

Jamie McDowell

visits an acting class with a difference that's giving stars the ammunition for a successful career

BELFAST'S Dockers Club in the Sailortown area of the city is synonymous with the Ulster boxing scene and it has seen its fair share of epic dust-ups in the ring down through the years.

Today however, as it is every week, the Dockers is home to the Belfast Screen Acting Masterclass.

Several gun-toting students in the rear bar are preparing for a different kind of fight – a gunfight. It's clear from the get-go that this isn't your average 'to be, or not to be' set-up.

The class, led by the charismatic and winsome Peter Ferris, founder of film production and talent agency Ferris Entertainment who has lengthy first-hand experience in the film, TV, theatre and music industries, has recently seen one of its fledgling disciples picked up by new Sky One comedy *Bounty Hunters*, starring Jack Whitehall and Rosie Perez.

Twenty-eight-year-old Aki Yunus is with his fellow classmates practising how to cock and reload automatic rifles, handguns and shotguns.

Knowing how to handle a gun is a beneficial skill for those seeking parts in TV shows and films involving gun scenes.

There's a jovial but professional atmosphere in the room, and the class's work continues unhindered by the presence of a photographer and a hack.

Having moved to Northern Ireland from Libya as a child, Aki joined the class after a chance encounter with Peter while he was at school.

"I was born in Benghazi, which is in the eastern province of Cyrenaica in Libya. When I was two years old my parents moved to the UK having found work here and we settled in Northern Ireland.

"I went to Campbell College and later Belfast Institute, so I'm completely naturalised! When

Boxing clever: Belfast club that helps actors aim for the top

I was in sixth form I still didn't know what it was I wanted to do, but during a careers day I met Peter who was doing a drama workshop. I was studying drama as an A-level at the time and that's when I realised that I wanted to be involved in screen acting.

"From the beginning, Peter taught us how to prepare for auditions and how to take a different approach to screen acting as it's completely different from stage acting."

Overseen by Peter, the students in the screen acting class skip the Shakespeare and Dickens and leap head first – sometimes, literally – into the action.

Aki adds: "Peter's approach means studying scenes from TV and movies such as *Heat*, with Al Pacino and Robert De Niro, and recreating those scenes, filming our version and then watching it back to analyse what went right and what went wrong.

"It was nine years ago when I began attending Peter's classes at the Dockers Club. I then decided to try and get into the well-respected Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts in London.

"Peter supported me and was able to help me get a try-out for the school.

The whole experience was a real eye-opener for me. The standard of the acting in London

was so high – my jaw just dropped. I didn't get into Italia Conti because I just wasn't good enough at the time.

"So I came back to Belfast to regroup and refine my acting. I needed to put in a lot more work than I initially

thought was necessary.

"Back in Belfast with Peter, he taught me to focus on professionalism and helped me rebrand. Three years later it was announced that *Game of Thrones* was to be filmed here. We didn't know anything about it at the time other than the fact that Sean Bean was going to be in it. I auditioned for roles in the show, but again, I didn't make the cut."

Having returned to Belfast and with a newfound hunger, Aki began to do some research into the British Action Academy (BAA), a school based near London which specialises in stunts and screen combat.

Peter then introduced Aki to a friend of his, a renowned stuntman and actor who convinced Aki



HOTSHOT: An actor taking aim in Belfast's Dockers Club



GUNNING FOR WORK: Aki Yunus, who was born in Libya but went to school in Northern Ireland, holds a replica Uzi at the class
Pictures by Mark Marlow/Pacemaker

Interview

WORKING ORDER: Actors break down guns – in-depth knowledge of weapons can help their careers



filming, thanks to Peter."

The hurdles that must be overcome for actors and stunt workers applying for auditions for shows and films produced in Northern Ireland is clearly a bugbear for both Aki and Peter. Peter explained how he feels raw, home-grown talent is often overlooked.

"In the UK there are so many cliques and clubs. It's upsetting to see so many talented people from here hitting brick walls because of that. You just need to look at the likes of Aki to see the huge potential we have here.

"You'll find that the departments in Northern Ireland are saying local talent is already being used in the film industry

here, but that's not the case at all."

Aki, like

My time in Bounty Hunters was fantastic

many others at the Belfast Screen Acting Masterclass, puts his newfound success down to the guidance of Peter and the vital skills the learned at the BAA and hopes *Bounty Hunters* will be the stepping stone which leads to bigger and better things in his budding career.

"My time in *Bounty Hunters* was fantastic. It was the push I needed to work in film. The bar is so high, but I'm fortunate to have been trained by the right people. I couldn't have asked for better mentors."

When asked what his ultimate endgame is, Aki smiles menacingly and responds: "To be the ultimate Bond villain!"

DOUBLE TROUBLE: An actress practises firing two pistols



that the BAA was the way forward.

Aki said: "It was through Peter and one of his old friends, Matthew Sterling, that I became interested in the British Action Academy. Peter then brought me over to London where he introduced me to Matt who he studied at Italia Conti with.

"Matt has worked as a stuntman in films such as *Star Wars*, *Fast and Furious 6* and *James Bond*. From his stunt work he was able to show filmmakers that he could act as well, and that led to a career in acting.

"When I first met him in Oxford Street in London, he said, 'forgive me, I'm so tired... I just finished filming fight scenes with *The Rock*!' That was an incredible moment for me, to see where Matt's career had led him."

Speaking of his role in *Bounty Hunters*, currently airing on Sky One every Wednesday, Aki, being perhaps unrealistically modest, credits chance for his selection for the show.

"Getting to work on *Bounty Hunters* was mostly down to luck. Peter's formula is preparation plus luck equals success.

"For *Bounty Hunters*, I was literally in a car on the Westlink traveling to the other side of town when I got a call saying, 'you have an audition for the show tomorrow', so I had to drop everything and fly over to London that night and ended up getting a part as a jihadi henchman.

"It was amazing being on set and surrounded by great professionals like Rosie Perez and Jack Whitehall. Everything went really smoothly for me during



HIT SHOW: Jack Whitehall and Rosie Perez in *Bounty Hunters*