

# THE WHISPERERS & EQUUS

## “ARE YOU THERE?”

Bryan Forbes' 1967 film of *The Whisperers* (based on the novel by Robert Nicolson) is, sadly, barely remembered today. But it contains one of the finest performances ever committed to celluloid – Dame Edith Evans, who, at the time, was seventy-nine years of age. As the *New York Daily News* said, “Here's not merely the performance of the year, it is one of the few truly great performances by an actress in film history.” Evans' performance of an elderly, lonely woman with a fantasy life, who hears voices (the “whisperers” of the title), lives in seedy squalor, and who barely can exist on what she receives from the National Assistance, is so haunting and touching and magical – the emotions that play across her face at any given moment for any given reason, the way she carries herself and cocks her head and asks “Are you there?” – well, it's simply not possible to offer enough praise.

The film itself is bleak and downbeat, gray and rainy, and it didn't catch on with audiences (it was a very strong year for film, with *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*, *Wait Until Dark*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *The Dirty Dozen* and more), but was a hit with critics. Apparently enough Academy voters saw it because Evans received a Best Actress nomination. She was in very good company – Audrey Hepburn, Katherine Hepburn, Anne Bancroft, and Faye Dunaway – but the award went to Katherine Hepburn. Evans did win the Silver Bear at the Berlin Festival as well as a Golden Globe and BAFTA award.

The film itself is one that's ripe for re-discovery. Bryan Forbes was a very underrated filmmaker – but a look at his

output, which includes *Whistle Down The Wind*, *The L-Shaped Room*, *Séance On A Wet After-noon*, *King Rat*, *The Wrong Box*, *Deadfall*, *The Stepford Wives*, *The Slipper and the Rose*, among others, shows a consummate filmmaker who was adept in any number of genres. He got superb performances from his actors, and his visual style was always interesting and always in service of the story he was telling. And *The Whisperers* looms large in his body of work.

For the score, Forbes used John Barry – they'd already done several pictures together, including *Séance On A Wet Afternoon*, *King Rat*, and *The Wrong Box*. By 1967, Barry had already become a legend, thanks to his iconic scores for the James Bond films. Whatever alchemy sometimes happens between director, composer, and subject matter, happened repeatedly with Forbes and Barry and Barry's score for *The Whisperers* is not only one of his best, but a perfect marriage of film and music. Here's Forbes on Barry, his score, and the composing process, from the original LP liner notes:

*“This is the fourth full length score that John has written for me and I have no doubt, whatever the merits of the actual film, his musical contribution is a major one.*

*I have always felt that film composers work under very adverse conditions. They alone, of all the creative elements involved in the making of a film are seldom, if ever, given a second chance. Take the fact that the screenwriter can and very often does submit half a dozen drafts before the final screenplay is accepted. Take the fact that the director can, of course, shoot each and every scene over and over again before pronouncing himself satisfied with the re-*

*sult. Take the fact that once the editing stage has been reached those same scenes can be rearranged, clipped, flipped, optically revised or distorted in a thousand different ways: there is literally no limit to the number of variations.*

*But the poor composer never enjoys these luxuries. He comes along quite late in the day – usually when the film has been edited into what is laughingly known as “the rough cut” and is exposed to it. In my experience, on these occasions, the director is more concerned with pointing out that “it's all going to be different” than with the composer's own peculiar problems.”*

He goes on to eloquently point out how grossly unfair it is for the composer to sit in a screening and then be expected to comment profoundly about how the music will work, and then has to compose to a looming deadline. So, for *The Whisperers*, Forbes decided to try another approach:

*“It was decided that John would write his music at the same time that I was shooting the actual film. This meant that by the time I came off the floor John had finished a complete score. He had the script the same time as the actors, he saw assembled sequences of the film at frequent intervals and spent a lot of time actually on the studio floor observing work in progress. In this way he became part of the production from the very beginning.*

*We recorded his complete score, not in snatches or short lengths to fit pieces of film, but as a musical whole. I always wanted him to have an opportunity without fetters, a chance to express himself in music as I expressed myself on film. Not a very revolutionary idea, you might say. But, alas, unique in my experience.*

*I think the result speaks for itself. If the film is remembered, John Barry's music will be remembered. If the film isn't remembered, John Barry's music will continue with a life of its own, and since one can't win them all, in that case I shall be content to rest on his considerable laurels."*

And Forbes was absolutely correct – the result speaks for itself. The film, unfortunately, hasn't been remembered much, but John Barry's score does continue with a life of its own.

*The Whisperers* was originally issued on a United Artists LP and had a prior CD release on Ryko. That release, as was the case with several Ryko issues, had dialogue tracks added between the score tracks, which, for most people, completely interrupted the wonderful flow of Barry's original LP sequence. For this release, we have removed the added dialogue tracks and remastered the sound.

### ***"I AM YOURS AND YOU ARE MINE"***

Peter Shaffer's 1973 play *Equus* was a sensation from the minute the curtain went up on its original production at the Royal National Theatre at the Old Vic in London. The show had brilliant direction by John Dexter, and two amazing performances, by Alec McCowen as psychiatrist Martin Dysart and Peter Firth as his young patient, Alan Strang. It was brought to Broadway, where Firth repeated his role, this time alongside the extraordinary Anthony Hopkins, where it won the Tony Award for Best Play and Best Direction (for Dexter). The list of cast replacements was also stellar – newcomer Tom Hulce replaced Firth and would, of course, go on to star in the film version of Peter Shaffer's other brilliant play of the 1970s, *Amadeus*. Hopkins was replaced by another Anthony, Perkins. And Perkins was replaced by another bona fide movie star – Richard Burton, who would, of course, go on to play the role in the film version.

Shaffer based his play on an incident he'd heard about involving a seventeen-year-old who'd blinded six horses. Instead of reading about the actual incident, Shaffer concocted his own tale about what might have caused the young man to do such a thing. It was compelling theater, filled with Shaffer's incredible wordplay, anguished characters, and innate theatricality. The play mesmerized audiences – it had a very long run in London, and ran for 1209 performances on Broadway. It has been revived many times since, most recently starring Richard Griffiths and Daniel Radcliffe.

For the 1977 film, Sidney Lumet was engaged to direct, with Shaffer adapting the play for the screen. Things that were highly theatrical onstage became real on film, and playwright Shaffer was apparently none too happy about the realistic presentation of the abuse of the horses (obviously no real horses were abused in the making of the film). The film version had a fantastic supporting cast, including Colin Blakely as Alan Strang's father (Blakely also played Dysart during the original London run), Joan Plowright, Harry Andrews, Eileen Atkins, and Jenny Agutter. The reviews were, for the most part, respectful and fine, but the film wasn't a huge box-office winner. Burton, Firth, and Shaffer all received well-deserved Oscar nominations.

To score the film, Lumet turned to Richard Rodney Bennett, with whom he'd worked on *Murder On The Orient Express*. Bennett, born in 1936, began scoring films in 1957, and had already become an amazing film composer, turning in wonderful scores for films in just about every genre – *Far From The Madding Crowd*, *Billy Liar*, *The Wrong Arm Of The Law*, *The Mark*, *The Nanny*, *Billion Dollar Brain*, *Secret Ceremony*, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, *Lady Caroline Lamb* and many others.

Bennett wrote a sparse but extremely effective score, using a very unusual or-

chestration for an ensemble of lower string instruments – ten violas, eight cellos, and six basses. Bennett's underscore compliments Lumet's visuals and Shaffer's dialogue perfectly.

On a personal note – I had the extreme pleasure of producing a CD for a vocalist named Mary Cleere Haran. I was more than delighted to find that her musical director was none other than Richard Rodney Bennett. Those days in the studio working with him, and just chatting between takes, was magical. Bennett was a charming, bright, wonderful person and he remembered that we'd put out his score to *Enchanted April* back in the Bay Cities days. He was delighted that I knew most of his work, and we even talked about doing something similar to what we'd done with David Shire – a chamber album of his movie themes. Alas, it never happened, but working with him is one of the highlights of my record-producing career.

The original United Artists LP of *Equus*, along with its prior CD release (on Ryko – now long out of print), interspersed five of Burton's monologues (and a scene with Firth) among the score cues. Some of the monologues retained their own track and had no underscore, and some were bookended with musical cues. The result was a very nice listen for the first couple of times – after that, one wished that the score could simply be listened to as a score, on its own. So, for this release, we've done exactly that for the first time. We present Bennett's score first, and then the six dialogue tracks – a couple of which have underscore from those score tracks. Listening to the score on its own is a fantastic experience and since the prior CD preserved the original sequence of the LP, we felt justified in presenting this in a new light. As with *The Whisperers*, we have also remastered the sound.

—Bruce Kimmel