



ART IN THE MAKING

Punch and Judy. Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy

+ intro by Jez Stewart, BFI National Archive Curator

Punch and Judy.

Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy

Directors: Keith Griffiths, Brothers Quay, Larry Sider

Production Companies: Koninck Studios, Arts Council of Great Britain

Producer: Keith Griffiths

Production Assistant: Patrick Duval

Script: Keith Griffiths

Photography: Mike Tomlinson

Animation and Puppets: Bros Quaij

Art Director: Miranda Melville

Images/Décors/Architecture: Bros Quaij

'Punch and Judy' opera: Harrison Birtwistle

'Punch and Judy' opera libretto: Stephen Pruslin

Musicians: London Sinfonietta

Orchestra Conductor: David Atherton

Singing voice of Punch: Stephen Roberts

Singing voice of Judy: Jan De Gaetani

Singing voice of doctor: John Tomlinson

Singing voice of lawyer: Philip Langridge

Singing voice of Pretty Polly: Phyllis Bryn-Julson

Singing voice of Choregos/Jack Ketch: David Wilson-Johnson

Piano music arranged/performed by:

Graham Nichols

Sound: Peter Rann

Bottler: Peter Lovstrom

With:

Joe Melia (*Punch's voice*)

UK 1980

46 mins

Street of Crocodiles

Animation, Mise-en-scène, Camera: Brothers Quay

Production Companies: Koninck Studios, British Film Institute Production Board, Channel Four

Producer: Keith Griffiths

Original story: Bruno Schulz

Photography: Brothers Quay

Live Action Camera: Jonathan Collinson

Puppets, Décors, Montage: Brothers Quay

Costume Assistant: Lys Flowerday

Music: Leszek Jankowski

Sound Montage: Larry Sider

Sound Mixer: Colin Martin

Technical Adviser: Olivier Gillon

With:

Feliks Stawinski (*actor in theatre*)

UK 1986

21 mins

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SIGHT AND SOUND

If the image of independent British cinema given to the world is that of a rather downbeat, grey-edged, political artform, sustained by its virtues of modesty and integrity, it is sometimes necessary to be reminded that fantasy and extravagance are no less a part of our inheritance. The films of Powell and Pressburger are nothing if not baroque. Our theatrical traditions, feeding into cinema, include the artificial as well as the realist. From the point of view of painting, the set designers at Pinewood and Elstree include some of the finest fantasy craftsmen in the world. In addition to this, there has been the recent runaway success (success against the odds, so to speak) of Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract*. No need to mention Monty Python. Thus fantasy in one form or another is alive and flourishing. Against this background the work of the Brothers Quay [pronounced and alternatively spelt 'Quay'] – severe and difficult surrealist ventures combining puppets, mime, costume and music, written by Keith Griffiths and animated by the Quaijs – begins, perhaps, to take on a less forbidding, a more welcoming air.

In early 1977 a grant of \$3,000 from the National Endowment Fund for the purpose of studying Celtic mythology allowed the brothers to return to Europe. (The name Quaij, incidentally, is Manx: like everyone else, they were partly in search of their origins.) A short, by all accounts disastrous, trip round Wales and Scotland used up the bulk of the money. Moving to Holland and Belgium, they spent the rest of 1977 exposed to the melancholy atmosphere of the Low Countries, whose Spanish inheritance, with its residual flamboyance (observable in the architecture and carnivals), compounds so strangely with the haunted, misty, introverted spiritualism of Northern Europe. It was here, in contact with the paintings of Ensor and Bosch, and more especially with the Toone Marionette Theatre in Brussels, that they discovered the sinister beauty of masks, later to be put into effect in films like *Punch and Judy* and *The Eternal Day of Michel de Ghelderode*. And it was from Holland, that year, that they were recalled by a telegram from Keith Griffiths, deputy head of the BFI's Production Department, telling them that an application for money to make a film in England had been successful.

A puppet film, dense and cosmopolitan, *Nocturna Artificialia* extracts a strange lyricism from memories of the damp cobblestones of Brussels and Lodz, their haunted and ghostly churches, the clanking of their city trams. An elegant essay in alienation. Success of a sort – it won prizes in Finland – paved the way for their next film, *Punch and Judy*, a freewheeling account of the assimilation of the Italian puppets into English folklore. The film benefited from the structure and order brought by the writer Griffiths. For the first time the collaborators mixed their elements: mime, masque, painting, archive footage, finally (most ingeniously) opera – puppet highlights of a one-act drama by Harrison Birtwistle, first put on at Aldeburgh in 1968. 'Punch and Judy', then, as history lesson – but for adults rather than children. (It won the prize for the best foreign film at Annecy.)

Punch and Judy takes the ancient puppets and, as it were, shudders them back into life: shakes them with the frenzied singlemindedness that Punch

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himself, in the days of his prime, was accustomed to mete out on his victims. 'New life in old bones' might be the motto of this film about death. 'They have pulled out my Italian teeth one by one – fed me on saccharine to sweeten my homicide.' The film rummages in the origins of the myth to uncover, once more, the bitterness of its anti-bourgeois satire. As, in sweat-filled sleep, there is no hard and fast dividing line between the register of a dream and the register of a nightmare, but the one turns imperceptibly into the other, so the object of the film seems to have been to take the unexceptionable, anodyne, daylight gestures of Punch and infuse them with their old night-time horror. Two horrific murders, with quill and syringe, effect the translation from seaside cabinet booth to the cabinet of Freud or Caligari. And along with Punch – struggling, protesting and snarling – the whole party of dogs, wives, crocodiles, devils and hangmen.

Mark Le Fanu, 'Modern Eccentrism: The Austere Art of Atelier Koninck'

Sight and Sound, Spring 1984

Peter Greenaway on 'Street of Crocodiles'

The Quay Brothers' film *Street of Crocodiles* begins with a glob of spit. It falls from the mouth of an aged museum curator into the ambiguous mechanical parts of what used to be called a philosophical toy – one of those numerous, patented, primitive viewing-machines, precursors of the early cinema. This gift of human saliva, performing the same function as the finger of Michelangelo's God on Adam, animates a universe – a largely monochromatic universe – full of that intermittent stop and start, frenzy and frozen moment that takes you from Marey and Muybridge to Méliès, the three Ms of the cinema's poetic beginnings.

A neatly self-reflexive metaphor for the Quays to choose. And their Adam is a puppet somewhere between a single portrait of their double-selves and a portrait of – in this case – their own animator, Bruno Schulz, who, according to his English translator, was unattractive and sickly with a thin, angular body and deep-set eyes in a pale triangular face. This puppet has the sort of hair that reminds you of the sensation of bare knees on coconut matting and the sort of shabby black clothes associated with classroom chalk and ink. All very tactile and associative. Rust and dust, grime and slime, oil and blood. It irritates the nasal passages, dries out the natural oil of your palms, makes you want to cut your fingernails, sneeze and spit.

After considerable wandering amongst some of the more recherché heroes and idols of early 20th century Belgium and Czechoslovakia, the Brothers Quay have alighted in ideal territory – Drohobycz according to Schulz – a city of dark streets, ambiguous rites, abandoned stages, long nocturnal perspectives, creaking machines of dubious purpose, panic, boredom and melancholia.

Schulz wrote about his Polish birthplace in the 1930s in a way that Italo Calvino wrote about Venice in *Invisible Cities* – infinite fictional variations on a favourite city. Both authors could hardly be said to have written short stories with a narrative, more like descriptions with some narrative content. And so it is with the Quay Brothers' film. To ask for anything in the way of a neatly packaged story is to ask for the wrong thing.

Sight and Sound, Summer 1986