

Daryl Runswick: *No Surrender*, a memoir

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The British film *No Surrender* (Dumbarton Films with Film Four) scripted by Alan Bleasdale and with music by Daryl Runswick was released in 1985. It opened at the Odeon, Haymarket in London. It was subsequently issued on VHS but never made it to DVD. Halliwell's Film Guide actually gives it one star.

When I was offered the job of writing the music to *No Surrender* I was elated and highly optimistic: here was a film written by perhaps the hottest TV dramatist of the time, Alan Bleasdale: his script had its heart in exactly the right (left) place and read wonderfully: this was almost certainly going to be an artistic and box office success: it was bound to receive enormous attention: and my career as a movie composer was about to take off big time.

No Surrender was my second feature film, and my last. It bombed. It is (looking again in 2003) not that bad but it doesn't know where it stands between comedy and thriller and it muffs quite a few things it should have got right. My music is quite good, actually: but as Tom Wilkinson memorably pointed out, you can be good in as many flops as you like, you'll only be taken seriously when you're good in a hit.

What went wrong? I think there was a chain of mistakes, some smaller, some larger, that contributed from the word go.

The script This starts out like a typical British Thriller, bleak, realist, political. The first five scenes (Billy McCracken and the Ulsterman, Mike approaching the Charleston Club, Paddy attacked in the underpass, the villains throwing McCarthur into the rubbish, and Billy and the Ulsterman finding the police stakeout) are unremittingly cold and violent. The intended humour – the obvious incompetence of the Ulsterman, the children's precocious (Thatcherite) corruption, the blind Paddy overcoming muggers etc – doesn't push through. By the time we get to the first scene which contains a real possibility of a laugh (the two pensioners getting ready for the fancy dress competition) it's too late: we're not in the mood and we find the scene surreal and unaccountable; and it is in any case quickly subverted by the irruption of the police, which we (sympathising with the old couple) find frightening, not comical. From this point onward Bleasdale is fighting an uphill battle to make us laugh at all (and he does intend us to laugh: the published script [Faber and Faber, 1986] subtitles the work 'a deadpan farce'). Whether this getting off on the wrong foot is all the script's fault is open to question: but what is beyond argument is its other major flaw: it's so wordy. This is not a movie script at all: movie scripts let the camera show you things and keep the verbiage to the minimum. This does the opposite.

The producer Mamoun Hassan is an urbane, cultured intellectual with a true passion for film and film history. I was recommended to him by Kerry Crabbe, who studied with Mamoun at the National Film and TV School (I had just done the music for Kerry's graduating short, *Trick of the*

Light) and before I wrote a single note for *No Surrender* he insisted on giving me a private showing of *Seven Samurai*, which I admitted I hadn't seen. 'No-one I employ to write film music does so without seeing *Seven Samurai*,' he declared, and hired a cinema behind Soho Square for an afternoon where I sat alone in state and watched it. That kind of man is not hard-nosed enough to produce a movie. He loves the genre too much and will develop friendships with his artists which preclude the cruelty necessary when things start to go wrong (I later realised that by the time I came on board he had already made the decisions which were to scupper the project, notably the choice of director). I'm sure also he was working on a completely impossible budget. I got £5,000 as my fee, from which I had to pay all the recording costs (I ended up with £1500). When I told this to my then 'agents' (who as usual had not got me the job and negotiated me no increase in fee – shortly afterward I dispensed with their services altogether) they said none of their other clients would consider such a low fee. I thought it was worth it for the exposure, and in other circumstances it might have been.

The director Peter Smith came from TV, and every shot in the film screams *small screen*. There are no cinematic shots anywhere: everything is framed for the living room, from the appalling first long-shot of the Charleston Club (a wonderful moment of sordid, faded glamour, squandered) to the unremitting head-and-shoulders closeups in dialogue – except where we get meaningless medium shots with nothing in the background, as the scenes between Mike, Ross (the villain) and his sidekick Frank outside the torture chamber. It's dreadful, dull, unimaginative. Then his directing of the actors is truly awful. I've already mentioned the script's unsure tread between tension and comedy at the beginning of the film: Smith does nothing to even out the balance, and his pacing of dialogue throughout is thoroughly inept. Ray McAnally and Mark Mulholland, great performers both, get us through the opening with panache, but Mike's banter with the kids, then later with Bernard, is halting and stilted. The scene mentioned above with the terrible mid-shot of Mike, Ross and Frank almost comes to a standstill. If I'd been editing this (but there's nowhere to edit) I'd have been screaming for music to cover the incompetent acting and directing. I was never asked for music to this scene.

The casting There are very good central performances in *No Surrender*, and some very poor secondary ones. Ray McAnally was never better, dignified but threatening, tired, wise, showing authority. Mark Mulholland does all that's required. Mike Angelis as Mike is excellent. Bernard Hill gets it slightly wrong (just over the top with the boneheadedness) but a better director would have fixed this, and he is in flashes brilliant. James Ellis's Paddy is believable and frightening. Thereafter, unfortunately, nobody is up to snuff. Joanne Whalley strangely misfires: she seems to have good comic timing but she just ain't sexy. We don't engage with her, and the script, actually, doesn't help: it nowhere says *who she actually is*, and Whalley doesn't seem to have the technique to fill in that gap. Perhaps her subsequent career (half-cock) showed up the same inadequacies. Everyone else is just bad. You could have, I'm sure, got better performances out of some of the bit players: you could have, I could have, but Peter Smith couldn't. (Tom Georgeson as Mr Ross is tooth-curlingly arch and slow in delivery, Joan Turner as 'Superwoman' was offered a beautifully-written cameo with a heart-rending climax, which she blew.) Though not even Smith could have saved the dreadful Elvis Costello.

The music I see now that the production team must already have been in despair by the time my job started. The film had been shot and rough-cut and it must have been obvious to everyone it was a turkey. Nobody told me, and nobody enlisted my help with the truly awful scenes, which I might have partially rescued. There was of course nothing I could do to turn *No Surrender* into a really good film, but with care and luck I think we might, even then, have got it past the opening fortnight in the Odeon Haymarket and onto general release. As the music stands, I'm quite pleased with it. The 'big tune' is appropriate and is set at the right emotional level. The 'loyalist' and 'nationalist' music are apt and stylistically correct, although they were used so little they never get the chance to make their point. At this distance with hindsight I would criticise the action scenes' music as being in cinematic terms old-fashioned by the time I wrote them: too militaristic and full of snare-drum ostinati. I should have been flagging up (for instance) not the sight of the police outside but Billy's reaction to that sight: his emotions on seeing them. I was just a few years behind on this. My next film score would have been sensational.

But as I say, this was my final one. I was not alone in the disaster, of course: Alan Bleasdale never wrote another movie, Mamoun Hassan never produced one, and Peter Smith never directed one. Michael Angelis fell below the radar soon after this; James Ellis gave here his final performance; Joanne Whalley (soon to be Whalley-Kilmer, soon after that plain Whalley again) was flagged at the time as a future superstar: whether *No Surrender* damaged her career who can tell? Ray McAnally was big and good enough to survive the debacle, though he died within a couple of years. Only Bernard Hill has gone on to greater things, rising as high as *The Lord of the Rings*, where the king of Rohan still retains a scouse accent.

My feelings at the failure were complex and negative. I felt angered and humiliated by my agents, who obviously set no store by *No Surrender* or by me. Their other composers (including George Fenton for whom I had done session playing) were doing starry work and I was not worth bothering with. After this I didn't even tell them when I got TV jobs, and when they noticed this they dumped me (though actually of course I had already dumped them). When the film bombed I assumed my agents would feel vindicated, which hurt my feelings even more.

I was also angry with Peter Smith for fucking up the project and all our chances of fame and fortune. (At around this time I was described in conversation by somebody – possibly my friend the clarinettist and conductor Antony Pay – as 'rich and famous'. I replied that, no, I was merely well-off and well-known. This reposte, witty as it was, nevertheless betrayed an enormous disappointment in me.) During the recording of the music Smith was plainly not pleased: 'I really hate synthesisers', he said. Stupid idiot: why didn't he say so before I spent money and wasted studio time hiring one? To my mind the tacky, synthesised sound I had created summed up ideally the Charleston Club and added humour to a film deeply in need of it: but of course he was the boss, and after negotiating some extra budget (for session costs only – I myself received not a penny more) I duly re-scored some of my music cues and re-composed others, using mainly a french horn to replace the synth. It was duller and more conventional, suiting Smith down to the ground. My original conception,

incidentally, is still audible over the end titles, which were not thought important enough to spend any extra money on.

I felt great resentment at the critics, who panned *No Surrender* with the glee of people kicking a successful man (Bleasdale) when he was down. My music was ignored, but then I never hoped it would be noticed: in those days film music was only mentioned if it badly failed to work. The days of superstar composers and concert performances of Hitchcock soundtracks were still to come. And I resented the public for dumbly following and not giving the film a chance.

All in all *No Surrender* took its place in my mind among the litany of my encounters with the world of commercial music, all of them seeming to me at the time bruising failures. There had been the session fixer (David Katz) who insulted my instrument and didn't re-book me; the film-music producer (Jack Fishman) who wouldn't get me any film jobs but wanted to turn me into Cliff Richard with a double bass; the TV script editor (Betty Willingale) whose choice of script-writer for *We, The Accused* I inadvisedly criticised, and who then (Kerry told me) froze me out of the BBC; the pop singer Rod McKuen, who loathed an arrangement I did for him so much he paid me with a cheque post-dated by a year; the refusal of EMI to let me produce The King's Singers' records; my agents at this time (see above); later my publishers; and even in the world of art music, the slights of various friends, the lack of a commission from the London Sinfonietta and the angry rejection of *Zany* by The Nash Ensemble and Simon Rattle (Tony Pay said of *Zany*, 'Christ, Daryl, this is harder than *Zeitmasse*. He didn't hang around in contemporary music long enough to have to play the much-fêted, much harder Ferneyhough). Now few of these things were as bad as I thought them (I did get lots of session work, I did get lots of TV jobs, some from the BBC, I did soon produce for The King's Singers, and I was by this time becoming a successful concert composer) but the hurt was, and has remained, strong.

Had *No Surrender* been a hit I'm sure I would have had a career as a movie composer. What might have become of me then who knows? My feeling is that I would have written many films, to the detriment (or even the still-birth) of my true work in concert music, and that I would never have become Head of Composition at Trinity College of Music in London. So on the whole, I tell myself, it was for the best. I still have many regrets, though.

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