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Nick Moran And Con O'Neill: Telstar

18 Jun 2009

The tragic story of maverick gay record producer Joe Meek is retold in the film *Telstar*, released 19 June. Rachael Scott went to meet Con O'Neill, who plays Meek, and *Telstar*'s director Nick Moran (yes, "that bloke from *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*" doesn't just do good geezer he writes and directs as well) to discuss how they went about bringing the forgotten maverick's gay life to the screen.

In the early 60s Joe Meek had the music world at his fingertips, a number one smash on both sides of the Atlantic and an unknown band called the Beatles requesting his production expertise. He ended up penniless and paranoid before shooting his landlady dead and blowing his brains out. What went wrong?

In the case of Meek truth is stranger than fiction. A genius before his time he pioneered new ways of recording music by adding reverb and echoes to tracks, multi-tracking and close-mic'ing whilst living and working above a handbag shop in North London.

He had a UK No. 1 in 1961 with John Leyton's 'Johnny Remember Me', but it was an instrumental track called 'Telstar', named after the first communications satellite, that took him to the top of his field. Played by his band The Vagabonds 'Telstar' sold 3 million copies, went to No. 1 in the UK and the US and won an Ivor Novello Award.

However, his ability in sniffing out the stars of tomorrow was as erratic as his personal life. He turned down the Beatles four times because he thought they were rubbish. David Bowie, Tom Jones and The Rolling Stones all got the same treatment. Instead he chose to nurture the talents of a bacon slicer from Southampton named Heinz Burt.

He moved Heinz into his flat, got him to dye his hair peroxide blonde and groomed him for pop star status. Love made Meek deaf to the 19-year old's off-key singing and it never happened. When Meek organised a tour with Gene Vincent the audience showered Heinz with tins of baked beans. His one small hit 'Just Like Eddie' was eclipsed by the Beatles' 'She Loves You'.

"I seem to remember he wasn't so nervous about the sex scene, but he was about the kissing scene...He's a good kisser it has to be said... I think it's a really romantic man on man kiss."

After Meek was caught with his trousers down in a public toilet on Hampstead Heath he received hate mail and a small group of bullies stood outside his flat tormenting anyone who entered. Heinz blamed Meek for his lack of success, moved out and got a girlfriend. Both chapters were instrumental in Meek's psychological descent, as were cash flow difficulties when a French composer claimed 'Telstar' was stolen from him and all profits were legally withheld.

Meek had an unhealthy interest in the occult, he popped pills to sleep, stay awake and keep thin and he became increasingly paranoid, convinced his flat was being bugged. His faithful songwriter Geoff Goddard was driven away by Meek's volatile mood swings and the Vagabonds departed one by one unable to stand his Jekyll and Hyde routine any longer.

On 3 February 1967 Meek shot his landlady Violet Shenton during a disagreement about the rent and then turned the gun on himself.

In 1997 Moran and his friend screenwriter James Hicks staggered drunkenly into a taxi on the Holloway Road, North London and noticed a blue plaque above an old shop that said "Joe Meek Lived Worked and Died Here". The cabbie told them that "this mad old poof" used to live there, take loads of drugs and shag young boys and that he ended up having the biggest-selling record of the time and then killed himself.



Moran was intrigued, researched Meek's life and wrote a play. *Telstar* had a successful run in the West End in 2005 and as Moran had always had a film in mind when writing the stage version reworking it for the screen was relatively easy.

Straight after *Lock, Stock* Moran was the man everyone wanted to be or sleep with. A penchant for pretty

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blonds and trendy togs put Denise van Outen on his arm and got him voted Most Stylish Man of the Year by 'GQ'. He lived up to his reputation as a bit of a lad and a hard nut when he punched a photographer at the premiere of *Lock, Stock* after he was shoved out of the way in favour of a snap of Sting. The tabloids portrayed him as a stupid clothes' horse who shouted his mouth off too often.

The Olivier Award nominated *Telstar* sets Moran's record straight proving there's more to the pretty boy East Ender than snappy designer suits and foot in mouth syndrome. In the lead role 42-year old Con O'Neill immerses himself into Moran's passion project never lurching into hysteria when Meek loses the plot. It may have been a groundhog day for him after playing Meek umpteen times but it doesn't feel that way for us.

“Everyone talks about the romance as if it's a heterosexual romance. No one says anything derogatory about it until right at the end when Heinz calls him a bender.”

No stranger when it comes to playing troubled characters, O'Neill was cast as one of the Liverpudlian twins Mickey in Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers* at 22 winning an Olivier for 'Best Actor in a Musical' and he explored his sexuality in Rose Troche's *Bedrooms and Hallways*.

He heads a diverse cast including Kevin Spacey as Meek's stiff upper lipped business partner, Pam Ferris as doomed landlady Violet Shenton, James Corden and Ralf Little as members of The Vagabonds, Chas Hodges of Chas 'n' Dave fame and flamboyant singer Justin Hawkins from The Darkness.

As always Moran looks pretty dapper in a light grey suit when we meet in the basement of a Soho bar and his boyish features belie his 39 years. O'Neill has lost the paunch he sported to play Meek (was it padding?) and it suits him. Both are eager to talk about *Telstar* so I get to the nitty-gritty...

I understand that JJ Field (who played Heinz Burt) was a little bit nervous about the sex scene. How did you help him out?

O'Neill: I seem to remember he wasn't so nervous about the sex scene, but he was about the kissing scene. He came into my room and he was talking about it and I figured because of the schedule we were on we could stand around and talk about it for hours or I could just go up and kiss him. So I just went over and kissed him. He's a good kisser it has to be said. Then we went down to the set and we shot it. I have to say I think it's a really romantic man on man kiss. I think it's very well done.

Moran: I had to prune it down. It went on for much longer than we'd initially planned, but the producers said, (adopts pious voice) "There's quite enough of that now. Cut out of that sooner". So we came up with this elaborate cross fade, but one the things that is very specific to the play that not many people picked up on is that everyone talks about the romance as if it's a heterosexual romance. No one says anything derogatory about it until right at the end when Heinz calls him a bender.



The whole idea was to lull people who wouldn't normally watch a gay love story into thinking they're just watching a love story about a man who's in love with someone who's younger and prettier than him who he could never really be with. He was never going to take him seriously and he was fleeced emotionally and financially. Everybody's been in that position irrespective of their sexual orientation.

What I tried to do with the play was have exactly that, but without the love triangle and without having anyone mention that they're gay. The point is your emotional attachment to somebody until right at the end. It's quite interesting that people who don't normally watch men on men kisses watch the film or the play and understand it because it makes perfect sense to them that Meek's obviously in love with Heinz and then it's not until afterwards that they think, "Hang on, what was that?!"

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There wasn't a sex scene in the original play was there?

Moran: There wasn't one in the play because we didn't have a bedroom.

O'Neill: Joe was prolifically predatory. He was big on cottaging, going to the Heath and all that. With Heinz it was different and I thought that if we were going to take it into the bedroom it should be in a bedroom.

Moran: There's an element of romance and it has to be right.

O'Neill: It has to be a romantic thing and the important thing about Joe is that the type of men he fancied were all young, teenage boys – bit of rough, blah, blah, blah - and his mindset was that of a teenage girl and that's why his music was so successful with young girls because he wrote about that romantic content. That's how he envisaged his relationship with Heinz. The fact that it was one-sided and Heinz wasn't really interested is neither here nor there. Joe believed in the romance and that's how he made it work.



You've assembled an eclectic cast with musicians playing musicians and people Meek actually worked with like Chas Hodges. Did you have a list of people you wanted on the film clear in your mind, did it come together slowly or did they approach you? And how did you become friends with Kevin Spacey?
Moran: I've known Kevin for a long time. He was a big fan of *Lock, Stock* and he saw it when he was doing *Ordinary Decent Criminal* in Ireland and he got in touch with me. This sounds a bit odd but when he did *American Beauty* he said to the costume and make up guys that when Lester rejuvenates he should look like this guy.

Like you?

Moran: Yes. They had a load of pictures and stills from the film sent over. So he had the white-tipped polo shirt and he had a hairpiece made and the whole idea was that he looked cool for the moment. It was great to be told that and then Kevin took me to the *American Beauty* premiere and we've stayed in touch as pals ever since. He's a terrific guy so I just asked him if he would be in the film and he said yes.

With regards to the rest of the casting, we had a casting director and we spoke to a lot of agents, but surprisingly enough a lot of people in the film had seen the play. Tom Burke (played Geoff Goddard) and James Corden (Clem Cattini) had seen the play, loved it and was desperate to be involved, and so was Ralf Little, so the core of people involved in the film were all fans of the play.

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What about people like Justin Hawkins from *The Darkness* (played Lord Sutch)?

Moran: Justin was like well, you know, who do you get to play an exhibitionist pop star? Well, him really and who do you get to be a bad boy rock 'n' roller, not a pop star, a rock 'n' roller, Carl Barat from *The Libertines* (Gene Vincent). There's an element of common sense about this by getting Johnny Lee who's a manufactured pop star from *S Club* to play a manufactured pop star in *Billy Fury*. Whether people will pick up on that I'm not sure. Then a lot of little cameos came my way because they were fans of the play.

Telstar opens in the UK on 19 June 2009. Find out more at www.telstarthemovie.co.uk.

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