

# THE PIANO TUNER OF EARTHQUAKES

A FILM BY THE QUAY BROTHERS



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

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THE PIANO TUNER OF EARTHQUAKES is the breathtakingly beautiful and long-awaited second feature from the Quay Brothers. On the eve of her wedding, the beautiful opera singer Malvina is mysteriously killed and abducted by a malevolent Dr. Droz. Felisberto, an innocent piano tuner, is summoned to Droz's secluded villa to service his strange musical automatons. Little by little Felisberto learns of the doctor's plans to stage a "diabolical opera" and of Malvina's fate. He secretly conspires to rescue her, only to become trapped himself in the web of Droz's perverse universe...

Starring Amira Casar (Catherine Breillat's ANATOMY OF HELL), Assumpta Serna (Pedro Almodovar's MATADOR), Cesar Sarachu (the Quays' INSTITUTE BENJAMENTA) and Gottfried John (Fassbinder's MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN).

# THE QUAY BROTHERS

The extraordinary Quay Brothers are two of the world's most original filmmakers. Identical twins who were born in Pennsylvania in 1947, Stephen and Timothy Quay studied illustration in Philadelphia before going on to the Royal College of Art in London, where they started to make animated shorts in the 1970s. They have lived in London ever since, making their unique and innovative films under the aegis of Koninck Studios.

Influenced by a tradition of Eastern European animation, the Quays display a passion for detail, a breathtaking command of color and texture, and an uncanny use of focus and camera movement that make their films unique and instantly recognizable. Best known for their classic 1986 film *STREET OF CROCODILES*, which filmmaker Terry Gilliam recently selected as one of the ten best animated films of all time, they are masters of miniaturization and on their tiny sets have created an unforgettable world, suggestive of a landscape of long-repressed childhood dreams. In 1994, with *INSTITUTE BENJAMENTA*, they made their first foray into live-action feature-length filmmaking.

The Quays have also directed pop promos for His Name is Alive, Michael Penn, Sparklehorse, 16 Horsepower, and Peter Gabriel (contributing to his celebrated "Sledgehammer" video), and have also directed ground-breaking commercials for, among others, MTV, Nikon, Murphy's Beer and Slurpee.

The Quays' work also includes set design for theatre and opera. In 1998 their Tony-nominated set designs for Ionesco's *The Chairs* won great acclaim on Broadway.

In 2000 they made *IN ABSENTIA*, an award-winning collaboration with Karlheinz Stockhausen, as well as two dance films, *DUET* and *THE SANDMAN*. In 2002 they contributed an animated dream sequence to Julie Taymor's film *FRIDA*.

In 2003 the Quays made four short films in collaboration with composer Steve Martland for a live event at the Tate Modern in London and in 2005 premiered their second feature film, *THE PIANO TUNER OF EARTHQUAKES*, at the Locarno Film Festival.

# THE QUAY BROTHERS ON THE PIANO TUNER OF EARTHQUAKES

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN ROMNEY

***JR: The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes is recognisably a Brothers Quay film in its images and textures, but it's also a narrative film, in the high fantastic tradition. What ideas and images inspired it?***

QB: The aim was to make something like poetic science fiction. We were very inspired by the novella “The Invention of Morel” by the Argentinian writer Adolfo Bioy Casares, which merges the fantastic and an element of science fiction, on a very poetic level. In the end, in fact, the film came to be much closer to Jules Verne’s story “Le Château des Carpates” (Carpathian Castle). It’s about a famous opera singer abducted by an obsessive Baron who takes her to the Carpathian Mountains. Her lover looks for her and finds out that a voice has been heard in this chateau. When he goes in, he sees her singing – but when he tries to save her, he realises it was all projections on glass that shatters.

The other inspiration is Raymond Roussel’s novel “Locus Solus”, which features these strange machine-like tableaux vivants. Droz is obviously Canterel, the inventor in Roussel’s “Locus Solus”, who guides us through his estate, showing off each tableau vivant and explaining it. We took the name Droz from Pierre Jacquet-Droz, a famous automaton maker of the 1700s—and by itself, Droz sounded like a science fiction name.

The film starts with a quote from Sallust (c. 86-34 BC), which really encapsulates everything: “These things never happen, but are always.” It’s the idea that there are powerful forces which are controlling and shaping people’s destinies. Then there’s this interloper, Felisberto—an innocent who incarnates the liberating Orphic spirit. He arrives to realise that there’s something powerful being perpetrated by Dr Droz, who’s victimising the innocent Malvina. That’s the Bluebeard’s Castle element—the innocent wanders into the forest to free the ‘princess’. And Droz sees what he’s doing and interpolates him into his plan.

***Why have you moved into making live action features rather than animation shorts?***

The idea was to force more animation into the features to combine it with live action. We wanted to push that further here. In a sense, it’s like having live actors walk around puppet sets. We want that integration – or disintegration at times, because there’s also a slippage where you’re hoping that the puppet realm is pushing into the live action realm, or vice versa. We were going for an in-between state, where you’re not sure which world you’re in.

***You’ve always used dolls and automaton figures, and this film is haunted by Droz’s mechanical creations. Why do we find the old mechanical automata so fascinating and uncanny, when we seem to be blasé about the commonplace science fiction of robots?***

The crucial thing about automata is their enchantment. They can be extremely sophisticated but at the same time very basic in terms of what they can do. They’re usually condemned to remain in a loop of actions that they can’t go outside. We based the Woodchopper in this film on an old ex-voto

painting: he basically calls out ‘Timber!’ and chops the tree down, but by accident cuts his leg instead, bleeds into a pool, and then it all starts all over again – he jumps up and he’s chopping again. It’s a very simple loop but there’s a lot of genuine enchantment.

***You usually work with models in your own workshop. Here you worked on a set in Leipzig, with human actors and sets on a human scale. What were the pleasures and challenges of moving outside your usual domain?***

It’s like when we design opera decors, working on a scale of 1: 25, and then suddenly see it on a stage blown up 25 times bigger there’s a bizarre pleasure in that. In Leipzig, although we were working in a huge studio, a lot of the decor was only partially built: the rest was green-screened, then digitally blended. We designed it so that all interiors could be done on one stage: we needed a seafront, and a bit of a forest, and one chapel for the automata, which became seven, as we shifted the décor round. It was conceived very theatrically. This is the first time we really went for digital – we shot it in Hi-Def, and simultaneously married the animation, which was all shot on a digital Nikon stills camera.

***This is the second feature you’ve made with actors, following *Institute Benjamenta*. How did you choose your cast, and what sort of actors fit your unusual film world?***

We like using actors not only when they’re talking, but also for those certain looks that they transmit. They can get you past dialogue into other realms.

We originally wrote the Assumpta part for Assumpta Serna ten years ago. We wanted a very seductive, entrancing character for this role: her carnality appealed to us. Amira Casar has this real porcelain beauty: we were fascinated by the idea of her immobility, which of course, is usually hard for an actress to accept. Her mother was an opera singer—so Amira was very knowledgeable about opera.

We love Gottfried John’s stature, his aloofness and regalness. We saw him for the first time in Fassbinder’s 25-part *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and we cast him in *Institute Benjamenta*, because we needed someone remote and a bit of an ogre character.

Cesar Sarachu was also in *Institute Benjamenta*, and his character Felisberto is like Jakob in that film, the figure who walks into the maelstrom. Cesar worked with Théâtre de Complicité; he studied under the mime teacher Jacques Lecoq, and looked into the notion of the clown. He has an innocence and a real comic turn.

***As usual, your film contains a lot of visual references to the art and architecture of the past.***

The chief reference is the painting *Island of the Dead* (1880), by the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin. The setting had to be remote: it had to feel like it really was the Isle of the Dead, or even like the island in Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* – locked off, utterly remote. The estate felt like some secluded Portuguese villa. There’s one place in Portugal called Buçaco where we immediately imagined automata in the form of the stations of the cross. The Portuguese Baroque was a big influence, and the whole earthquake theme was very pertinent to Portugal, because of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

Another reference was the famous Magritte painting *The Empire of Light*, where it’s daytime in the sky and night down below. Of course the landscape, when we created it as a model, was made of cork – we matted those images in, and added sky and water digitally.

***For a long time, you worked as a duo, but your cinematographer Nic Knowland seemed to adapt very naturally to your vision when he worked with you on *Institute Benjamenta*. How did your collaboration evolve on this film?***

We've worked with Nic on a couple of commercials and ballets, as well as *Institute Benjamenta*, so we've always been exploring things with him. We're merciless about framing, but Nic really loosened up the camera on this film. On *Institute Benjamenta*, we had it locked off – here it was more sensuous. Planning with Nic, we knew we were required to shoot in colour and so we said, “OK, then we'll design in black and white, then the only colour will be in the costumes, the faces and the sea and the sky.”

***Music has always been important in your films, and this one is particularly operatic. What were your musical ideas here?***

For the opera that Droz composes, we needed a unique sound world, a sort of anti-opera because he's rejected by the established opera world. So he does his take on the Nissi Domini of Vivaldi—a kind of Schnittke-esque take on opera. That's the theme you hear at the beginning and it's composed by Christopher Slaski.

The other music is by Trevor Duncan, who's a very agile composer. If you want music for sailing he's done it, he's done thriller music, and you can just buy them off the shelf. We had a plan to use library music and we've known for more than 40 years that his was the music that Chris Marker used in *La Jetée*. We use the same music here—it was originally written for a ballet in the late 1950s.

***It's not just the music that's haunting, though: there's a whole range of sound design that contributes to the uncanny nature of this film's universe.***

We were looking for the ambience of the remote island – for those states where you felt that the automata realm was starting to contaminate the human world. We use certain sounds—drones—to create an atmosphere of psychic confusion. The sounds float down and multiply and create a sense of depth. We wanted a dream state at times, where you felt that the automata were dreaming the people. We wanted to create a dirtier sound world, one that was almost deliberately mono, that pushed out to the limits of 'Scope.

***The most bizarre image in the film is inspired by the 'Stink Ant' of Cameroon (*Megaloponera foetens*) – one of the pseudo natural history exhibits in the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, an exhibition of apocryphal wonders.***

The story is that there rains down a fungus of spores and the poor unsuspecting ant walks along the ground, inhales the spore, suddenly detours, climbs the stalk and dies, because its brain matter has been eaten by this fungus—which then excretes a spike that rains further spores for the next unsuspecting ant... It's all very convincingly documented, but as you leave that museum you say to yourself, it's all faked. It's purely a museum of the imagination. We wrote to David Wilson, who runs the Museum and asked if we could use it and it became the essential core of *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*. We wrote it into the script, seeing it as a metaphor for Droz's world – an allegory of madness.

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## CAST

Malvina van Stille AMIRA CASAR  
Dr. Emmanuel Droz GOTTFRIED JOHN  
Assumpta ASSUMPTA SERNA  
Felisberto / Adolfo CESAR SARACHU  
Gardener Holz LJUBISA LUPO-GRUJCIC  
Gardener Marc MARC BISCHOFF  
Gardener Henning HENNING PEKER  
Gardener Echeverria GILLES GAVOIS  
Gardener Volker VOLKER ZACK  
Gardener Thomas THOMAS SCHMIEDER

Directors QUAY BROTHERS

Producers KEITH GRIFFITHS, ALEXANDER RIS, HENGAMEH PANAHI

Scenario ALAN PASSES & QUAY BROTHERS

Costume Designer KANDIS COOK

Editor SIMON LAURIE

Director of Photography NIC KNOWLAND BSC

Music TREVOR DUNCAN & CHRISTOPHER SLASKI

Director of Sound LARRY SIDER

Art Director ERIC VEENSTRA

Line Producer BJÖRN EGGERT

Direction Design Animation QUAY BROTHERS

Executive Producer TERRY GILLIAM

Executive Producer for UK Film Council PAUL TRIJBITS

Senior Executive for the New Cinema Fund EMMA CLARKE

Co-Producers for Mediopolis Alexander RIS & JÖRG ROTHE

Associate Producer for MCA MICHAEL BECKER

Associate Producer for ARTE France Cinema MICHEL REILHAC & RÉMI BURAH

Associate Producer for ZDF/ARTE MEINOLF ZURHORST & EVA KAMMERER

Production companies

KONINCK STUDIOS PTE,  
MEDIOPOLIS FILM- UND FERNSEHPRODUKTION,  
LUMEN FILMS

Co-Production companies

ARTE FRANCE, CINÉMAZDF/ARTE

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INGENIOUS FILMS LTD., MEDIA I2I, TOHOKUSHINSHA FILM CORPORATION,  
VCC PERFECT PICTURES

**UK/Germany/France • 2005 • 99 mins • Color and B&W • Dolby SRD  
In English • Aspect ratio: Cinemascope (2.35:1)**

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247 CENTRE ST • 2ND FL • NEW YORK • NY 10013

www.zeitgeistfilms.com • mail@zeitgeistfilms.com

(212) 274-1989 • FAX (212) 274-1644