

Edinburgh classic film was written on menu cards

Restless Natives screenwriter Ninian Dunnett has said he wrote the Scottish cult comedy classic film on the back of menu cards.

Dunnett was 24 when he plotted the film about two bored Edinburgh teens who put on Clown and Wolfman masks to hold up tourist coaches in Highland glens on the back of a Suzuki 125 motorbike.

The 1985 comedy crime caper, which featured a soundtrack by Scots rock legends Big Country, has become a cult favourite.

Dunnett has now transformed the story into a stage musical set to make its world premiere next summer, 40 years after it hit cinema screens.

Dunnett, from Edinburgh, told the Restless Natives podcast – named after the film – how he outlined the story on menu cards while working as a local newspaper reporter in Newcastle.

The film became a reality after he sent it off to a competition advertised in his local bank branch.

He said: “I was trying one or two other things and one of them was this wee story. I had a pack of blank menu cards from a restaurant and so I started writing a scene on each card.

“A couple of boys, what are they doing? They’re in a place, a joke shop is kind of interesting. What are they doing then? They’re getting bored and thinking ‘we should do something’.

“They’ll have an idea for a caper – what’s going to be more interesting if one of them wants to do the caper and the other one doesn’t and on it goes.

“That was the start of it and then it was like the three bars turn up on the fruit machine and you’ve not even put in the money.

“I picked up a leaflet in my local bank for a screenwriting competition and I thought about the menu cards and put them together. I typed it up and sent it off and it won the competition.

“That was immediate attention. David Puttnam, the big producer who’d done Local Hero was judging the competition so then it all took off. Then EMI came in and said yeah we want to make it.

“I was 24 by this point.”

The film starred Scots actors Joe Mullaney and the late Vincent Friell as Ronnie and Will, also known as the Clown and the Wolfman, holding up coaches in the Highlands and robbing tourists with their charm and a toy gun.

The characters become folk heroes as they try to keep one step ahead of the law, including holidaying CIA agent Fritz Bender, played in the film by late Hollywood legend Ned Beatty, are in hot pursuit.

Beatty had previously starred in films including Deliverance to Superman and been nominated for an Oscar for his role in 1976 film Network.

Dunnett said the Hollywood great was attracted to the film, which was shot in Scotland, by his Scottish ancestry.

He said: “I always thought if we could get Robert Vaughn – as a wee boy I loved The man from U.N.C.L.E – but Ned Beatty turned out to be just the thing.

“Ned was fantastic as the CIA agent and the way we got him was working on his Scottish roots – Beatty country and all that. It’s possible he was even given a kilt.

“His wife came over after shooting and the two of them went down exploring the ancestral lands.”

Produced on a low budget, *Restless Natives* – following others like *Gregory’s Girl* and *Local Hero* – brought Scotland to a larger audience and helped pave the way for a boom in Scottish cinema.

Dunnett said the film wasn’t universally praised in 1985, and has grown in status over four decades.

He said: “When *Restless Natives* came out it wasn’t treated as *Citizen Kane*. Some people didn’t like it and especially the London media were very tough on it.

“It was very mixed. People liked it – it played in three cinemas in Edinburgh at the same time but the reviews were not all great.

“It’s one of the amazing, very nice, things that have happened – the film has got better as the years have gone by. More people have liked it and critics have liked it more. It’s a very strange thing.

“In 2021 we were asked to go to the Edinburgh Film Festival – they had not asked us in 1985 – and we did a screening. It was still covid and we were outdoors in St Andrew Square – and it was fabulous.

“You look out into the audience and there’s people in Clown and Wolfman masks.”

The musical is being produced and directed by the same team who made the film, alongside co-producers Perth Theatre

Dunnett, who wrote the film, director Michael Hoffman and the

movie's co producer Andy Paterson are all involved, with music inspired by songs and themes of Big Country.

Dunnett said: "The old team is back together. We've been working very hard with the cast and we've got such a great little ensemble together."

The musical will premiere at Perth Theatre, where it will run from April 24 until May 10 before touring venues in Stirling, Aberdeen and Inverness before rounding off at The King's Theatre in Glasgow.

Photos feature director Michael Hoffman, actor Rachel Boyd (Isla), screenwriter Ninian Dunnett and producer Andy Paterson and actor Teri Lally (Margaret) attended a screening of Restless Natives as part of Film Fest in the City in summer 2021



Clockwise from top left: Andy Paterson, Ninian Dunnett, Michael Hoffman, Rachel Boyd and Teri Lally.
Credit Pako Mera