



# the incredible suit

95% movies. 4% twaddle. 1% lycra.

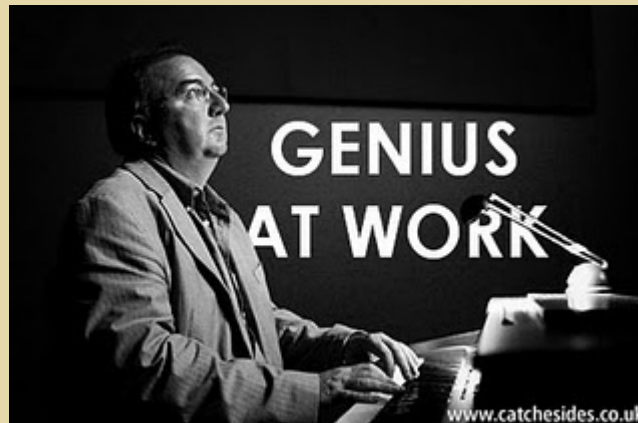
Friday, 19 November 2010

## Alfred Hitchcock, Natasha Kaplinsky And An Exclusive Interview With Silent Film Accompanist Neil Brand!

In 1929 Alfred Hitchcock made two versions of his thriller *Blackmail* - one silent and one with dialogue, which became the first British sound-on-film talkie. Although the sound version is better known, I long ago gave up on it because although Hitch threw in some cheeky audio gags to show off how unspeakably ace he was, he still didn't really know how synchronised dialogue was going to work and as a result the film drags like a self-refilling bucket of boring.

A few weeks ago I went to London's Barbican to see the silent version of *Blackmail*, with a new score performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and written by tipples topples movie music legend Neil Brand. It was totes amazaboggles, and looked and sounded a bit like this, only a bazillion times bigger, louder and betterer.

Brand's new score improves the movie incalculably. Reminiscent of, but not in thrall to, the likes of Bernard Herrmann, his music reinvents *Blackmail* as a film that's as witty, taut and tense as much of Hitch's better-known pictures.



Neil Brand has been scoring silent films for over 25 years, and I've seen him perform several times since I first encountered him when he visited my university \*cough\* years ago. His work with Paul Merton on their 'Silent Clowns' live tour has brought the magic of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the like to new audiences of jaded grown-ups and *Transformers*-fed children, all of whom had their souls enriched by the wondrous powers of silent comedy.

Brand also accompanied Anthony Asquith's *Underground* at last year's London Film Festival, which somebody wrote an excellent piece about [here](#), and if you ache for further Brandery that there isn't room for here, have a look at [his website](#).

The Incredible Suit was therefore quite excited when Neil Brand agreed to another future-award-winning interview to discuss his work, his thoughts on silent film music in a modern world and his troubling feelings about Channel Five newsreader Natasha Kaplinsky.

**Hello Neil. Now then, this score you've done for *Blackmail*. It's amazing, isn't it? Come on now, don't be modest.**

I'm hugely proud of it and slightly awed it came off as well as it did. Two things got *Blackmail* into the full orchestral zone - Cubase sequencing software and conductor Timothy Brock, who took my work and fashioned it into a final orchestration which blew everybody away. Tim has a wonderful way with orchestras and a real perfectionism for hitting his cues, and I gave him some horrible things to hit - shop

bells, the first kiss on the cheek, Alice's shudder once she has killed the artist - he had at least sixty precise cues to hit on the nose in 76 minutes.

When I first heard the full score played by an orchestra I cried like a baby all the way through - it was everything I love about movie scores, and the BBC Symphony Orchestra took it onto an even higher plane than that.



How did you go about striking the balance between something that sounded typically Hitchcocky but that you were still able to make your own?

Over the years I've developed my own musical voice which isn't like Bernard Herrmann or Miklós Rózsa, but does use big chords and lush textures. In the past that's been a real problem - when scoring TV documentaries I was always told to simplify, do less, turn it down. Now I've discovered a medium that likes it big and doesn't need to allow for dialogue or voice-over, so the lushness and size - as well as the combination of simple melody and complex harmony - is reminiscent of Golden Age Hollywood, but is essentially all mine.

There's a lengthy scene in a newsagent's, where the actual blackmailing takes place, that goes on forever and is painfully tedious in the sound version. In the silent version though, with your music, it whips right along. How did you approach such a potentially snoozeworthy scene?

I was terrified of that scene. It takes up roughly a quarter of the film and stays obstinately put in the tiny shop, but I realised on first accompanying the film 22 years ago that it's essentially a high-stakes poker game in which the blackmailer is continually raising the stakes. It's classic blackmailing technique - start small and see how far you can push it, and it turns that scene into dramatic dynamite which makes the shop seem all the more ordinary and the customers each a potential threat. Hence the loud shop bell, intended to jerk the audience out of their seats every time somebody walked into this hothouse Mexican stand-off.



Are there likely to be any more performances of your scores for *Blackmail* or *Underground*? People might not believe me when I bang on about them so they need to hear them for themselves.

I really hope so, although financially this couldn't be a worse time to be dealing in luxury goods like full orchestral scores. Part of this whole initiative for me is to throw a bright light on British silent movies - we have a great repertoire of pre-sound film which is very rarely seen and almost never critically assessed.

The BFI National Archive is doing sterling work to get many of these films digitally restored and out into the public arena, and it matters to me a great deal that they are noticed, nationally and internationally, and our own film industry appreciated from its inception, not just after 1930.

Quite right too. Your score for *Blackmail* feels definitive, but do you think there's room for more than one score for the same film? In theory anyone could have a go, couldn't they?

Yes, and they should - Eisenstein declared that his films should be rescored every ten years for new generations, and I'm with him. However, anybody who comes to these films with a view to scoring them must understand every second of them on as many levels as possible, and know how to turn that understanding into music. It's a tall order and we now have a very demanding, film score-savvy audience who won't be fooled.



Have you ever been tempted to knock out a completely alternative score for something like *Psycho* or *Vertigo* just for fun?

I wouldn't dare.

I admire your restraint. So do you sit at home at the piano improvising scores for *EastEnders* or the news while they're on? I'd love to hear your music swelling behind Huw Edwards.

No, but that's as good a way as any to train up as a media composer - I couldn't manage music for Huw Edwards but I find Natasha Kaplinsky curiously inspiring...

Erm... OK. Moving on, are we seeing a resurgence in the popularity of silent films with live scores?

Without a doubt. I've been playing these films for more than 25 years and I've seen them go from slightly embarrassing one-off heritage fests to mainstream cinema, with the audiences for them growing exponentially with the availability of the material.

Why do you think that is?

I have to say, your generation is much more curious, understanding and enlightened about silent cinema than mine was - as the audiences have got younger, the performances have got more exciting, demanding and numerous. Also, Paul Merton has done a tremendous amount to move silent comedy into the mainstream, more than any previous personality with the media clout to do it - being part of that popular resurgence has been a real privilege.



Are you only interested in scoring crusty old silents or do you fancy working on something more contemporary? I don't think Michael Bay has locked anyone down for *Transformers 3* yet.

Knowing at second hand just how stressful, thankless and maddening major soundtrack scoring can be for a composer, no thanks. Although if they ever make *The Natasha Kaplinsky Story* I hope they'll come to me first.

Hmm. Don't hold your breath. OK, obvious question time. Which film score composers do you admire the most? I will allow you three from the "Dead Or Retired" section and two from the "Still Alive, Still Working" section.

Miklós Rózsa, Malcolm Arnold and Franz Waxman (dead), Richard Rodney Bennett and John Williams (still alive/working).

I'm ashamed to say I had to look a couple of those up. This "John Williams" chap has been busy, hasn't he? Now, I saw one of the 'Silent Clowns' shows you did with Paul Merton and was surprised by the number of kids in the audience. You'd think a 90 year old black and white film with no CGI and in boring old 2D would be the last thing they'd enjoy. What has their reaction been like?



Brilliant - they don't think about it, they just react - it's real anarchy, that uncontrolled laughter which we all have when we're kids. The thing to be aware of with silent comedy is that the shots last longer than most modern visual media, and there's always an obvious place to look - physical comedy is more connected to us as human animals than verbal comedy.

Next time you go round Paul Merton's house to watch *Modern Times* or something can I come? I'll bring popcorn.

No.

You meanie. Just for that I'm going to hit you with my hardest, most Paxmanesque interrogatory question. What's your favourite colour?

Wedgewood Blue - looks great on pottery, also makes some of the houses stand out in *The Prisoner*.

Like it. Now it's customary at this point for interviewees to make an unprompted, witty but conveniently concise compliment about *The Incredible Suit*, even if it's a lie. Go!

You're gorgeous. GORGEOUS!!

Yes. Yes I am. Neil Brand, thank you very much.