



## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

# Quay Brothers in Conversation

### Stephen and Timothy Quay

Born 17 June 1947  
Norristown, Pennsylvania, USA

Selected filmography

#### Feature Films

- 1995 **Institute Benjamenta, or This Dream People Call Human Life**  
2005 **The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes**  
2024 **Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass**

#### Short Films

- 1979 **Nocturne Artificialia: Those Who Desire Without End**  
1980 **Rain Dance** (for Sesame Street)  
**Punch and Judy: Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy**  
**Ein Brudermord**  
1981 **The Eternal Day of Michel de Ghelderode**  
1983 **Igor, The Paris Years Chez Pleyel**  
**Leoš Janáček: Intimate Excursions**  
1984 **The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer**  
1985 **The Epic of Gilgamesh, or This Unnameable Little Broom** (Little Songs of the Chief Officer of Hunar Louse, or This Unnameable Little Broom, being a Largely Disguised Reduction of the Epic of Gilgamesh)  
1986 **Street of Crocodiles**  
1988 **Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies**  
**Stille Nacht I: Dramolet**  
1989 **Ex-Voto**  
1990 **The Comb** (from The Museums of Sleep)  
1991 **De Artificiali Perspectiva, or Anamorphosis**  
**The Calligrapher** (ident commissioned by BBC2 which was later rejected and never broadcast)  
**Stille Nacht II: Are We Still Married?**  
1992 **Stille Nacht III: Tales from Vienna Woods**  
1993 **Stille Nacht IV: Can't Go Wrong Without You**  
1995 **The Summit**  
2000 **Duet**  
**The Sandman**  
**In Absentia**  
2001 **Stille Nacht V: Dog Door**  
2002 **Frida** (animated contribution, d. Julie Taymor)  
2003 **Songs for Dead Children**  
**The Phantom Museum: Random Forays into the Vaults of Sir Henry Wellcome's Medical Collection**  
2007 **Alice in Not So Wonderland**  
**Eurydice: She, So Beloved**  
2009 **Inventorium of Traces**  
2010 **Maska**  
2011 **Bartók Béla: Sonata for Solo Violin Through the Weeping Glass: On the Consolations of Life Everlasting** (Limbos & Afterbreezes in the Mütter Museum)  
2012 **The Metamorphosis**  
2013 **Unmistaken Hands: Ex Voto F.H.**  
2019 **The Doll's Breath**

Stephen and Timothy Quay, identical twins, were born in Norristown, near Philadelphia, in 1947. After graduating in 1969 from the Philadelphia College of Art, where they studied illustration and graphics, they won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, London. At the School of Film and Television they made their first short films (mostly lost), and met fellow student Keith Griffiths, who first collaborated with them on *Nocturna Artificialia* (1979), funded by the BFI Production Board. Working together as Koninck Studios, with Griffiths producing, the Quays have maintained a steady output of surreal and fastidious puppet animation films, supplemented by design work for opera, theatre and ballet. To help finance their avant-garde projects they have also worked on TV commercials, channel identification footage, and numerous music videos, including the *Stille Nacht* series, and, less characteristically, Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer*.

The Quays are renowned for their craftsmanlike methods and their unusual sources of inspiration. Apart from their puppets, which typically look like old dolls abused by many generations of children, they construct their own sets, arrange the lighting, and operate the cameras. The films draw heavily on twentieth-century European visual and literary culture, especially the surrealist and expressionist traditions represented by the Polish writer Bruno Schulz, the painter Max Ernst, and their fellow director of puppet films, the Czech Jan Svankmajer. As with Svankmajer, the Quays' cinema is short on conventional narrative but long on enigmatic visuals; music usually plays a major part in creating a bizarre, sinister atmosphere.

The world invented by the Quays appears frozen in time, covered with dust and cobwebs, full of mirrors and strange machinery – a world stored in a locked room or glass cabinet that nobody has accessed for decades. The colour scheme often suggests the hues of old photographs: sepias, browns, and dirty yellows predominate. *Nocturna Artificialia*, describing the cataleptic hero's adventures when he leaves his room for the city, immediately established their individual technique and propensity for dream narratives. Subsequent films in the early 1980s, made for the Arts Council or Channel 4, paid specific homage to the team's European influences, including the Punch and Judy tradition, the artistic vortex of 1920s Paris, Svankmajer, the Czech composer Janáček, and, in *Ein Brudermord*, the claustrophobic imagination of Franz Kafka.

The twenty-minute *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), their first film shot in 35mm, decisively lifted the Quays beyond the quasi-documentary orbit. The film is a homage to Bruno Schulz, one of whose novels bears the same title. The setting is a mythical land, somewhere in pre-Second World War provincial Poland, which operates like a living organism (Schulz in his work often compared a city to a living body). The population consists of people either half-dead or half-alive, with empty heads, who move in a circular, mechanical way, oblivious to anyone else's movements. The Quays suggest that this degraded land is stored in a deserted museum and activated by an old Kinetoscope machine – something that could be interpreted as a sign of their faith in the creative powers of cinema.

Further impressive film puzzles followed, among them *The Comb*, a sexually suggestive dream of damaged dolls, ladders, passageways, and a live-action woman (perhaps the dreamer), and *De Artificiali Perspectiva*, a quirky analysis

2020 **Vade mecum**  
2021 **11 Preliminary Orbits Around Planet Lem**

### Music Videos

1986 **Sledgehammer** – Peter Gabriel (1986) (animated contribution, d. Stephen R. Johnson)  
1991 **Stille Nacht II: Are We Still Married?** – His Name Is Alive  
1992 **Long Way Down** (Look What the Cat Drug In) – Michael Penn  
1993 **Stille Nacht IV: Can't Go Wrong Without You** – His Name Is Alive  
1996 **Black Soul Choir** – 16 Horsepower  
2001 **Stille Nacht V: Dog Door** - Sparklehorse  
2008 **Ubu Roi** – Pere Ubu – projected music video for live show  
2008-10 **Muslingauze** – DJ Spooky  
**Stille Nacht V: Starman** – Sabisha

### IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

**The Quay Brothers: Short Films + intro by The Quay Brothers**

Thu 12 Sep 20:40

**Robin of Sherwood: 40th Anniversary + Q&A with director Robert Young and actors Nikolas Grace, Philip Jackson and Phil Davies**

Sat 14 Sep 12:00

**Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI**

Mon 16 Sep 18:30; Mon 7 Oct 18:30

**Reece Shearsmith presents: The Elephant Man**

Tue 17 Sep 18:00

**The Thief and the Cobbler: A Moment in Time + Q&A with Imogen Sutton**

Sun 22 Sep 14:30

**Zardoz + Q&A with writer-director John Boorman**

Wed 18 Sep 18:00

**60th Anniversary Screening: Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb + Q&A with Armando Iannucci, Sean Foley and Steve Coogan**

Thu 26 Sep 18:10

**Funday Workshop: Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit**

Sun 29 Sep 10:30

**Funday: Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit + intro by Nick Park and Merlin Crossingham**

Sun 29 Sep 12:00

**Nick Park and Merlin Crossingham in Conversation**

Sun 29 Sep 14:15

**TV Preview: The Life and Deaths of Christopher Lee + Q&A with Peter Serafinowicz, director Jon Spira, producer Hank Starrs and Christopher Lee's biographer Jonathan Rigby**

Tue 1 Oct 18:00

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of the optical distortions of anamorphosis. Then in 1995 the Quays mounted their first live-action feature, *Institute Benjamenta*, inspired by the writings of the Swiss novelist Robert Walser. Like the *Street of Crocodiles*, the Benjamenta Institute for the training of domestic servants presents a sinister microcosm, with its inhabitants leading a half-life of repetitive, largely pointless activities. Typically, the presence of actors prompted no change in the brothers' stylistic approach: Mark Rylance, Alice Krige, and Gottfried John became willingly used as quasi-objects, scrupulously positioned alongside forks, stag horns and dripping water in a fascinating if static symphony of light and shade constructed on the prevailing Quay themes of death, decay, and nothingness.

Collaborations with the choreographer William Tuckett and their small insert in Julie Taymor's *Frida* (2002) have introduced wider audiences to the Quays; while *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* (2005), a live-action fairy-tale where a piano tuner attempts to rescue an opera singer from the clutches of a mad doctor in the Carpathian Mountains, is so bizarrely beautiful in its foggy, artificial, de-colourised way that it surely attracted new admirers. But the Quays remain director-animators for the cognoscenti – happy to live, like their films' characters and objects, in a remote, hermetic maze.

Ewa Mazierska, *Reference Guide to British and Irish Film Directors*, BFI Screenonline.org.uk

Animation is almost always an intricate, painstaking and laborious process, requiring patience from craftspeople and expectant audiences alike, but the 18-year-long wait for the latest feature film by stop-motion masters Stephen and Timothy Quay has been particularly tortuous.

It will please fans to hear, then, that the animation on their long-gestating project *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* is now well underway. The Brothers Quay describe the journey to this point, by email: 'Over the past dozen and a half years we have been slowly constructing decors along with the puppets, but then commissions would come along and we would set the project aside, coming back to it sporadically.' With funding finally obtained, they are now able to turn their full attention to the film. Inspired by Bruno Schulz's 1937 story 'Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass', *Sanatorium* sees the Quays return to the work of the Polish author almost 40 years after their unsettling and atmospheric *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), which was based on another of his tales. The source for *Sanatorium* (from a collection of Schulz stories famously adapted by Wojciech Has as *The Hourglass Sanatorium* in 1973) invokes a dreamlike atmosphere through the author's richly metaphorical prose. The Quays explain why they have returned to his work: 'With Schulz, it has always felt that there were things that still needed to be visually elaborated; [his] prose seemed to represent entire kingdoms of what animation "could" be capable of and also as a supreme challenge.'

A perfect pairing of source material and adaptor, then: an abstract text not suited for direct adaptation and a pair of filmmakers whose idiosyncratic style can take up that challenge. Where Has worked in live action, the Quays' approach is primarily 'funnelled through the kingdom of puppets', a world which is being conjured up at the brothers' London studio. When I ask the Quays a question about their filmmaking aesthetic, they are appropriately elusive in response, describing instead their process of 'the dizzying hours spent inching forwards the tiniest sliver of a second in order to make that lunatic journey around the circumference of an apple'. Their response to another question was more straightforward. Was there any particular inspiration for this film's visual style? 'No!' From the Brothers Quay, we wouldn't want it any other way.

Thomas Flew, *Sight and Sound*, June 2023