

DANNY TREJO INTERVIEW: "MY MOTHER LOVED MACHETE!"

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AND POST-IT NOTES

THE TALL GUY

THE TALE OF THE FIRST
RICHARD CURTIS FILM

**WRITING FOR
FRIEDKIN**

WHEN THE DIRECTOR OF
THE EXORCIST CALLS

SIMON BIRD

EXCLUSIVE: from *THE INBETWEENERS* to movie director with

DAYS OF THE BAGNOLD SUMMER

INDIE CINEMAS: HOW THEY'RE SET TO FIGHT BACK

SHOULD IT HAVE EVER HAPPENED?

In 1988, The Pet Shop Boys starred in their own feature film – and this is the story of how it came to be, from the people who made it...

Words: Owen Williams

The Beatles made *A Hard Day's Night*. The Monkees made *Head*. Slade made *In Flame*. Talking Heads made *Stop Making Sense*. And in 1988, though you may have missed it, The Pet Shop Boys starred in their own theatrically released feature film.

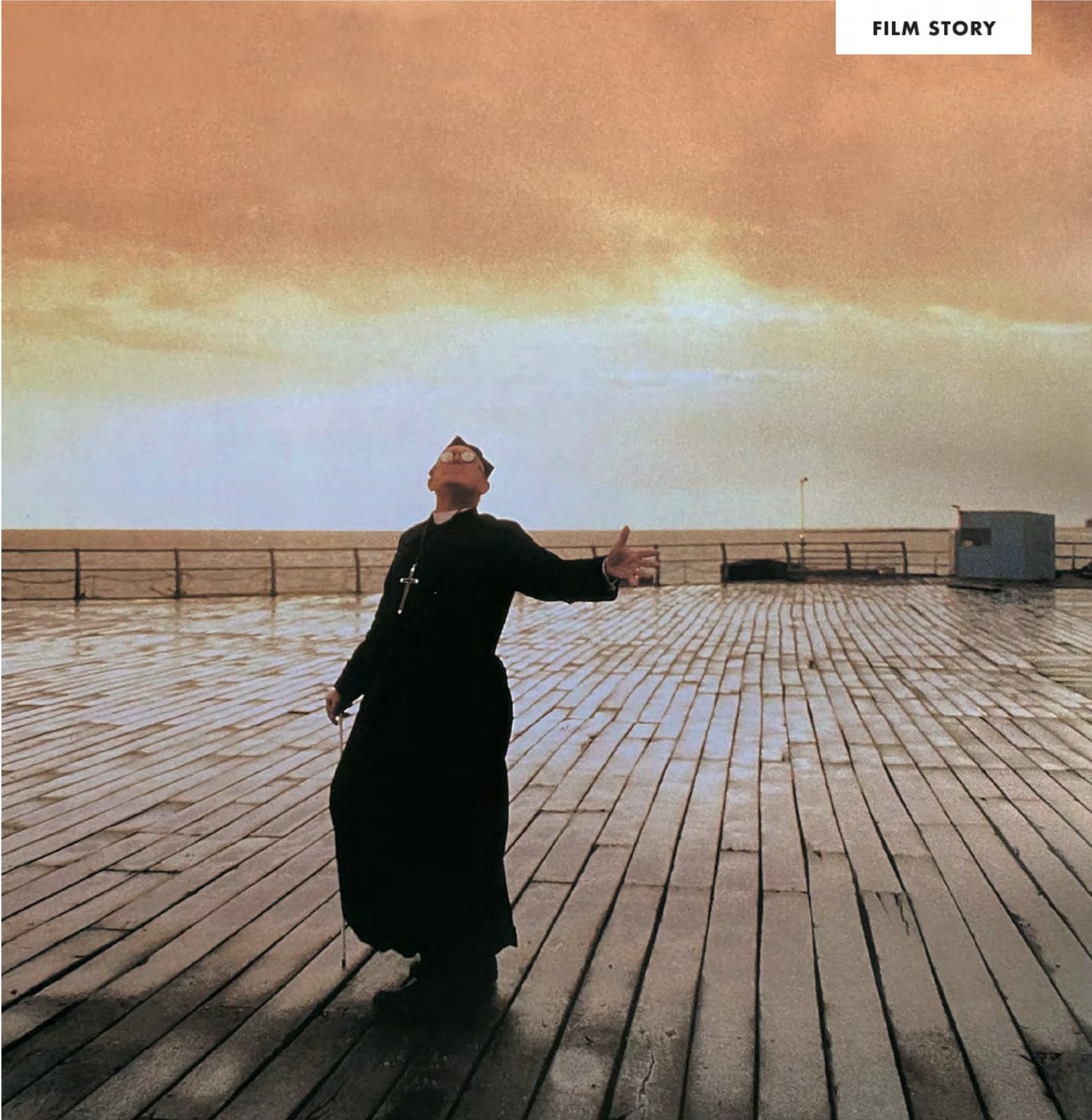
It Couldn't Happen Here was initially conceived as a video showcase for songs from the albums *Please* and *Actually*, but grew in the telling, morphing into an 'event' for dedicated fans of a band that, at the time, were reluctant to play live. Filtered through the arthouse sensibilities of director Jack Bond, it took Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe – playing versions of themselves – on a surreal road trip through an England in which time is liminal: Margaret Thatcher's bleak 1980s co-existing with half-remembered childhood seafronts and boarding houses, Catholic schools and greasy-spoon cafes.

Neil Dickson, two years previously the star of the adventure movie *Biggles*, plays a rather familiar-looking WWI fighter pilot, as well as a chauffeur in Regency costume and a used car salesman in a literally flashy suit. Gareth Hunt is a ventriloquist (with an existentialist dummy),

a joke salesman and the proprietor of a Clacton tea shack. Barbara Windsor, evoking the Carry On spirit, is a bed-and-breakfast landlady and the star of a pier-end What-The-Butler-Saw machine. And Joss Ackland is a blind priest in high heels and a serial killer with a line in corny jokes. The dialogue at various points quotes Milton, Boethius and Lewis Carroll. There are biker gangs, Benny Hill women and businessmen on fire. *Strictly's* Arlene Philips was the choreographer.

It's an enjoyable mess, balancing on a precarious wire between pleasing silliness and irksome pretension. But while a VHS version followed a short run in cinemas, *It Couldn't Happen Here* has largely never been seen since: denied a disc or digital release; an obscure footnote in The Pet Shop Boys' career.

Until now. Somewhat extraordinarily, a BFI Blu-ray arrives in June, with its restoration overseen by the director himself. The 30th anniversary might have seemed the obvious opportunity, but fittingly the 'lost' Pet Shop Boys movie was genuinely missing at the time. "We were looking in the wrong cupboard," chuckles Bond. Here, he and his key collaborators cast



their minds back over the making of the film, and how it came to be...

PART ONE: “I’m looking for a partner, regardless of expense...”

JACK BOND (DIRECTOR): Neil Tennant had been watching television, I think. He saw a *South Bank Show* I had made for ITV with Roald Dahl, and he liked the feeling of that.

NEIL DICKSON (ACTOR): That was another very Jack, out there project.

BOND: So then I got a call from PMI, Picture Music International, wholly owned by EMI, and I was asked to go in for a meeting with them to discuss making what became *It Couldn’t Happen Here*. I made it up a lot as I went along. We did have a script, which I co-wrote with James Dillon.

JAMES DILLON (ART DIRECTOR): My credit probably should have been Production Designer, but PMI being a video and commercials company, they called you Art Director. When they put the film out they gave

me that strange credit. And Jack and I wrote what script there was.

DICKSON: We all had the same agent at the time: me and Joss Ackland and Jack and Gareth Hunt. It was all a bit of an agency package.

BOND: PMI asked me if I'd mind shooting the film on 35mm. I told them to try and keep me away from it. So we had magnificent equipment.

My usual cinematographer, Peter Sinclair, was doing something in South Africa. I hadn't worked

with Simon [Archer] before but he was terrific. And he had a lot to do...

SIMON ARCHER (CINEMATOGRAPHER): I was shooting a lot of music videos at the time, quite a few for PMI. I met Jack for a beer in Maida Vale somewhere, and he said, "You haven't done anything, have you?" And he was right, I hadn't.

But I was young and ignorant and brave and leapt into it. I wanted to make movies. This was a set of music videos with some dramatic sequences, essentially, so it was quite a nice transition for my first film.



THE NAME'S BOND

PART TWO: "I know it sounds ridiculous..."

BOND: They [PMI] were completely unconcerned about the cost. That was made plain to me very early on. "Oh blow the money, money's no problem. Don't talk about money!" It was absolutely fantastic. Extraordinary. I've failed all my life to understand and appreciate money, and as time went by people made allowances for this.

ARCHER: [Laughs] I had the impression that they were concerned, but they didn't really have any way of controlling Jack.

DILLON: The Pet Shop Boys were also big, so people believed in it and wanted to do it, and probably if you compared it to the cost of a tour, it felt like a good enough risk. It was a lot more money than a *South Bank Show*, and I think it was about a three-week shoot. But it was a tough shoot because we were fairly under-prepped.

BOND: James and I worked each day building the framework of it, in the office I had at Pinewood Studios. It was such a romantic life then. You'd go through the famous Pinewood arch – which you can't do now; you have to go round the back through a car park – and on the right was this lawn and on the lawn was a cottage, and that's where we wrote the film. We just sat there and made it up each day.

DILLON: It wasn't originally intended as a sort of video LP, and as such we probably approached it more as a collection of ideas rather than anything that had to have a cohesive story. I think later, when it was decided that it would be released as a feature film, there was more of an effort to try and put some kind of narrative arc into it. The voiceover came later, for example, to try and link things a bit more.

BOND: The songs would provide a springboard, and then we'd try to create a visual logic – or as logical as it could possibly be. It's nostalgia and the compression of time: past, present and future squashed into one moment as it unfolds. The

Director, artist, fisherman and, by his own account, international playboy: Jack Bond has not led an ordinary life. "Life twists and turns," he shrugs, "and sometimes you're vaguely in the right place. You wouldn't want things to be predictable. You've got to be light on your feet."

At the BBC in the early '60s, he filmed Bob Dylan while working on the *Sunday-Night Play* titled 'The Madhouse on Castle Street' (sadly now lost, like so many BBC productions of that era). In the late '60s and early '70s, he collaborated on the extraordinary experimental films of director Jane Arden: *Separation*, *The Other Side of the Underneath* and *Anti-Clock*. His eclectic *South Bank Shows* from the early '80s onwards covered subjects ranging from Roald Dahl, Albert Camus, Werner Herzog, Patricia Highsmith and, er, Catherine Cookson. The film on Dahl was praised by David Lean.

Bond was also one of comparatively few filmmakers to win the cooperation of Salvador Dali, for the 1966 BBC documentary *Dali in New York*. "He agreed that I could meet him, but that I must put out of my mind any idea of filming him," recalls the maverick director of the eccentric artist. "I said, 'Yes, I completely understand,' and he looked phased by that; disconcerted. He said, 'If you were to have made a film with me – which you will not, you understand – what would have been your purpose?' I had prepared a speech in my head but instead I suddenly heard myself saying something about putting an electric drill through his head. He just froze and stared at the wall. I was thinking I needed to get on a plane quick. And then he pointed at me and said, 'I will make a film with you!'"

Away from work, he talks wistfully of Bentleys and yachts and outrageous leisure. "I did start an autobiography once, but then I thought, hang about, my children are going to read this," he laughs. "Half the fun of my life has been being surrounded by wonderful people who I enjoyed. Otherwise what's the point?"

pilot is a great model for that stuff. I loved him. Neil had played Biggles a couple of years earlier. That was why we cast him.

DICKSON: At the time I wondered if it was a bit cheeky to be playing Biggles On Acid. It was so out there. The sound mixer was a guy called Paul Le Mare, who had done *Biggles*. He and I had a laugh about that. In *Biggles* I actually did go up in the aeroplane. In *It Couldn't Happen Here*, the plane I was in didn't leave the ground.

DILLON: We had used a Spitfire in the Roald Dahl *South Bank Show*, and all of that was done by Tony Bianci Aviation, down in Booker. So for this we thought, "Let's see if Tony can give us a bi-plane!" We shot the war scenes where the Dome is now, Becton Gas Works, where Kubrick shot *Full Metal Jacket*.

PART THREE: "Who do you think you are?"

BOND: Both Neil and Chris were models of good conduct. We never heard an irritable word. They were superb and tranquil and a pleasure to be with. They were happy to go along with what

me and Jim told them to do – which is how it should be isn't it? They must have liked it or they wouldn't have been so cooperative.

DILLON: I think with guys like them when they do promo videos, they'll turn up and somebody will have a concept and they'll either go with it or not. With this, because it was all to do with them not wanting to tour but wanting to do something for the fans, I think they went along with this idea of a road journey and their childhoods. They may have talked about spending time at the seaside on holidays, or Catholic priests, but I wouldn't vouch for it being autobiographical. Those memories were probably ours as much as theirs.

DICKSON: We started talking before the scene where I'm quoting Milton's *Lycidas*. I asked how it was going to work, how they were going to have them singing and me talking, and Neil said, "Well... it'll be like we always do it. I'll be miming." I said "Ohhhh, you'll be miming!" and he looked at me as if I was the dumbest guy he'd ever met. And of course they were brilliant at miming.

BOND: Barbara Windsor loved them already. She was a big fan, and they thought she was wonderful. Carmen Du Sautoy was one of my favourites. The huge discovery for me was Gareth Hunt. He was inspired. When Chris and Neil are laughing at him in the cafe scene, that's absolutely real. That was unrehearsed. Gareth knew what he was

doing, of course, but they were unprepared for his performance. I hoped to meet him again, and somebody told me he'd died. I couldn't believe it.

DICKSON: I loved Joss Ackland, although I didn't have any scenes with him. I met him at a screening and he'd obviously enjoyed it. He was at a stage of his career where he was all guns blazing. He must have wondered what his agent had got him into.

BOND: I couldn't enjoy Joss. He was a miserable old sod, just grumbling and moaning all day long.

DILLON: It was probably because Joss wanted to know what was happening. He'd have wanted to know what it was all about.

ARCHER: I think they were a bit naughty in stealing jokes. That gag about Salvador Dali's dotted line is a straight lift from Steven Wright, I'm pretty sure. I can imagine Joss, as a thesp of a certain standing, might well have had some... thoughts.

PART FOUR: "Let's not go home..."

DILLON: The extraordinary thing about the Rent sequence was that it was shot on the night of the Great Storm [15-16 October 1987]. I think we were probably the only film unit in London that was still working – in an industrial refinery in Rotherhithe. The rain and the wind were unbelievable.

BOND: The corrugated iron was flying off the building and twirling in the air like newspaper. If you watch the dancers' faces during that scene, they're all slightly distorted from the wind. My assistant was very concerned. I could tell because he started calling me Sir.

ARCHER: We had all this steam and smoke and splatterings of rain and all this stuff, and it was really working visually for us. But the refinery's own electricity went down, and consequently the thousands of gallons of water that are there to refine the sugar being pumped through every hour, couldn't go anywhere, and so the water level around us started to



IT SHOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED

Less than enthusiastic about the prospect of “a pop movie, the ultimate folly” was the Pet Shop Boys’ own manager at the time. In his 2016 autobiography *Let’s Make Lots of Money*, the late, greatly outspoken Tom Watkins recalled feelings that were far from mixed.

“Not all of their ideas were impeccable. Most of them were, but a few were horribly pretentious. A question that I used so much that it became a bit of a catchphrase [was]: ‘What would Edna from Huddersfield think?’

During their golden year... they had planned to make a video album of *Actually*, but that turned into this. I just didn’t get it. The Pet Shop Boys had hardly put a foot wrong since ‘West End Girls’ and I thought this was a great big boot stomp in the wrong direction. But you can’t tell pop stars anything, especially when they are riding high on the crest of a wave of success. This was going to be an arty, audacious monument to the Pet Shop Boys’ imperial phase. Neil thought it should have been called *Escape from Suburbia*. They decided to call it *It Couldn’t Happen Here*. And it shouldn’t have happened – here, there or bloody anywhere.

They held an exclusive preview. I squirmed in my cinema seat as I watched the film, which seemed to last an eternity. Finally it was over. Muted, obligatory applause filled the auditorium. Everyone gathered around Neil and Chris and tried to change the subject quickly.

The film was the first real setback for the Pet Shop Boys since the disappointing chart performance of ‘Love Comes Quickly’. But they speedily busied themselves with getting back to what they did best: making great, intelligent pop records with sexy, stylish sleeves.” *Let’s Make Lots of Money: My Life as the Biggest Man in Pop* by Tom Watkins is published in the UK by Virgin.

rise. We then had to get the lights up off the ground, up onto gantries and walkways. It was potentially pretty dangerous. Jack just looked at me and said, “Courage, boy! Courage!” He wasn’t phased at all. Nobody died, fortunately. We drove back the next morning to our homes through this destroyed, post-apocalyptic landscape!

DILLON: We’d already had some really heavy weather the week before, when we were filming the seaside stuff in Clacton. We tried to film stuff on the pier, but the waves were literally pushing the boards up. So when we went later and filmed that other stuff, it just felt like we were used to it!

ARCHER: That sequence moves from day to night. It wasn’t supposed to look like a big transition. We’d been there all day, but that wasn’t the intention. And yet it sort of works, and nobody cares.

PART FIVE: “Now it almost seems impossible...”

DICKSON: It was quite radical. Nobody knew what was going on. Is there a message in it? I’m not sure. It’s mathematical puzzles and Hawking and Einstein and rock and roll all rolled into one. It’s very visual. I’d almost say there are elements of Fellini and Satyricon in it. Bizarre people navigating themselves through strange circumstances. “We’re going to put you in this jacket with loads of lights on.” Oh okay...

ARCHER: It was a wander through Thatcher’s Britain, sticking two fingers up and saying ‘look what you’ve brought us to.’ That was how I viewed it. With a *Biggles* spoof thrown in for good measure, and using the Pet Shop Boys’ music, which had its own political points. They kind of came through it as commentators above the whole thing. There was a certain English, surreal sensibility going on. We indulged that wherever possible. I don’t think we wanted to make it look too seaside-British-comedy, but inevitably some of that Carry On stuff crept in.

BOND: I didn’t know what they were going to do with it. I thought it might be for television. Instead of which, I was on an aeroplane flying

back to England from New York, and they had the English newspapers on board the plane, and I was astonished to see a full-page advertisement, and it said, “At a cinema near you!” I thought, “What are they talking about?”

DILLON: To a wider general audience just going to the cinema, it would have seemed really strange. But of course the soundtrack is astonishingly good. All those songs are fantastic. They’re great, classic songs.

ARCHER: I thought it was for Pet Shop Boys completists only. Only a very small cohort of my friends and family saw it when it came out.

BOND: We had a screening at The Regent Street Cinema last year. It was sold out. It was astonishing. I decided it was one of the best films ever made. I didn’t think it was weird at all, but you couldn’t make something like that now. We took every risk in the book, and we didn’t know if it was working or not. But we loved doing it.

It Couldn’t Happen Here is released by the BFI in a Blu-ray / DVD combo pack on 15 June. The Pet Shop Boys have refused any and all interviews in support of the release.