

Episode 3 – The Music of Flux

Introduction: Welcome to our Smoking Apples podcast as we get ready to release our first ever digital tour of our show *Flux*. In this series, we bring you an exclusive behind the scenes insight into our theatre company, including embarrassing stories, feminist chat and all sorts of puppet related content. Enjoy.

Matt Hello, hola, hallo, guten tag, wherever you are in the world for joining us for this episode on Smoking Apple's podcast, and we are going to be looking at the music of Flux. And we've got two special guests with me here today. Jon and Molly, we'll get on to introducing them shortly. But before we do, I'll introduce myself. My name is Matt, I'm a Co Artistic director of Smoking Apple's. My pronouns are he, him and a bit about me, I am a 32 year old male with brown hair and a brown beard with a few grey flecks coming through for that salt and pepper, look. I wear glasses that I need for prescription purposes, not this blue light thing that people seem to be doing now because it's cool to wear glasses. And I'm in a grey jumper and yeah, that's me in a nutshell, and I'm going to pass over to Jon.

Jon I'm Jon, I'm a composer now, and I write music for things in a theatre and things on the radio sometimes, or podcasts, things like that. And I am about six foot and I have a receding hairline and I'm about 40, no I am 40. And yeah that's old. And, um, and I wear charity shop clothes and I hope I don't smell too bad. It's inappropriate.

Molly (Laughter) No, no.

Matt You just carry on.

Molly So perfect.

Matt So thank you very much, Jon, for that. I will now. Let's hear from Molly.

Molly Hello, I'm Molly. I am an Co Artistic director of Smoking Apples and performer, puppeteer in Flux. And I am a five foot eight female with long dark hair and blue grey eyes. I have two characteristic moles or beauty spots, whichever you prefer, on both cheeks. And in between them there's a big smile. I like to smile a lot, I've got big white teeth. I like to get them out. I don't smile a lot with my mouth shut, as everyone knows, and I'm wearing a blue and white patterned dress and a mustard cardigan, and I'm sitting in a room full of a lot of stuff.

Matt Awesome. Thank you very much, Molly and Jon. So I'm going to ask you guys some some questions. Uh, um, and I'll fire them, some of them will be general that you can both chip in on on some will be more direct. Um, so. We kick off, Jon, can you tell us a bit about yourself, which you've kind of already done, but more so how you came to be the composer on Flux?

Jon Well. I basically I started writing theatre music soundtracks about probably about five years ago only, I was in a band at the time and was something I always really wanted to do, but I'd never really had the opportunity to do it because I didn't really have time. I don't know that that kind of became less active. And so I had this opportunity to work with a theatre company called Idle Motion, who was the first production I really worked on and that was, I think about five years ago. And then I miraculously saw this advert posted somewhere. Where did I see it, I can't actually remember now? And I thought, that looks interesting. And it was Smoking Apples. And I thought, I'm going to have a go see see if

you see what happens. And I went to this big, scary interview and met these people in a dark room in Deptford, I think. And I I was grilled a bit like this situation in a room, in an actual room and. Yeah. And then no one else came to to to see them. So they decided to go for me.

Molly Stop it

Jon But yeah, I don't know I, I suppose. Yeah that was, that was, when was that? That was about two years ago?

Molly 2018 so three years ago, but years really you know last year doesn't count does it, so year.

Jon Yeah, I was going to say it doesn't count. No.

Molly Yeah. So you're still 39 perfect,

Jon I'll always be 39.

Matt Yeah awesome. And if I remember rightly, you were late for your interview as well. I remember coming down the stairs and calling you...

(laughter)

Jon Sorry

Matt And you were like

Molly (laughter) Sorry!

Jon Yeah, just woke it up.

Matt You were like, oh no, no. I've been here for like ten minutes. I just got distracted reading a book in a library and

(laughter)

Jon I remember that was it about trains or something

Matt Might have been, it could well have been. OK, so then so you came aboard as a composer and never looked back. So can you describe the sound world or the style of music for Flux and I guess well we'll kick off of Jon but then, Mol, you can come into this as well.

Jon Well, I remember when we sort of first discussed it because obviously the time period is 1980s, so that actually. Yeah, conjures up lots of things for lots of people, I suppose. And actually there's a lot a lot there with with 80s music because it's the birth. So it's not really the birth of synthesisers at all, but it's like this moment where a particular particular type of synth sounds were being used. So that's quite exciting as a composer to have that kind of time specific, brief, like retrogressive time specific thing where you can dive back in and get really involved in listening to to. Yeah. The sounds of a particular time period. And so, I mean, it's kind of early 80s as well, but but it moved along chronologically a little bit.

So so we have to move from Careless Whisper to to Snap, not literally because we you know, we obviously

Molly For copyright reasons,

Jon Yeah for copyright reasons, but there were some very specific reference points in there as well, which was really nice. And then I suppose part of building a sound world is. Yeah. Is using some of that palette and and kind of. Creating the entire world with it, not just doing sound alike of which there were a couple kind of sound alike tunes within it, but it's kind of using some of the sounds within that to kind of punctuate what is actually going on in the story with our protagonist, which I guess we will come to later anyway.

Molly Yeah. I think one of the I think one in your interview, actually, Don, who's that, Don? Sorry, Jon, I've just called you the wrong name.

Jon Don, big Don.

Molly I've really lost it, it's Friday, apologies.

Jon I'll go with Don it's fine.

Molly Because I'm trying I'm trying really hard not to call you Jon Jon. And now it's just confusing me entirely. So we'll go with that, so, in your interview and you said I've got a shed full of synthesisers and I remember that coming up quite a lot and us being like excellent.

Jon I was just boasting.

Molly Yeah, that was really the sound that we, we wanted to go for.

Matt He doesn't even have a shed.

Jon Yeah it's all a lie. I have collected quite a lot of, yeah, old bits and pieces and a nice reel to reel tape recorder, which was definitely part of it for me. Just sort of that was like the end of the process was like sticking it through, basically recording everything to tape and then giving it a bit of hiss and warmth and yeah, it's kind of a little bit sort of surreptitious really. I don't think most people would really notice a difference, but.

Molly Yeah, yeah, I remember, I remember I remember this conversation. It was like in the wild depths of the premier and Jon was like, no, that's not the final version. I've got the final version. And I was like, what do you mean it's not the final version? And then when you gave it to us I was like, OK, great, cool, this is perfect. But my untrained musical ears.

Jon You were like I can't hear the difference.

Molly No, no. And yeah I think as well, you know, actually. So you were saying like you've not really had the chance to compose much for theatre you've done less of that than like for radio, like other mediums. I think for us that was like one of the biggest draws because we always sort of say we're you know, we're really looking for someone who can write a score that matches visuals, which is I'm not saying that other pieces that have like lots of dialogue in don't require the same thing. But for us, like the music is like as important in terms of the narrative, it's like it's like another language in the shows. So, yeah, you if you

work with kind of things where you create pictures like radio, exactly like that, and it's all about what you can hear telling the narrative so I think that was yeah. That worked really well for us in terms of, you know, your background. That was good.

Matt Was there any particular music that inspired the the the Flux score?

Jon Well, yeah, there were a few points where there's bits of sort of instrumental Gary Numan stuff, which I really like, Tubeway Army album, um, Reptile's some of that really early 80s stuff. I'm kind of I found that kind of useful in terms of, yeah, just some of some of the sounds. And then then yeah, as I said, there were a few yeah, there were a few specific reference points as does some of my God, I'm going to forget his name now, but I'm going to I'm going to just remind myself what it is, Hiroshi Yoshimura. That's why I was listening to at the time and he does sort of ambient music and it's quite sort of washy, pad synth, soft, quite soft stuff. And I did use some kind of sounds based on that for quite a few of the more kind of thoughtful moments in the score.

Molly Yeah, definitely. Definitely. I think it's a real balance, isn't it? And that's what was, you know, what we wanted. Like we wanted the kind of upbeat like like poppy really catchy identifiable sound alike stuff that, you know, and you did for us, which was great. But then also, you know, in order to kind of like match the emotional journey of Kate, we needed, you know, a lot a lot of kind of other pieces that show that texture. And, you know, that's the hardest thing to do, I think, isn't it? Like if you think as well, like the show basically has music in for almost a a whole hour, I'd say what we're probably looking at at least 50 minutes of music across the whole show. So it's like a lot of content, isn't it? And without it being repetitive.

Jon Well, I mean, one thing I would say that for me was really important. It was actually that I had actually seen one of your shows before, before I met you guys, which was In Our Hands. And so I kind of knew obviously it didn't sound anything like Flux, the music, but I knew the type of the way that you'd want music to be utilised in, yeah, I knew that, I knew that it would be important because obviously there's no dialogue. And, well, there was this little sort of snippets of things in the, that we did put in the soundtrack. But it's just generally it was important that there are kind of little. I suppose I suppose certain sounds become more important then because they're more laden, they have more significance because they they have to carry more weight. Potentially.

Molly And I think just on that note, as well, as about you can great at introducing, was the balance between the the the found sound of the environment coming into the score, which again, it's funny you mention In Our Hands, because we did a lot with that score because it was kind of noisy and trawler fishing and lots of like mechanical world, whereas, you know, nuclear science is much more electronic beeps. But I think the Geiger counter sounds that was something we were quite keen on, wasn't it, from the beginning that, you know, it has such an identifiable sound. But actually, once it's in a piece of music or in a score, it's very, very subtle and it's only really kind of gets drawn out at certain moments. And yeah, I think that works really well in it and for those people who can hear it, you know, who know what that sound is and yeah, it's a nice touch.

Matt OK, so we've talked about the, you know, the world, we talked about, you know, the style, what are the inspirations. So let's let's go let's go back into, you know, the R&D phase and once you've got an idea that you're happy with, how do you then develop that, Jon, into a full piece of music so you might have Molly going 'oh it needs to be a bit like

this, it needs to be a bit like that.' Or, you know, how do you take that and then develop that into a full piece of music?

Jon I suppose it often comes down to texture, actually, because that's I think one of the things that I probably learnt from in a way from doing that production, because it was often about just as much about removing stuff and paring it down and then building it up at the right moment. But often sometimes just using just quite a small bit of material, initial material, and then working out a way of pairing it down where it needed to be paired down and then and building building up layers, if that makes sense, rather than sort of working horizontally.

Matt Just to add on to that then a particular phrase, that phrase sorry that we've all heard you say a few times, which maybe you'd like to elaborate on, which is can you tell us about throwing spaghetti at a wall?

Jon I thought everyone said this phrase, do they not?

Matt Probably in the 1960s.

Jon I, I think I think for me that's just really about being able to sort of fail and and work out why why something doesn't work. But just also failing publicly, but not as in the sense of just just just sketching, really. That's all it is. And then but just showing your sketching, your sketches to people you're working with. And so you're just just throwing out ideas, really.

Molly I really enjoyed that.

Jon And then Molly and Molly and Matt and immediately so say no, that's absolute shit.

(laughter)

Molly And then I was going to say I really like that because it was like one of the biggest things I think is difficult, I remember saying this to you at the beginning. I was like, I don't have the words like the words because I'm not a composer. So I can't, like, talk to you in, like, musical language. I literally can't play any instruments, as you well know, completely musically untalented the end. And but, you know,

Jon Don't believe you

Molly But I also know what I like. So I think, you know, doing that was really good because it was like I could actually I didn't have to try and articulate what I meant. There was already something to go off. And then, you know, it was less abstract when I was like, oh, can it be a bit more like 'merr' like, you know, can I have a bit more like of that in it?

Jon I actually, I actually quite like it when people are not necessarily well, they feel somehow in articulate in terms of music, because it becomes really abstract and you just have these very strange conversations with people about what they want.

Molly We had many of those.

Jon In a sense in a sense, like being in a way like I'm sort of fishing around just as much for for ways to describe it to. But then, yeah, all it is, is just yeah. Sometimes just working

out if it's the equivalent of yes, is my is my blue sounds your blue or whatever, but you're just kind of meeting in the middle somehow. But yeah it is very, it can be very nebulous until you start doing stuff which is I suppose what I mean by spaghetti, the spaghetti thing. So you kind of need to just throw just throw that spaghetti against the wall, you know.

Molly Um yeah. We love it. Got some great we use it all the time now. We do.

Matt We do. It's been adopted and adopted. Okay, so you throw all your spaghetti at your wall, you find this common language, as inarticulate as it is, you start to put sketches or these tracks together and they start to knit together to form the soundtrack of Flux. Was there a particular moment you like? Bang! We have found the sound world like bang we have found, was it a particular theme or character. Was it you know, was there a moment you're like, yes, now everything can slot in.

Jon I mean, I don't think I've ever actually experienced that kind of moment in any production I've ever worked on, only because I tend it tends to be really a cumulative process and I don't know, I think I get too, yeah, it's a funny thing, but I suppose looking back, I would say there were certain moments like when Kate is in the record shop and she's got headphones on and I don't know if she's listening to something on her phones and then she's doing something else. And I remember thinking, yeah, this feels right. But I don't I don't think I ever thought, okay, now I know exactly where I'm going to go with everything else. There was no sort of hinge moment like where everything after that point was sort of really sort of somehow more straightforward. Um, because because partly because the show is developing constantly as well. So it never. Yeah. You never quite sort of I don't know you never entirely. I don't entirely sort of relax about this sort of aesthetic until the whole thing is up and running. And even then I don't know, I remember sort of tinkering with stuff on the night, on the first performance of the yeah, the R&D at the end of the day. And, you know, that's that's probably the same for you guys too, that I guess.

Matt Yeah. I was going to say so, so, so Mol like was there a particular moment when I don't know, Jon sends you through seven versions, seven different versions of a theme that say Kate's theme for example, you then listen to them, listening to them like bang this is the one like how do you whittle that down?

Molly Yeah, I think I think for me it was split into two halves, like the upbeat, like kind of poppy sound alike things were for me much more of instant wins because they sound like other things that already exist. So it was like much easier to kind of get into that mindset. But also the purpose of those things is to be like pastiche and a bit tongue in cheek. And they used in kind of moments to have that function and not necessarily like used to, like I was saying earlier, bringing like emotional depth to the characters and the story. So, the Break-Up song you didn't compose it with lyrics because none of them and songs, none of the music from Flux has lyrics in right? Actually apart from one and but when we were on tour we decided to make up some lyrics to that song, and while we didn't make up the lyrics, we actually applied Toni Braxton's on Unbreak My Heart lyrics to that song. And it's the one...

Jon That's anachronistic, though, surely.

Molly Exactly. So it's an obvious choice, but it makes us happy. And so, yeah, it goes, "Unbreak my heart. Say you love me again, undo this hurt when you walked out the door," Do you know the bit I mean?

Jon I think I think we should record it and release it.

Molly Yeah, hundred percent, I can I'm sure I can do that awkward thing where we try and fit all the syllables that don't fit in to the melody line for sure.

Jon Those are my favourite types of song, with too many syllables.

Molly Excellent, yeah I'm up for it.

Matt When we are filming next week, we should film that and send it to Jon

Molly What the listeners don't know is that wonderful Jon also gave us the best present ever with the Flux score in that he gave us like a million Easter eggs. So what people don't see behind the scenes is that all the tracks that are sound like they also have sound alike names, so and they're so much fun. So on one track, sounds kind of like is inspired by Careless Whispers by George Michael. And what is the sound a like? What's that what's the Easter Egg name for Jon?

Jon Oh, um,

Molly Don't say that you don't know,

Jon I've actually forgotten, tell me.

Molly Oh, it's Wear Less Whiskers. Yeah, there's loads of them. (laughter) There's loads of them they bring me great joy.

Jon I know there was, forgot the flower - I've Got The Power.

Molly Exactly. Yeah.

Matt Fake my Breath Away.

Molly Fake my breath away instead of Take My Breath Away. Oh yeah, yeah. There are loads so yeah it's a joyful to read the script that no one else gets to see.

Matt Classic, all right. Right, we're going to wrap it up now. And so we've I've of asked Jon about throwing spaghetti at the wall. Mol, you wanna explain where Jon Jon has come from, how Jon developed this nickname?

Molly I just don't even know. That's the honest answer. And that's just one of the stupid things that we called you without your permission. And it's stuck

Jon O ne if you had a stutter,

Molly Maybe. Yeah, I don't know they just, everyone, everyone gets a nickname in Smoking Apples apart from me, Matt and Hattie, basically.

Matt All right. One final question for you each then, Molly we'll start with you. What is your favourite piece of Flux music?

Molly Oh, my goodness. I knew you were going to ask this question. Oh, I don't know. It's it's the tight one for me between the unbreak my heart music, which is now what that piece is called in my head. And I love the bit in the end. Right at the end where it starts, I mean I can't describe it. Bing, bing, bing, bing. I have to do it. And then it's like really joyful and uplifting. It's like the moment where she's it's like she's resolved her story and it's a really resolving, resounding kind of satisfying from that perspective piece of music to listen to is right at the very end of the show. That's my second favourite or equal favourite to unbreak my heart. Fun break my heart, sorry, let rename it.

Matt Amazing. Jon, then what's your first or, well, what's your favourite memory of working or Smoking Apples?

Jon Well, I've already given you one, which is, you know, the first first day I have. Um, but I actually for me, to be honest, was, was when we actually put the whole production together and yeah. Working with the whole team, with all the lighting, amazing lighting and and and just the general the set as well, just, it was yeah. I think I always enjoy that moment in every production I work on, but this one in particular, because you had this incredible set with all the lights and yeah, this is all very it's all very exciting. So just and I guess. Yeah. And, you know, that did sort of when I first saw the set actually that did sort of really help as well, because you've got something to visualise and when you're when you're making stuff, sonic stuff. So yeah. I think that.

Matt Awesome. That sounds great. Well, it was a lovely, nice note to leave it on. And I mean, obviously you've you've worked on Arbor, albeit briefly and some other stuff, and we're trying to rope you in to come on board properly for Kinder and hopefully you'll come on board for Buzz. So, you know, hopefully we'll get to work with you more

Jon Buzz?

Matt Yeah Buzz is a new one, I'll send you an email about that. (laughter) we'll talk with talk off air. Um so I'm going to play a track now and we'll smooth you out into a nice radio Smoking Apples least I'm joking. Thank you very much Jon, thank you Molly.

Jon Are you going to play Toni Braxton?

Molly We should shouldn't we, we'll fine it.

Jon Thank you guys.