

The Production

When in March 2000 the newly set-up production company Phantom Pictures took an option on Neil Cross' first novel *Mr In-Between*, the company's producers Andreas Bajohra and Bob Portal were consciously choosing a book that would lend itself to a highly cinematic adaptation. The Producers responded immediately to Neil Cross's writing, and quickly persuaded her partners that this was raw material which perfectly fitted the company's remit and quality threshold. The story, about an existential hitman, was so enthralling and populated by such vivid characters, that it cried out to be made into a movie.

As producers in the UK film industry, the three were acutely aware that many of Britain's recent breakout movie successes were comedies or period dramas. Good as many of these films were, there was very little contemporary British cinema which could truly be described as bold and different. Neil Cross's novel, while conventionally exciting, is also a challenging and shocking thriller. "It has extraordinary characters and an extraordinary story: it's very un-English, with a strong European tone," explains Andreas Bajohra.

Phantom believed that if the book's understated power and raw existential angst could be transferred to the screen, the resulting film would stir audience emotions and shake their expectations. This, they felt, was what any self-respecting filmmaker should be aiming to do...

Admirers of the maverick work of directors such as David Lynch and Nicolas Roeg, the producers set out to find a screenwriter who shared their Michael Powell-inspired vision of "total cinema". They needed a writer who could key in to the unique and strange love triangle they saw in the novel – between Cathy, Jon and the Tattooed Man.

After a long search, Phantom chose screenwriter Peter Waddington. Peter is an actor of 20 years standing, and is also a highly respected UK script doctor on films such as Sky Pictures' *Milk*. Waddington had been known to producer Bob Portal for many years, and they had worked together on everything from short films to music videos. "Peter's a bit of a Renaissance Man," says Bob Portal. "If he wasn't wasting his time with frivolous pursuits such as writing, acting, casting, and producing political cartoons, he'd probably be Prime Minister or running the England football team by now...!" Peter's work for

Phantom as script consultant had certainly demonstrated his acute understanding of story, character and irony.

On reading Neil Cross's novel for the first time, Waddington says he had a strong reaction to the "very dark, very bleak material. And although I loved the book when I was reading it, there were times when I was dramatising it that I found it just so difficult to work with...scary and dark at the same time". Writing the script took him to an uncomfortable place, which was reflected in the finished draft. Of the dubious relationship between the Tattooed Man and Jon, he says – "The Tattooed Man is a deeply worrying character. He is a dominant force, a paternal figure, but there's also a degree of love between them which perhaps isn't just paternal: there are elements of homosexual sado-eroticism there too. And in another way, it's like a servant and his master.

It operates on a number of different levels. It's a fascinating relationship, not entirely savoury, but I think very entertaining to watch."

Waddington's screen adaptation of *Mr In-Between* radically restructured the book's second half, while remaining entirely faithful to Neil Cross's themes and intentions – taking the love triangle element further than Cross had done. "It's high romance," says Peter Waddington, "but not as we know it..." The screenplay also added a strong element of dark humour to punctuate the tension (Waddington has often said, only half-jokingly, that he sees the film as a "romantic comedy"!). Most importantly, the script was a page-turner from beginning to end – with a jolting, unexpected conclusion which took the reader by surprise, and will undoubtedly have the same effect on the film's audiences.

By late 2000, the script was ready to shoot. There remained the small obstacle of raising the money to finance it. Feeling strongly that the film had to be shot as written to retain its unique tone and style, the producers were keen to find partners and financiers who would be daring enough to back challenging material without compromise.

Producer Andreas Bajohra had met Michael Lionello Cowan at the Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in September 2000. Cowan and his partner Jason Piette run The Spice Factory - a prolific and dynamic UK production company with a track record of getting behind films of all varieties and budget levels. The company's previous feature

productions include *The Killer Tongue*, *Dying to Go Home*, *Ricky 6*, *New Blood*, *Pilgrim*, *Sabotage* and *Heist*.

Michael Cowan saw the potential in *Mr In-Between* immediately. Having recently struck up a good relationship with Bajohra in Halifax, he definitely wanted to make the picture. Spice Factory had forged an exclusive relationship with David Rogers, a tax specialist accountant who had created the Great British Films fund operated by Enterprise Films, which Rogers owns. Cowan and Jason Piette greenlit *Mr In-Between* with Rogers, and Great British Films/Spice Factory became sole financiers of the film. Crucially, they agreed to put up the money without demanding major script changes, provided that the right talent was found to helm and star in the movie.

Paul Sarossy was known to Phantom through his award-winning career as cinematographer on *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Exotica*, *Felicia's Journey* and *Affliction*. But he had never directed a feature before. Why then choose a Canadian first-timer to direct a British movie like *Mr In-Between*, which required such a delicate balance between horror and sympathy? There were several compelling reasons...

The idea of enlisting a foreigner's eye on the predominantly London-based setting is one the producers thought could work brilliantly – especially as Sarossy's eye is acknowledged as one of the keenest in the business. *Mr In-Between* is a film which straddles two worlds: one bright and warm and normal, the other dark and dangerous - where nightmares are what you go to sleep to escape from. "It is my world," says the Tattooed Man, "which is the real world". Sarossy had the challenging task of making the audience believe in the Tattooed Man's disturbing world vision, a hyper-reality that Jon increasingly wishes he could escape from.

There were practical considerations too in choosing Sarossy as director. He had a wealth of experience on set, which (when shooting time was short and resources stretched) would ensure that the film retained a look and style of its own. Watching Sarossy work, recalls writer Peter Waddington, you could see that strong directorial vision being meticulously put onto film shot by shot: "He's terrifically experienced, he's wonderfully relaxed on set, he's got a great eye, and it's very enjoyable being round him."

Sarossy's own reasons for wanting to make *Mr In-Between* his directorial debut lay in the fact that he felt ready to make a natural transition and fulfil one of his underlying ambitions. Recently, he says, "I haven't seen myself as a cinematographer or a director: I see myself as a filmmaker. The distinctions are very blurred." As a director of photography, he had of course read a great many scripts, but very few resonated in his mind in the way that *Mr In-Between* did. "After reading it," he says, "you couldn't help but come back to it again and again."

With *Mr In-Between* due to commence shooting in February 2001, the producers swiftly engaged a strong creative team to surround their new director: Cypriot cinematographer Haris Zambarloukos (*Camera Obscura*, *First Daughter*), whom Sarossy had met while judging the International Festival of the Art of Cinematography (CameraImage) in Poland, and whose career promises to be as sparkling as Sarossy's; production designer Matthew Davies (*24 Hours in London*, *Dead in the Water*), who has a reputation as one of the most talented young visual stylists in Britain; and respected UK costume designer Joanna Eatwell (*Oliver Twist*, *Miracle at Midnight*).

The film benefited immensely from the generous assistance of key sections of the UK film industry. Initially budgeted to shoot as a Super 16mm blow-up, the industry started to take notice of *Mr In-Between* - this small movie with a high profile international filmmaker directing for the first time. Many big names such as Deluxe, Fuji, Lee Lighting and Panavision offered support beyond the call of duty. The general consensus was that "No way should Paul Sarossy shoot his first feature in the UK on 16mm!" And so *Mr In-Between* rapidly became a full-blown 35mm production.

Informed by his many years of working on set, Sarossy values his collaborators immensely – "As a director, you're surrounded by very talented, imaginative people and you have to listen to them. The moment you close your eyes and ears to the people around you, the lesser director you are. A wise director takes one step back and listens."

Sarossy worked closely with writer Peter Waddington to cast a selection of the best actors in the British industry. They quickly engaged what Sarossy calls "a most committed, dedicated and imaginative group of actors".

The female lead Cathy was a role that needed an actress who could convincingly appear to be at the end of her tether when we meet her, but who would become a beacon of warmth for Jon, even as she gravitates towards him as her saviour. Irish actress Geraldine O’Rawe (*Resurrection Man, Circle of Friends*) is married to Paul Sarossy. As luck would have it, she was also perfect for the part of Cathy. As producer Andreas Bajohra puts it, “Very few actresses would have the sensitivity to bring such understatement to the role.”

David Calder, fresh from *The World Is Not Enough* and Dogme movie *The King Is Alive*, was chosen to play Jon’s father figure and nemesis, the Tattooed Man. Calder was attracted to working with first-time director Sarossy – “He has that extra edge of commitment and enjoyment and relish of the whole event!” *Mr In-Between* also appealed because “It’s not a film which romanticises violence.” Of his dominating role in the film, Calder says: “He’s a psychopath – but it’s actually more than that because he’s obviously extremely powerful and mysterious and runs an organisation rather like Assassins Incorporated. He is somebody who relishes this job of killing and has turned it into a philosophy, so he is not your common-or-garden criminal.”

The roles of the Tattooed Man’s decadent cronies, Mr Basmati and Mr Michaelmas, were filled respectively by veteran Asian star Saeed Jaffrey O.B.E. (*Ghandi, A Passage to India*) and popular film and TV actor Clive Russell (*The Thirteenth Warrior*, Genie-nominated for *Margaret’s Museum*). Of Michaelmas, Russell points out, “He’s very, very tall, he’s an albino, he’s sexually ambivalent, and he enjoys the world which has been created by the Tattooed Man. His relationship with the Tattooed Man is that of a friend and ally and fellow pleasure-seeker – of pain and death.”

Sarossy had worked with Saeed Jaffrey previously in Canada on Srinivas Krishna’s *Masala*, and was hugely impressed by “the relish with which he approaches his work...One cannot help but be infected and informed by the weight of film culture and history he brings to the set.” Jaffrey also brought a spiritual dimension to the shoot, with his customary blessing of the camera. “We were well-blessed on this film,” says a grateful Sarossy.

Andrew Tiernan (*Interview with a Vampire, Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*), often cast as the bad guy, seized the chance to play against type as Jon’s long-lost schoolfriend

Andy, who has fallen on hard times. “He’s just a normal guy looking for work, trying to get by with his wife and daughter – nice and normal. Fortunately this character does not kill anyone, which is unusual for me really!” says Tiernan.

Mark Benton, a much-loved character actor from numerous British television shows (notably the BBC’s *Eureka Street*) and Mike Leigh films such as *Topsy Turvy* and *Career Girls*, was picked to play the Tattooed Man’s driver Phil. He describes the character as “faint of heart really – he’s a go-between between Jon and the Tattooed Man. He’s scared but also enthralled by the Tattooed Man.”

Clint Dyer (*Tube Tales*, *Shopping*) was cast as Jon’s ill-advised tormentor Rickets, and actor/screenwriter Peter Waddington (*Secrets and Lies*, *Little Dorrit*) took a small role as the Priest. (“He wanted to play the bigger role of Phil the driver,” recalls producer Andreas Bajohra, “until we discovered that he doesn’t actually drive – which was a bit of a problem...!”) Well-known UK-based comedienne Gina Yashere was cast in a cameo role at a party and a funeral, where eagle-eyed members of the audience might also spot the author of *Mr In-Between* the novel, Neil Cross.

In late February, two days before the start of principal photography, the team had yet to find the perfect actor to play the lead, Jon. Sarossy felt very strongly that in the casting of this role lay the success or failure of the whole film – how to find an actor who could be sympathetic and vulnerable, while committing atrocious acts of violence. Jon had to be someone who could convey the conflict raging in Jon, torn between his old mentor and his new friends. “It was a tough call,” explains Bob Portal. “Jon is in every single scene. We interviewed a lot of actors, and many more were considered. In the end, when three separate sources phoned up on the same day to recommend Andrew Howard, we quickly arranged a meeting – Andrew was hugely enthusiastic and had an immediate understanding of the character.”

Welsh actor Andrew Howard, who had appeared as Trofimov in Michael Cacoyannis’s *Varya* (a.k.a. *The Cherry Orchard*) and had co-written and starred with Ioan Gruffudd in the movie *Shooters* (recently picked up by Universal), is definitely the “next hot thing” in British Cinema. He describes the character of Jon as “a dark disturbed individual who has a very interesting past. Basically, he is a hit man, and he does it surreptitiously, very

clinically and efficaciously, with no emotion. Throughout the film he releases his humanity through meeting his old friends...Cathy in particular just opens up a whole tome of emotion that Jon had forgotten about and never realised was there... it makes him very divided, torn and screwed up!”

When the cameras turned on Day One of the shoot, on a cold blustery day in the coastal town of Eastbourne, Paul Sarossy looked over at his new leading man standing on the pier, turned to the producers and said: “You know it’s funny, but now I really can’t imagine anyone else in the role: he *is* Jon.” Writer/actor Peter Waddington concurred, when (as the Priest) he shared his first scene with Andrew Howard inside a church. “Huddled up against the pulpit,” Waddington recalls, “he looked like something from a Blake painting, like an elemental fallen angel – he’s just the archetypal Jon for me.”

The shooting of *Mr In-Between* took place over five weeks, mainly in cold, wet conditions. This after all was England in February and March. Some of the locations chosen by Paul Sarossy and designer Matthew Davies filled the crew with horror – most of all the leaky, freezing, rat-infested Victorian railway tunnels in the heart of old London known as Bishopsgate Arches, which doubled as the Tattooed Man’s lair. In the script, this had been an Edwardian town house, but the visual and thematic resonance of the strange echoey chambers at Bishopsgate had so inspired Sarossy and Davies that they begged the producers to let them shoot there. So it was that the producers bit the bullet and inflicted several uncomfortably grim days’ shooting on the long-suffering crew and cast in the name of art.

The combination of constrained budget and the expense of building a standing set seemed likely to restrict *Mr In-Between* to shooting on location. However, thrift and smooth-talking enabled Matthew Davies to build both the interior and exterior of Andy and Cathy’s shabby flat on a makeshift stage at a local Territorial Army centre. This allowed more flexibility for Sarossy and the chance to shoot some of the film’s most intimate scenes in a controlled environment. The art department purloined much of the stock flattage to make up the set from other larger-budgeted productions which had recently finished shooting. “Recycling is a way of life in the low budget British film industry: I wonder if there’s an award for environmentally friendly film design...” says Matthew Davies.

The design team went to great lengths to ensure authenticity in several unwholesome areas. They brought on drug expert Ron Stenner to advise on exactly what substances Jon might be ingesting to cope with his violent lifestyle, and how he might be ingesting them. More gruesomely still, they had to investigate the true effect that the scripted dosage of “succinylcholine” would have on a wretched victim. In this latter matter, they gleaned further advice from producer Bob Portal’s mother (also to be seen fleetingly in the movie as a woman with a lost dog), an anaesthetist with a comprehensive, if disconcerting, knowledge of the terminal effects of lethal substances.

Reputed tattoo artist Charlie Young wrestled with the most effective way to apply full-body tattoos to actor David Calder’s body. In the end, it was an eight hour make-up job for Calder, but he was pleased with the finished result: “They’re a series of very dead faces,” he says. “If you look closely they have numbers on them, sometimes letters – C or W – children and women. This is the Tattooed Man keeping a body record of the thing which he relishes and desires, which is to take life.”

Disaster threatened the production many times. The famous clifftop of Beachy Head, on which the final scene of *Mr In-Between* was shot, suffered a massive landslide only a week after shooting finished there. The exact spot where director, camera and half the crew had positioned themselves to shoot the movie’s closing shots is no longer there and the rubble lies hundreds of feet below the cliff edge, dashed by the waves of the English Channel. “Acts of God are explicitly excluded from production insurance,” says producer Bob Portal. “Had this happened on the day we were shooting, I think the lawsuits would have heavily outweighed the irony...”

The film suffered unexpected problems with foot-and-mouth disease, which had just engulfed the British countryside at the time of filming. Though it is primarily set in London, *Mr In-Between* contains one scene, pivotal to the story, which takes place in a “country cottage” location, where the Tattooed Man and his cronies revel in unspeakable acts and invite Jon to “take steps” with them. Location manager Gavin Northover found that not only was there no possibility of the crew being allowed anywhere near a real country cottage, but even key areas of open land within the London area such as Richmond Park were out of bounds. Obviously the “country cottage” would have to be located further into suburban London. At the last minute, the production chose Severndroog Castle

in the borough of Greenwich - a 19th Century folly built on top of a hill in 1784 to commemorate the part played by Sir William James in the violent siege of the real Castle of Severndroog on the coast of Malabar in 1755. Necessity, as it turned out, was the mother of inspiration: Severndroog possessed the appropriate aspect of the bizarre for one of the film's more surreal sequences, and offered the perfect backdrop for the night of sadistic debauchery planned and executed by the Tattooed Man.

As dailies were assembled by editor Eddie Hamilton (*Large, Mean Machine*), it became clear that the film would indeed have the sought-after "high cinema" look, distinguishing it from many other contemporary British movies.

While Paul Sarossy and Haris Zambarloukos had early on decided to adopt a "classical" approach to the cinematography, the film is peppered with elements of the heightened and the downright weird.

Occasionally, shots were conceived and added - and sometimes snatched opportunely - to enhance the film's feeling of foreboding: Jon walking through an ocean of closely-packed gravestones, or the incredible formations of flocking starlings over the pier at Eastbourne. Many of these found their way into the finished film.

What was also becoming apparent from the dailies was that the cast were relishing the chance to inhabit these characters - and that Andrew Howard was giving a performance as Jon every bit as strong and charismatic as Sarossy had hoped for, which would be the glue that bound together the film's contrasting worlds.

With shooting completed on March 23rd 2001, Sarossy and Hamilton set about the relatively less frantic task of editing. The process was complicated somewhat by the fact that Sarossy had a long-standing commitment to shoot Atom Egoyan's new film *Ararat* in Canada - a commitment which clashed dramatically with the post-production schedule of his directorial debut. This left him with something of a quandry. However, with the aid of flying faxes, videotape cuts and snatched phone calls, the cutting process continued transatlantically, and by July the film was at the final mix stage. A flavoursome sound design element was added by Videosonics' Bernard O'Reilly (*Large, Relative Values*), and

Jennie Muskett (Daniel Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, *B Monkey*) was chosen to compose the unusual musical score.

Composer Muskett faced many of the same challenges that had tested the writer and director of the film: how to underline the sympathetic qualities of Jon without shying away from the cold brutality of his life and work. With a combination of electronic samples and more organic instrumental and vocal contributions, she managed to interweave the different strands of Jon's persona into a homogenous musical score.

Meanwhile, also in the world of music, *Mr In-Between* was attracting lots of attention. Very specific song titles had been written in at script stage - the character Phil has an unfortunate habit of playing screamingly inappropriate songs on his car stereo at just the wrong moments - but the producers never believed that they would be able to afford to use the songs named in the script in the final film.

To their delight, Music Supervisor Ann Marie Shields proved them wrong. Her relationships with bands, and her friends in the music industry, meant that she could get this dark and original story seen and heard. She distributed early cuts of *Mr In-Between* to various artists and labels, who were inspired to support the movie on its extremely limited budget. Early support from David Bowie and his company RZO was a huge help.

The reaction from artists who saw the movie was fantastic. Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, for example, watched a cut of *Mr In-Between* on their tour bus during a tour of Europe and, after seeing the movie, Nick was inspired to write a new song called *Mr. In-Between!*

"The support from the musicians who provided songs for the soundtrack has been phenomenal," says Ann Marie Shields. "Their music has added beauty, depth and humour in a significant way."

The final soundtrack includes fantastic tracks by Nick Cave, David Bowie, Lou Reed, Goldfrapp, Ash, MAD LION, Dreadzone, Violet Indiana, The Nextmen, Supersister, Helen Shapiro and Lotus Crown. All of the tracks are from critically acclaimed records, many that have been released in the past year or are just about to be released, such that the soundtrack is as powerful and cutting edge as the movie.

Having completed the film, Paul Sarossy had a chance to reflect on his directing debut: “It was an experience that exceeded all expectations... A director is a very greedy creative person, because you desperately want material and lots of it! And you can only accomplish so much in a day...that’s a perspective you don’t see as a cinematographer. Working on *Mr In-Between* was a glorious introduction to a whole other dimension of filmmaking – it’s as exciting as everyone says.”

Mr In-Between will engage and shake its audiences. Part love story, part thriller, it has been compared in substance to Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Le Samourai*, in style to Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* and in tone to Mike Hodges’ *Croupier*. While it springs from the classic stable of British crime thrillers, it is notably far from being a conventional gangster movie. The film is not afraid to keep the audience guessing, to leave questions unanswered, to explore uncomfortable philosophical ground.

Actor Clive Russell (Mr Michaelmas) describes it thus – “We’re all caught between different worlds: what we might have done with our lives, could have done, are doing, would like to do... This film is something of an exaggeration of that – it’s beautifully done...!”