

► NOSTALGIA  
► FAMILY JOURNAL  
► LIFE INTERVIEW

► HEALTH & FITNESS  
► FOOD & DRINK  
► CULTURE

MUSIC P41 | FILMS P42&43 | TIME OUT P44&45 | TV P46&47

# New film is no cop out

Writer Arthur McKenzie will be joined by TV star Stephen Tompkinson on Monday night for the Durham premiere of feature film *Harrigan*. He tells BARBARA HODGSON about its long journey from page to screen

**W**HEN faced with set-backs and challenges there are those who buckle and those who tough it out.

Writer Arthur McKenzie - a bit like his new fictional hero Harrigan who's about to make a big screen debut - is one of the latter, as you might expect of a former policeman who tackled villains on the mean streets of Newcastle in the sixties and seventies.

So when his script for *Harrigan*, a North East police drama inspired by his career, initially struggled to get off the ground, he filed it away as a case pending but didn't give up.

And now the end result sees his 1974-set feature film, starring Stephen Tompkinson, set for general release after it makes its debut on Monday night - to be followed by a Q&A with its writer and its star - at Gala Theatre in Durham.

"It's only taken 17 years!" laughs Arthur of his labour of love which was initially commissioned by TV producer Geraint Davies who was looking for a new police series.

But before it could be developed Davies died. "So it went in the bottom drawer," says Arthur, a 74-year-old father-of-two who lives in Gosforth.

It remained in the background while he worked on other projects (he's written for *The Bill* and *Wycliffe*) then three years ago he took it up again with the encouragement of his friend, local actor David Whitaker who knew New Tricks star Alun Armstrong and had read about its cast bemoaning the lack of good quality TV scripts.

So Armstrong was asked to take a look and, says Arthur, "about two or three days later I found an answering machine message from him saying it was a terrific script and should be made."

"He said such nice things about it and I thought an actor of his calibre is not going to say it unless he means it, so that gave me a stimulus."

The next step was to work with Vincent Woods of local film company TallTree Pictures, where Arthur's daughter Kirsty Bell is commercial director and helped raise the film's budget of about £1.5m

**He said such nice things about it and I thought an actor of his calibre is not going to say it unless he means it**

Writer Arthur McKenzie, left, with actor Stephen Tompkinson



## CULTURE

## From Page 25

with the help of local businesses.

Arthur had Teesside-born actor Tompkinson in mind from the off for the main role as Detective Sergeant Barry Harrigan who, on the brink of retirement, returns to the region from secondment in Hong Kong and, instead of spending his final working days shuffling papers, decides to get hands-on tackling problems on a crime-ridden estate.

By "sheer chance" Tompkinson was appearing in a play at Live Theatre in Newcastle and, again at David Whitaker's suggestion, Arthur sent him the script.

Arthur recalls: "He said 'I want to do this' - he'd just read it. I asked him if it would clash with DCI Banks but he said he didn't think it would at all because this is set in the seventies."

It also represents a very different style of policing, before the advent of computers and DNA profiling: a world of old-fashioned detective work carried out in cluttered offices, piled high with paperwork, overflowing ashtrays and takeaway cartons and helped along, you might imagine, by a copper's instinct and occasional headlock.

When shooting on the film, originally called Harrigan's Nick, started late last year on location around the North East, Arthur was invited onto the set, the police station created in the old Swan Hunter shipyard, to talk to the actors and help ensure the period detail was right.

"The CID office was spot-on," he says. "I thought I was standing back in the West End police station. It was spooky."

"The one thing where I had to say 'we didn't have that in the seventies' was angle-poise lamps."

If it sounds a bit like a Geordie version of *Life On Mars*, remember Arthur's story, set against the backdrop of power cuts and miners' strikes, was born before that hugely popular period police drama.

When the finished film had a private screening in Newcastle earlier in the year, Arthur invited old colleagues.

"They were friends I trust who I know would tell me the truth. One said 'it is just as it was' and another said 'it reminded me how awful it was in those days'."

Arthur was busy writing throughout his police career, finding the meticulous nature of the paperwork to be good training for capturing crisp detail and essential facts.

A rare copper who "enjoyed doing paperwork", he says: "Whatever the case, you had to put a file of evidence together and it had to have a beginning, a middle and an end and the content had to be right."

The old advice to write about what you know is what gives his work that ring of truth.

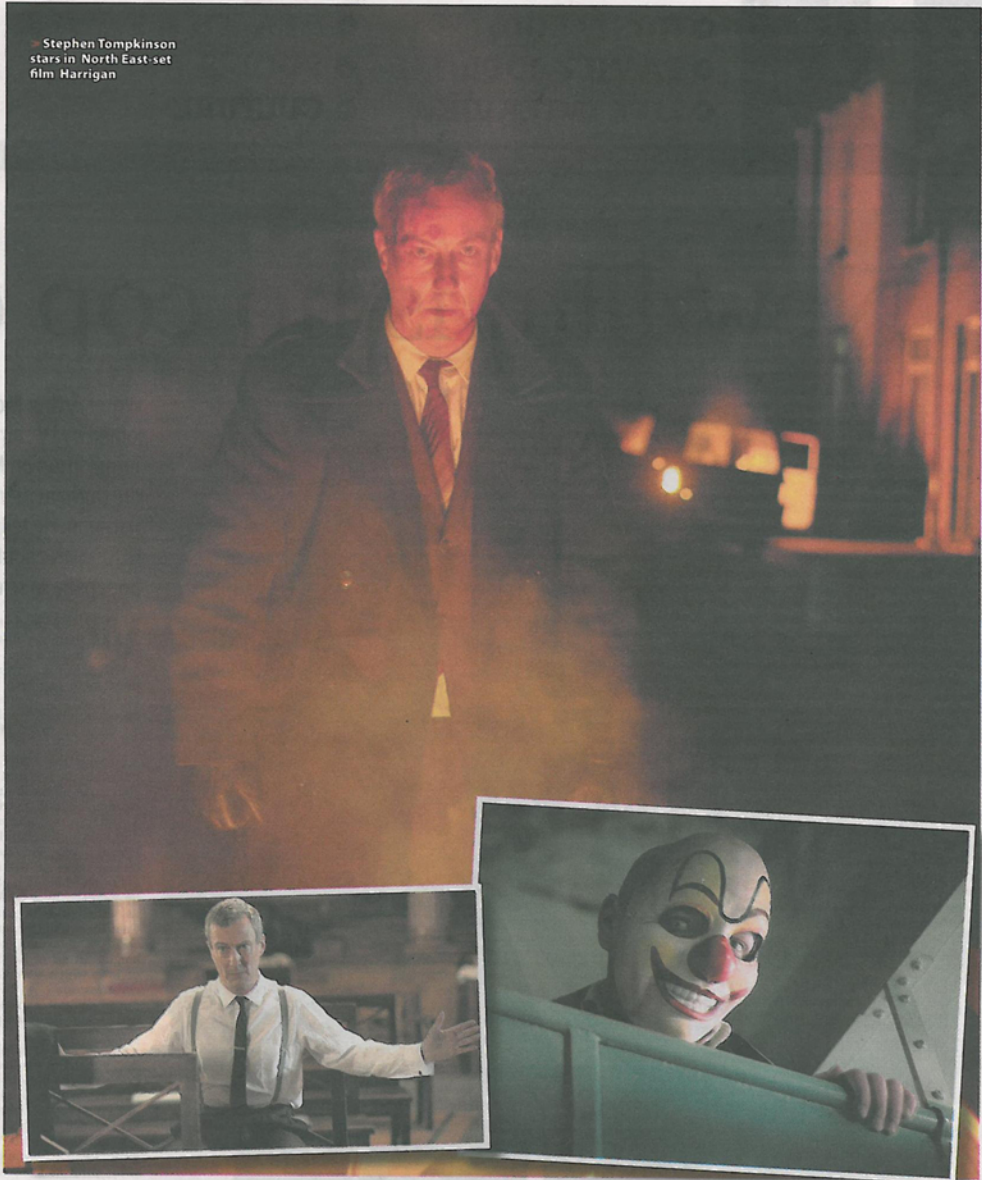
In his 31 years in the force, Arthur received 27 commendations for his front-line work, reaching the rank of detective inspector before retiring in 1989.

Working the city centre streets in the sixties, he remembers being on duty alone in the Big Market "thumps in my jacket, waiting for the pubs to turn out. I basically had a fight every night."

Once he even stopped a speeding car containing the Krays, whom he thought "gentlemen" - "I didn't know who they were!"

Back then it was a matter of relying on your own skill to solve crime. "Now it's collective management and a different sort of policing; a different attitude."

Stephen Tompkinson stars in North East-set film *Harrigan*



He adds: "People were respectful of the police."

"It's completely different now. Kids don't seem to have any respect. Then there's binge-drinking - I don't know what that's about to be honest."

"I think it's harder to police now than it was then because we had that respect. We didn't have the carry on with pepper sprays, flak jackets and stab-proof vests."

The film of course draws from his experiences - "at least two incidents are basically exactly as they happened" but others, as well as the characters, tend to be composites.

"I'm happy with the way the film has turned out but when you're so close to something it's hard to be

objective.

"I know every word, every inflection - and I know what's missing!"

"Two storylines are missing as they had to chop it down for time and finance reasons so that's a frustration."

But if the film is a success the hope is that, with plenty of material still left, Harrigan might be brought to life on the small screen too, where he was originally meant to be. In acknowledgement of its roots, Arthur has included a credit to Geraint Davies at the end of the film.

So might his first feature film now inspire him to write more about his life?

Arthur has already published the

story of his early police career but is looking for takers for his now-complete story.

And there's another fascinating tale in there, about Arthur's other earlier career: as a top athlete, representing Great Britain at discus throwing.

Success in his careers has come from using the mindset he developed as a 14-year-old, at a time he lay ill, in danger of dying from pleurisy, and was given Wilson of the Wizard comics to read which introduced him to a wonder athlete.

"I was inspired by a comic!" he says. "And I've used principles I used then through my time in the police force, as an athlete and as a writer: discipline and to keep going with a

clear vision of what you want and having the confidence to aim for it."

Right now, it is the story of another athlete he has in mind to develop. Again a project he's had on the back-burner for years, it's about Victorian runner James Rowan from Gateshead, also known as The Black Callant, who had a fascinating but ultimately sad riches-to-rags life.

"I'm hoping the Harrigan experience might just be a little stepping stone to talking about that one as well," he says.

■ Arthur McKenzie and Stephen Tompkinson will be joined on Monday night by Vincent Woods and Kirsty Bell of TallTree Pictures for a Q&A after the screening of *Harrigan*.