



Carry on cowboys

Cannes audiences loved it, but the building industry's image will be knocked back by years when Ken Loach's new film Riff Raff opens next month. Alastair Stewart talks to Loach and asks if it is representative.

WHILE MADONNA was stealing the show at the Cannes film festival last week, critics were heaping praise on a British film about tax-dodging subbies, unscrupulous foremen and Kangos walking off sites. *Riff Raff*, the latest movie from Ken Loach, the controversial director of social realist films such as *Cathy Come Home* and *Kes*, may have been an instant hit gaining the festival's second prize but employers and union leaders have already slammed it as unrepresentative.

"How did the Cannes audiences react to hairy-arsed builders?" Loach laughs. "They responded very warmly. They were glad to see a bit of humanity for once."

Commissioned by Channel 4 and originally scheduled for screening on Sunday, it proved so popular at Cannes that the distributor, Palace Pictures, is instead putting it on general

release, starting at London's Camden Plaza early in June.

The film stars Stevie, an unemployed Glaswegian who finds work on the sort of London site that most of the construction industry would rather disappear. It takes the world of *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* to raucously funny extremes, with plenty of slapstick, a brief love story and a patter as earthy as you will find on any site.

But it doesn't stop there. Skiving and a signal disregard for the taxman lead to corruption, victimisation, increasingly appalling site safety and, ultimately, tragedy when someone falls to his death. His friends take their revenge on the management in a final apocalyptic scene.

Loach does not pretend to be neutral. Long associated with left wing causes, he nevertheless tries not to ram the message too far down the audiences' throats. "I'm reluctant to pontificate; it doesn't make for good film."

But off-screen he seems quite happy to do just that. "During the 1980s there has been an attack on the unions and a consequent loss of job security and safety standards. I hope the film will support moves for proper recognition of trade unions."

Employers, painted as cynical and uncaring taskmasters, might not agree. Ian Dixon of Willmott Dixon is one (see box).

After watching a pilot video last week he retorted: "It was a pretty artificial film. The problem with it is that *all* the construction industry suffers from the portrayal, and not just the 5% of

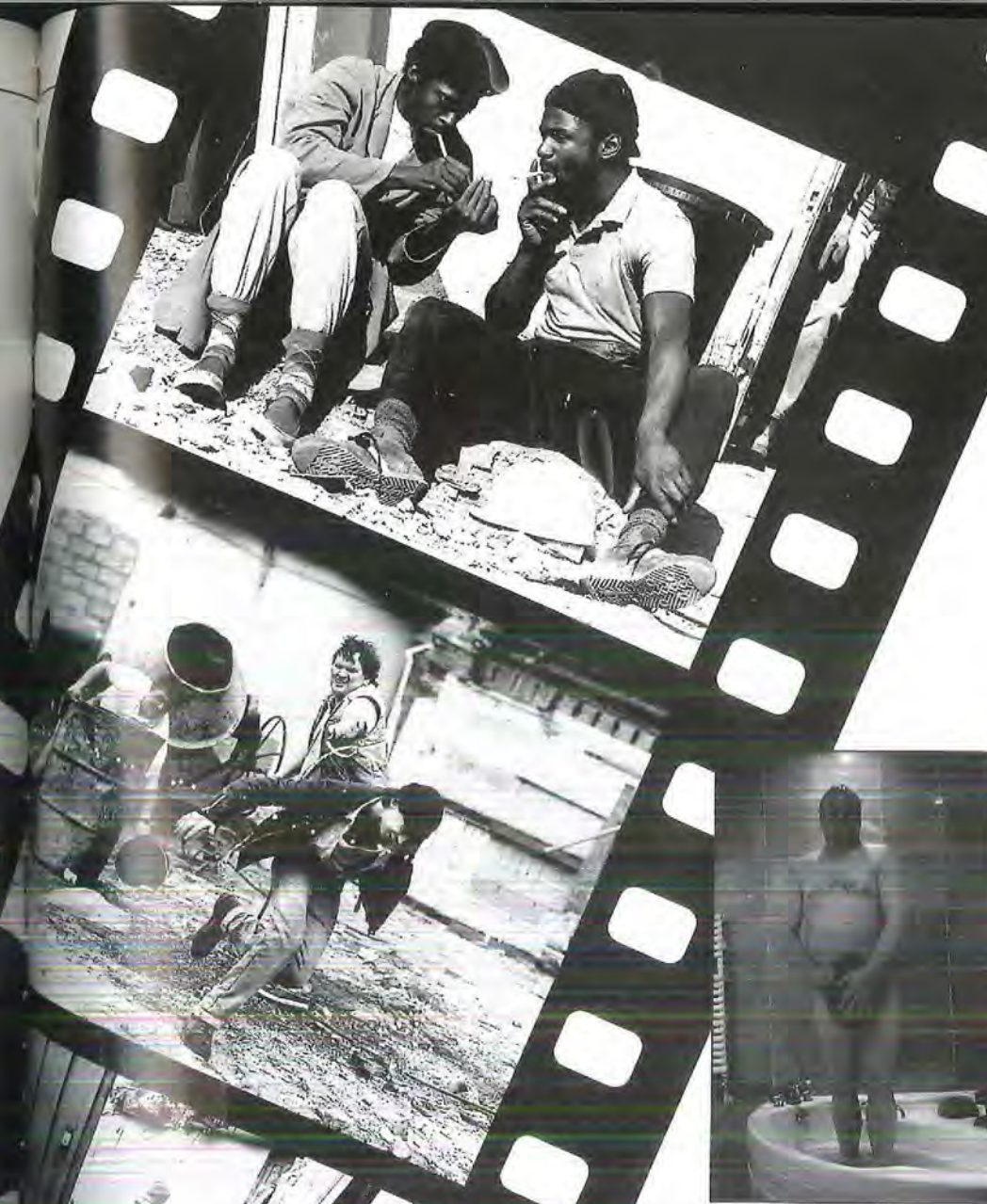
sites that are like that."

But scriptwriter Bill Jesse, who died before the film was completed, and most of the cast have been on many sites just like the film's north London hospital in the midst of being converted into luxury flats.

Loach insisted on most of the cast having site experience ("and not just as summer jobs"). Stevie is played by Robert Carlyle who was a painter and decorator in Glasgow for five years.

Ricky Tomlinson, of *Brookside* fame, was a plasterer and – more infamously – one of the Shrewsbury Three union members who went to gaol following the building strike in 1972. He plays the highly likeable Liverpoolian campaigner, who gets his cards after asking for better safety standards.

Any members of the industry who see the film at the cinema, or watch the TV screening later this year, will form their own opinions as to the accuracy of the portrayal. But it is highly unlikely they will not have an opinion.



Ganger: "I've just come across from the tea room. Talk about health hazards, there's a couple of rats running around"

Foreman: "Wouldn't surprise me. They're probably signing on and all"

Points of view – what does the industry say?



EMPLOYER
Ian Dixon,
Willmott
Dixon
chairman

It was very political; very left wing; very much 'us and them'. Management would not be like that.

It was fine as long as it's recognised as a film and not a documentary. ♪



ARCHITECT
Leon Krier,
architect,
town
planner,
theoretician

It was probably quite right about parts of the industry. The building industry is more or less the same everywhere. They are not very well organised. Sometimes you have to be a bit of a thug to win respect.

I would not go near sites like that. I am mainly a town planner and have not been involved on many sites in my career. ♪



UNIONS
George
Brumwell,
UCATT
executive
member

I enjoyed it, but it does the typical building worker a dis-service. They're not usually the loud-mouthed, brash type that are portrayed in the film.

It is not a true reflection of typical building workers as I know them. But it is a reflection of the growing unacceptable fringe and does a good job to expose it.

It's that part of the industry that requires a public enquiry. Most of the workers are DSS or tax fugitives and they're being grossly exploited.

I feel very sorry for them and it is good the subject is brought up. ♪