spiderman – and now Peckham, South London, spawns its very own superhero, SuperBob. When unassuming postman Bob Kenner is struck by a meteorite, he is endowed with extraordinary powers; recruited by the Ministry of Defence, he is sent on life-saving missions all over the world. Seven years on, a documentary crew is following him around, capturing the superhero on his day off. What the film crew finds is a regular South London guy who squabbles with his cleaner and bemoans the endless form-filling associated with his role as a 'civil servant'. Where SuperBob's predecessors fought the likes of megalomaniacal Lex Luthor or the psychopathic Joker against a backdrop of explosions and collapsing skyscrapers, SuperBob is shown shopping in Peckham Market or singing in the local gospel choir.

The faux documentary conceit is a fresh and welcome take on the superhero genre. The prologue, with its far-fetched news reports and amusing vox pops (one witness describes her sighting of the meteorite, announcing that "my dog was very wide-eyed – he only ever gets that look when he sees a bitch across the park"), propels us into a madcap world of superhero pastiche, accentuated by the film's unglamorous setting and unlikely, self-effacing ex-postie hero. Regrettably, the tempo stalls when we meet SuperBob at home and the film settles into cosier romcom-veering-into-sitcom territory, albeit with an MoD subplot involving Bob's boss trying to contract him out to the US military.

SuperBob is Jon Drever's feature debut. As with his 2009 short of the same title, he collaborates here with actor/writer/stand-up Brett Goldstein, who plays Bob in both films and had script input. They have some serious talent on board in the shape of Catherine Tate, whose unflinchingly taut comic timing is put to excellent use in the



Is it a nerd? Brett Goldstein