

A man and a woman in medieval attire are standing in a misty forest. The man, Stuart Brennan, is wearing a chainmail tunic and a dark cloak, with a sword at his waist. The woman, Carolina Carlsson, is wearing a blue dress. They are standing next to a large, moss-covered tree trunk. The forest is filled with tall trees and ferns, with a soft, hazy light filtering through the canopy.

Fit for a king

'We were so lucky to find Dunskey,' says BAFTA award-winning actor Stuart Brennan, who wrote, directed, produced and starred in the new film *Kingslayer*, a medieval thriller about Richard the Lionheart, made on the Orr Ewing family's estate new Portpatrick last autumn with a stellar cast and crew. Chief Feature Writer **Anne Armstrong** reports on how movie magic was made in Galloway

PHOTOGRAPHY MARK PACURA

Meeting in the mist at Dunskey:
Richard the Lionheart (Stuart Brennan)
and Lea (Carolina Carlsson)



Kingslayer at Dunskey

As the 12th century prince emerges from the mist into a beautiful woodland setting, there’s no hint that this is actually 21st century Galloway. Until you spot the film crew preparing to capture the scene, and a make-up artist poised just off set, brushes at the ready.

This is a snapshot of life at Dunskey Estate, near Portpatrick, as it was transformed into medieval England for its latest creative adventure. For a few weeks last autumn, the beautiful coastal estate was awash with knights, fair maidens, nasty mercenaries and thrilling plot twists.

Home to the Orr Ewing family, the estate was chosen as the perfect location for a new film, Kingslayer, a medieval thriller about an attempt on the life of Richard the Lionheart before he sets off for the Crusades.

“It was a filmmaker’s dream,” says Stuart Brennan, who wrote, directed, produced and starred in the movie.

Covid-19 helped Dunskey play its starring role after the original plans to shoot the film in Devon last March had to be cancelled.

Alastair Orr Ewing and his wife, Anne Tristine Nguyễn, stepped in to help, and opened the doors to Dunskey to the cast and crew last September, working to all Covid-19 protocols when restrictions were eased.

Anne says: “It was just so incredibly impressive. I was entirely bowled over by how hard-working and incredibly professional everything was.”

Throughout the six-week filming period, a core ‘bubble’ group of 25 cast and crew stayed within the main house at Dunskey, but around 200 people were involved in the whole production at different times, with strict protocols in place and a special Covid Officer employed on set to make sure all rules were followed.

‘Richard the Lionheart is days away from his coronation when a secret meeting with the woman he loves turns into a life-and-death fight for survival’



Ryan Gage and Stuart Brennan in action



Ryan Gage as Chaplain Anselm



Scots actor David Hayman in threatening mode as mercenary Dafydd

‘I’ve shot films all over Scotland, and this was definitely the highlight for me; Dunskey had everything’

Stuart Brennan says: “Keeping the core group of 25 isolated was a real mission and quite an undertaking. The Covid Officer – a thankless task – did the job really well.”

The starry line-up of cast and crew includes John Rhys Davies, well known for roles such as Gimli in Lord of the Rings, and Sallah in two of the Indiana Jones films; Ryan Gage, of The Hobbit and BBC TV’s The Musketeers; and acclaimed Scots actor, director and television presenter, David Hayman. The film was shot by legendary director Stanley Kubrick’s director of photography, Doug Milsome, whose film credits include Full Metal Jacket and Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves; and producing alongside Stuart was Gareth Wiley, who won a Best Picture Golden Globe for Woody Allen’s Vicky Cristina Barcelona.

“This was a real passion project for me,” says Stuart, himself a BAFTA-award winning actor, who plays Richard in the film. ▶

Kingslayer at Dunksey



The all-star crew included renowned cinematographer, Doug Milsome, seen here with Ellie-Rose Mackinlay, who plays Millicent

“The storyline is that Richard the Lionheart is days away from his coronation when a secret meeting with the woman he loves turns into a life-and-death fight for survival. As hired mercenaries attack, Chaplain Anselm – Richard’s right-hand man, played by Ryan Gage – who has gone looking for the young prince, tries to uncover who is behind the plot and prevent civil war.

“John, David and Ryan were great to work with; great fun. Doug, who is in his 80s now, was first on set every day and last to leave. He’s a master cinematographer. The film looks beautiful; he has such a wonderful love of what he does, and has such an eye for detail.”

When the original shoot was cancelled in March, Stuart moved the dates to September and set about looking for a new location, which would work well within the Covid guidelines.

He scoured the country and found Dunskey through online accommodation site Airbnb: “We were so lucky to find Dunskey. We called up Anne and Ali and told them what we were looking for: we weren’t a huge movie by any standard, not a Hollywood production, but this is what we are trying to achieve, and would they like to be part of it.

“They were wonderful and that really rubbed off on the cast and crew, who felt so valued to be there, and gave their best work.

‘It’s a place that felt like no-one had been there before and the area feels like a real hidden gem’

“What I really liked about them was that they saw the benefits for the local economy, and were so keen to see if we could engage with the local community, such as having schoolchildren visit the set, and employing some local lads as runners.

“Dunskey is so well set up for this kind of production, with accommodation and catering on site, and lots of locations: so many different kinds of trees and woodland, and great landscapes of coast, big hills, rivers and lochs. I arrived at the beginning of September and left on December 1. It’s a place that felt like no-one had been there before and the area feels like a real hidden gem.”

Using the 2,000-acre estate and Edwardian mansion as a film location is something Anne and Ali have been keen to do since they became the latest generation of the Orr Ewing family to take over the estate six years ago. It was bought around 1900 by Ali’s great grandfather, who built the impressive three-storey house, which is packed with grand rooms and ornate features.

It is now home to the couple and their children Ava Lily and Atticus, and they have also been working hard to open up the estate for the first time as a special venue for weddings, celebrations and events.

“We have a good venue here, with different kinds of accommodation, catering and locations all in one place, and it’s a big dream to make this region an



incredible production destination,” says Anne.

“It’s so important to support these kinds of endeavours, and the whole cast and crew were incredibly respectful to the building and our team here.”

The Orr Ewings were keen to encourage a commitment to involve the community and were delighted to welcome school groups, giving them an insight into different creative career paths, and to have some fun finding out how films are made.

“It was so rewarding,” says Anne. “We really want to develop the community engagement part of what we do in future.”

While Ali and the children also got involved in the production as extras, Anne loved the glimpse behind the scenes of a movie coming together: “Watching the sword master practising with members of the cast, and seeing people keeping working on their script after a full day of filming was really something. That commitment to their craft was so inspiring.”

She was also full of praise for Dunskey’s head chef, David Alexander, who kept everyone well fed: “It was a very different brief for him, and he worked really hard to make sure they had all lovely things to eat; offering things like comfort food if they’d had a challenging or difficult day. People so loved his food, and we are so lucky to have him.”

As Anne works on some exciting plans for the



Anne, Ali and their children Ava Lily and Atticus Orr Ewing

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estate, Kingslayer is now in the post-production stage, with production company Stronghold looking to sell the film around the world.

While Stuart believes there’s a chance of a cinema release, he thinks it will most likely air on one of the streaming platforms, such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, hopefully towards the end of this year.

Meanwhile, he’s taken away happy memories of Dumfries & Galloway and working at Dunskey: “I’ve shot films all over Scotland, and this was definitely the highlight for me; it had everything.”