

Concert

Blackmail

Barbican

★★★★☆

On Friday night, the Barbican screened a new Japanese film, *Big Tits Zombie*. Well, it takes all sorts. But that feast of blood and flesh surely couldn't top the BBC Symphony Orchestra on Hallowe'en, live and lurid, accompanying Alfred Hitchcock.

The film was *Blackmail* from 1929: not the pioneering talkie version scattered with brilliant inventions and elocution lesson vowels, but the silent edition prepared at the same time for British cinemas not wired for sound. The music, receiving its British premiere, was supplied by Neil Brand, our most renowned silent film accompanist. Often he improvises at a piano; here he luxuriated in a composed score and the full symphonic palette, from slithering bass trombone to the celeste's ghostly icing.

He also luxuriated in Hollywood's past. *Blackmail* might be rooted in a recognisable 1920s London of newsagent shops, humble housing and Lyon's Tea Rooms; but the score came bathed in memories of Herrmann, Rózsa, Waxman, composers from Hollywood's golden age. Brand's other spot references were cheeky but adroit, like the tiny snatch of *Dixon of Dock Green* — matched to a policeman trundling outside while Anny Ondra's heroine, facing an emergency in a creepy artist's studio, finds a new use for a bread knife.

Spiritedly conducted by Timothy Brock, deviser of Brand's full orchestration, the BBC musicians pitched into the score with flair and obvious enjoyment. If at times Brand thumped us or twiddled his thumbs, he was only reflecting the film. We didn't need Hitchcock's repeated shots of a jester painted in horrible oils; but we got them. Nor could Brand stop Charles Bennett's plot eventually running out of steam. None of its characters is particularly bright, certainly not the naive heroine, or the detective

boyfriend played by John Longden, who'd barely know a clue if it hit him.

Where Brand and Brock succeeded mightily was in making us nervy (that ringing doorbell) and stirring emotional ambiguity. We heard the danger in Ondra's innocence; smelt the threat when the music swelled in romantic pomp. A bad night for Japanese zombies, maybe; but a great night for the rest of us.

Geoff Brown



Anny Ondra in the 1929 *Blackmail*

