

"A reality that's just slightly sideways" – Dave Borthwick, bolexbrothers.

Jan Svankmajer has a lot to answer for.

In 1986 Michael O'Pray, Jayne Pilling, and Paul Taylor put together a BFI touring package under the banner 'Alchemists of the Surreal', which played around the UK over several months. In the same way that the scant handful of people who purchased 'The Velvet Underground & Nico' LP in 1967 or attended the Sex Pistols' Manchester gig in 1976 pretty much all went on to form bands, it seems that many among the audience exposed to this eye-opening programme may have been given a kickstart into entering the weird world of experimental animation. The 'Alchemists' selection showcased the short films of Prague's Svankmajer and his disciples, British-based Pennsylvanian twins the Brothers Quay. You can bet your bottom doll's head (with its top sliced off or broken) that more than a handful of entranced, shocked viewers will have stumbled away from those screenings intent on spreading the word, and on getting out the stop-motion cameras and searching thrift stores and litter bins for suitably eerie and forbidding props.

bolexbrothers was established in Bristol in the 1980s as an animation collective, a hub for local talent named after the popular Bolex brand of camera used for decades by entry-level budding amateur auteurs. By the early 1990s the studio was officially a company, and work had commenced on a handful of shorts plus their ambitious hour-long mini-feature, 'The Secret Adventures of Tom Thumb', directed by one of the bolexbrothers founders Dave Borthwick. Any suggestion in the title that this might be a slice of family-friendly whimsy based on old English folklore is soon dispelled by its gloomy post-industrial setting, not to mention a title character who comes across almost as the dark side of Morph (Aardman's celebrated creation who became a popular hit with viewers of BBC tv's 'Take Hart' series), perhaps infused with DNA from the mewling infant in 'Eraserhead'. The 'Tom Thumb' legend is transplanted to a grim, toxic wasteland blanketed in a layer of grime – contemporary British science fiction cinema certainly exhibited a penchant for such settings, as seen in 'Hardware' (1990) and 'Split Second' (1992) amongst others – and a Svankmajerian milieu is evinced through the depiction of a sinister laboratory imprisoning captive skeletal experimental subjects of various shapes, sizes and bone structures.

Flies, spiders, roaches, lizards, and butterflies flit or crawl menacingly through the entire hour. Insects and the shadows of insects are a constant, dancing irritation, and even the human participants have a stilted, disjointed quality to their movements (which may result from alternate frame removal, or possibly from a painstaking procedure of frame-by-frame photography, using real actors rather than armatured fantasy creatures). Passing, fleetingly-glimpsed components that play no direct part but which add immeasurably to the murky ambience include the truly shocking sight of a crucified Santa, and a piece of creepy-crawly 'living jewellery' adorning a female customer in the on-the-verge-of-collapse local pub; and those flies make a chilling late reappearance, threatening to defile an otherwise idyllic closing tableau.

Despite 'The Secret Adventures of Tom Thumb' proving a critical success and festival hit worldwide, winning over a dozen awards, bolexbrothers were unable to follow with further feature production. The remainder of the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century saw them focusing upon development of short films, as well as those standbys, music videos and advertisements – the studio made commercials for Budweiser, Chupa Chups, Lego, and Fanta, amongst others, though admittedly even Svankmajer had pursued this route, with his peerless 'Možnosti dialogu' / 'Dimensions of Dialogue' (the undoubted sensation of the 'Alchemists of

the Surreal' programme) being homaged in one of the innovative series of late 1980s ads for McEwan's lager, and Svankmajer himself offering up a sort of condensed 'greatest hits' compilation as a promo video to support the release of 'Another Kind of Love', a 1988 solo single from Hugh Cornwell of The Stranglers.

In 2005, bolexbrothers became rather unlikely partners within the mass of UK financiers and French companies involved in the big screen revival of 'The Magic Roundabout' – what's more, Borthwick and animator Frank Passingham co-directed this major theatrical release, in tandem with experienced French layout artist Jean Duval. A glut of damning reviews, and tinkering by the American distributors (who released it as 'Doogal', amongst other misguided changes), coupled with the film failing to live up to the childhood memories and expectations of older audience members, saw this poisoned chalice ultimately picking up a poor reputation – though bolexbrothers devotees, if such entities happen to exist, will find stray elements to 'enjoy'. Borthwick and fellow bolexbrother Dave Alex Riddett immediately began work on 'Grass Roots', a proposed stop-motion feature based on the underground comic strip 'The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers', but after shooting some early test footage the promised production funds ran dry and it seems this one has entered 'development hell'. 'The Secret Adventures of Tom Thumb' promised so much that it would be a shame if we fail to hear from Borthwick and co. again.

Darrell Buxton

Darrell is a cult film historian and editor of the books 'The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969' (nominated for a British Fantasy Society award in 2011) and 'Dead Or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989'. He is a freelance film journalist and lecturer, has written reviews and in-depth articles for publications including Samhain, Shivers, and Giallo Pages, and is co-author of the screenplay for 2018 feature film Oujageist.

