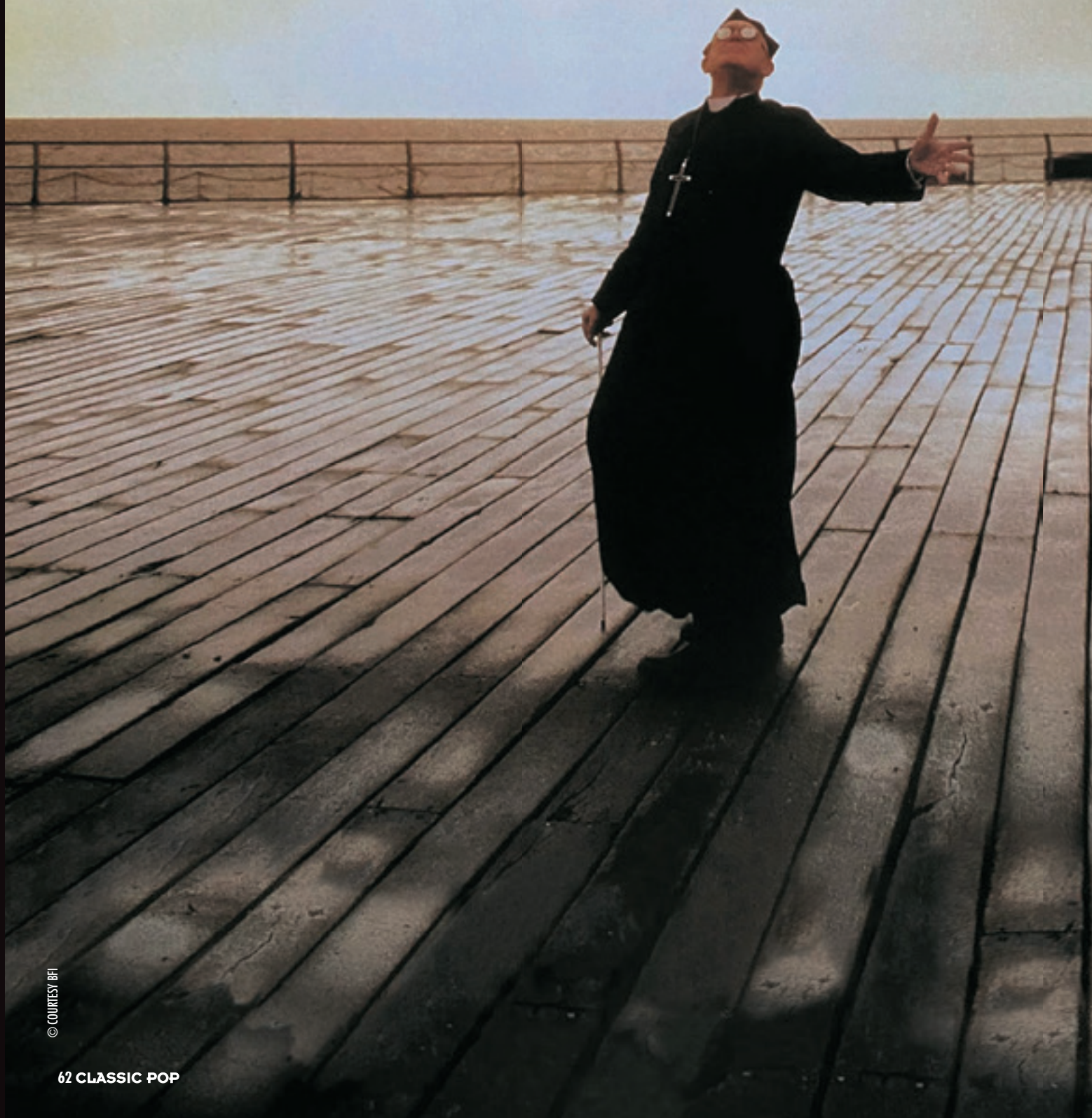


IT COULDN'T HAPPEN HERE



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SEA SIDE STORY

A BOX OFFICE BOMB IN 1988, THE PET SHOP BOYS' ONLY FEATURE FILM WAS – FOR OVER 30 YEARS – ONE OF THE MOST OBSCURE OFFERINGS IN THE PAIR'S OEUVRE. THIRTY-SIX YEARS ON FROM ITS RELEASE, WE LOOK BACK ON THIS GLORIOUSLY ODDBALL ODYSSEY THROUGH THATCHER'S BRITAIN...

STEVE O'BRIEN

Most big-screen musicals are on a mission to make us feel good. Chances are you've caught *The Young Ones* or *Blue Hawaii* or *Help!* on the box at some point. Schedulers cherish them – big artists, big songs, with a promise to put a smile on your face and a spring in your step. So when the Pet Shop Boys announced that they were making a feature-length musical in 1987, at the peak of their Imperial Phase, the general thinking was that this could be their *A Hard Day's Night* or *Summer Holiday*. But Neil and Chris were always too mischievous and awkward (no Russell Mulcahy or Steve Barron for their pop promos – they'd headed straight to Derek Jarman) to make a breezy, conventionally shaped musical. So when *It Couldn't Happen Here* arrived in cinemas in the summer of 1988, while it didn't come as a surprise to those of us who really understood what the Pet Shops Boys were about, to many, it was simply a bewildering jumble of surreal vignettes, half *Carry On*, half Luis Buñuel. *It Couldn't Happen Here*, then, doesn't pop up on BBC2 at one in the afternoon on bank holiday Mondays or turn up in lists of the 100 Greatest Movie Musicals. And when it was finally released on Blu-ray in 2020, it was on

the prestigious – and stridently arthouse – BFI label, not the kind of home you'd find *The Tommy Steele Story*.

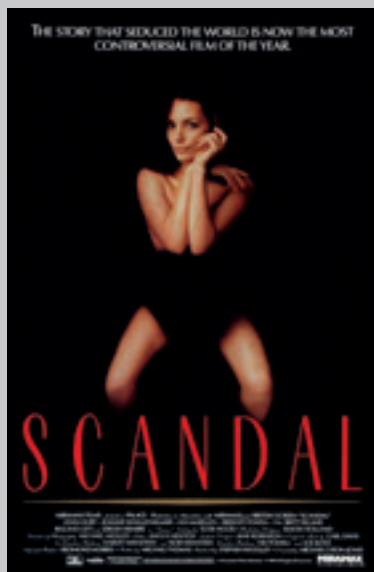
It Couldn't Happen Here didn't exactly set the box office on fire in 1988. Roasted by critics and shunned by audiences, by the time of its eventual release on DVD and Blu-ray, over three decades after its cinema release, it had acquired cult status, if only because it was one of the hardest-to-find pieces of work in the Pet Shop Boys oeuvre.

If *It Couldn't Happen Here* has any cinematic antecedents, it's more maverick movie fare such as John Boorman's Dave Clark Five-fronting *Catch Us If You Can* and 1968's *Head*, Bob Rafelson and Jack Nicholson's absurdist portrait of The Monkees. Both were gleefully peculiar, while also having a sharp satirical bite, both on the illusions of stardom and the commodification of youth culture. This movie would be, as director Jack Bond told the BFI, "a saucy seaside postcard come to life", a dreamlike journey through an imagined England.

Bond wasn't an obvious choice to direct a pop musical, but he was a natural fit with the Pet Shop Boys. In 1965, he'd made a documentary about Salvador Dali, an artist whose striking dream logic would clearly

Joss Ackland as the blind priest in Jack Bond's *It Couldn't Happen Here*

IT'S A SCANDAL



In 1989 the Pet Shop Boys re-entered the world of film, penning a song that would play over the end titles of the true-life British drama *Scandal*. *Nothing Has Been Proved* would be written by Tennant and Lowe, but sung by their old *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* collaborator Dusty

Springfield (Neil can be heard on the recording, whispering "It's a scandal, such a scandal" in the background).

Based on the story of disgraced Tory MP John Profumo, the film starred Ian McKellen with Joanne Whalley as the politician's mistress Christine Keeler. The lyrics reference all the story's main characters, from the osteopath Stephen Ward (who introduced Profumo to Keeler) to the model Mandy Rice-Davies ("Mandy's in the papers 'cause she tried to go to Spain/ She'll soon be in the dock and in the papers once again").

Produced by Tennant, Lowe and Julian Mendelsohn, *Nothing Has Been Proved* made No.16 in the UK and was Springfield's first solo Top 20 hit since 1968's *Son Of A Preacher Man*. It was later included on her 1990 album, *Reputation*. The Pet Shop Boys' original demo, with lead vocals from Tennant, was included on the expanded reissue of their 1988 album *Introspective* in 2001.

Producer Stephen Woolley would call on Neil and Chris again to work on the soundtrack to his 1992 film *The Crying Game* (they produced the film's biggest hit, Boy George's version of the title track).

influence *It Couldn't Happen Here*. Bond's CV was littered with experimental features, often made alongside his then-partner Jane Arden. He'd also directed a number of *South Bank Show* programmes, on such subjects as Werner Herzog and Patricia Highsmith. Bond, it seemed, was sufficiently highbrow for pop's brainiest duo.

It was specifically a film that Bond had made about Roald Dahl that had turned the Pet Shop Boys onto him. After playing with the idea of making a long-form video for their 1987 album *Actually* (with Zbigniew Rybczynski, the Polish filmmaker who'd directed their *Opportunities (Let's Make Lots Of Money)* clip), their plans changed when they approached Bond about making an

hour-long special – intended either for TV or VHS – based around their music. It was only after filming had started that it was decided to expand the movie to feature-length.

Bond's Roald Dahl film had featured a character played by Ian McKellen travelling through scenes from Dahl's books, inspiring the Pet Shop Boys to envision a movie where "we would be placed within the landscapes of our songs," as Tennant remembered to the British Film Institute.

"We'd had such fun making our videos," Chris Lowe told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1988, "and the whole business of marrying sounds to images always intrigued us so much that a film seemed like the next logical step. It was something we always wanted to do."



With guest star Barbara Windsor (centre)

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Tennant and Lowe both riffed on their respective public images for their roles in *It Couldn't Happen Here*

Though they had no intention of aping The Beatles with their first feature film, *It Couldn't Happen Here* entered production with the working title 'A Hard Day's Shopping', a wink nod both to the Fabs' big screen debut and the third track off *Actually*.

Unlike *A Hard Day's Night* – or even the looser *Catch Us If You Can* – there's no plot to speak of in *It Couldn't Happen Here*. Instead, the film follows Neil and Chris around a stylised, surrealist England, filled with benign and sinister eccentrics. Its stream of consciousness narrative had more in common with European arthouse cinema than anything else your Odeons and Cannons were screening in 1988. During its lean 87 minutes, we witness wrestlers scrapping on a seaside big wheel, World War II soldiers listening to a mournful violinist, a commuter on fire, a couple of black and white striped-faced zookeepers ushering a zebra onto a train and Barbara Windsor having a jumbo-sized Full English tipped all over her. Characters weave in and out of the story, often by actors playing multiple parts: Barbara Windsor is the amorous owner of a seaside boarding house and also a suburban housewife, lip-syncing Dusty Springfield's vocals for *What Have I Done*



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To Deserve This? Neil Dickson triples up as a Regency dandy, a spivvy car salesman and a World War II fighter pilot (a subtle nod to his role two years previous as WE Johns' pilot adventurer Biggles), while *The New Avengers'* Gareth Hunt appears as a theatrical ventriloquist, an end-of-the-pier comedian ("It's only a larf – no 'arm done!") and a lascivious ice cream seller. Joss Ackland, who just a year later would star as the villain in *Lethal Weapon 2*, would steal the show, however, as a serial-killing priest ("I had a girlfriend once who used to sing on the radio. Every time she walked under a bridge you couldn't hear her sing"), and it's Ackland who features in the video for the Pet Shop Boys' 1987 cover of Elvis Presley's *Always On My Mind*. That promo was the most the general public ever saw of *It Couldn't Happen Here*. Using the *Always On My Mind* sequence from the movie, where Tennant performs the song in a taxi cab, with Chris driving and Joss Ackland's glaring priest in the backseat, it's punctuated with clips of the then yet-to-be-released film. (The song itself would be the duo's third No. 1.)

Musically, the film takes from their first two albums (*Always On My Mind* excepted). All of *Please* and *Actually's* 45s are present

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and correct, as well as some deeper cuts, such as *Hit Music*, *One More Chance*, *Two Divided By Zero* and *King's Cross*. But the track that's weaved through the film like words through seaside rock is the titular *It Couldn't Happen Here*. The song's aching melancholia appears to have set the tone for the movie and was a collaboration between Neil and Chris and revered film composer Ennio Morricone.

"The lyric is about this friend of mine who was diagnosed with having AIDS,"

Tennant said of the track in the sleeve notes to *Actually's* reissue. "In the first verse we are all teenagers in Newcastle in the whole glam period, and the song describes the Newcastle scene: 'in six-inch heels quoting magazines' – we'd always buy *Harpers & Queen*. We were all very ambitious. 'Who do you think you are?' refers to the idea that gay people were too public... And then AIDS comes along. I remember my friend and I discussing AIDS, and how people said it wasn't going to develop in England like it had in America. We said it couldn't happen here."

In the film, Neil and Chris don't really stray far from their public image. Tennant spends the entirety of the movie tuxedoed and tousle-haired, "a jaded bright young thing from an early Noël Coward play", as writer Sukhdev Sandhu puts it. Lowe, meanwhile, is mostly mute and unsmiling, as inscrutable and enigmatic as his on-stage persona, his only break from character when he's seen dancing in a field for the *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* sequence. Bond wisely keeps their dialogue to a minimum – the few lines Tennant has to deliver don't suggest that he was any loss to the acting world – and surrounds



Chris and Neil in a shot familiar from their video to *Always On My Mind*

"I MADE THE FILM IN THE THATCHER BRITAIN OF 1987 WITH ITS STRANGE DEPICTION OF ENGLISHNESS AND IT PROBABLY DOES REFLECT THE MOOD OF THOSE TIMES"

JACK BOND

them with bona fide thespians. The presence of Joss Ackland, Gareth Hunt, Neil Dickson and even Barbara Windsor give the film cinematic credibility as does Simon Archer's doleful cinematography. Despite its modest origins as a video companion to *Actually*, and fleeting life on the big screen, it absolutely works as what it is – a full-blooded, visually ravishing feature film, albeit of the rarefied arthouse variety.

Maybe it was always too much to expect *It Couldn't Happen Here* to pull in the punters. It may have headlined one of the country's premier pop acts but its wilful oddness and its impulse to show off (there are quotes from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Lycidas*, while even Tennant's own lines – "Ever since I was

a child, the comic and the hostile seemed to go hand in hand" – have a self-consciously literary quality about them) were never going to compete against *Crocodile Dundee II* or *Police Academy 5: Assignment Miami Beach*.

For all its high-mindedness, however, it's not immune from moments of crassness and objectification. Dominique Barnes, an actress famous at the time for starring as John Alderton's daughter in the Channel 4 sitcom *Father's Day*, doesn't speak a word of dialogue in the film, and appears mostly as sexual titillation, flashing her stockings and suspenders in one scene, standing in front of a window in just her bra and pants in another. For a band as progressive as the Pet Shop Boys, there are some moments in



It Couldn't Happen Here which look now, three and a half decades on, to be tone deaf to the sexual politics of the era.

Pop musicals were rare in the late 1980s. Why go to the cinema to watch your favourite artist when you could see them on MTV for free? So it was never a given that the Pet Shop Boys would have needed to make a film that simply showed them performing. What we got instead is a filmic portrait of the Pet Shop Boys' world, a travelogue culled from the lyrics of their first two albums.

"The film was dismissed at the time and we got a lot of 'vanity project' criticism for it," Tennant said to the BFI a few years back. "But looking at it now, I still think it's as beautiful and weird and silly as it seemed to

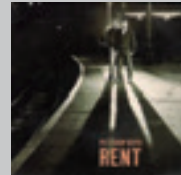
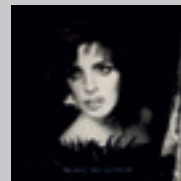
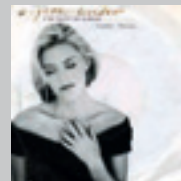
us in 1988. And there's something strangely moving about these two reserved young men travelling together through a lonely and often hostile landscape."

"[*It Couldn't Happen Here*] has been described as the 'first post-Brexit film' and 'a light-hearted *Clockwork Orange*,'" Jack Bond reflected in 2020 to the BFI. "I made the film in the Thatcher Britain of 1987 with its strange depiction of Englishness and it probably does reflect the mood of those times, which has become even more relevant today."

It Couldn't Happen Here remains something of a curio in the Pet Shop Boys canon, and it wasn't even until 2020 that most fans got to see it (a VHS, long since

SCREEN TIME

A SELECTION OF PET SHOP BOYS SONGS THAT HAVE FEATURED IN MOVIES...



I'M NOT SCARED (EIGHTH WONDER VERSION)

Lethal Weapon 2 (1989)

SO SORRY, I SAID (LIZA MINNELLI VERSION)

Mr. Frost (1990)

IT'S A SIN

Party Monster (2003)

ALWAYS ON MY MIND

I Now Pronounce You Chuck And Larry (2007)

FLAMBOYANT

Turbo (2008)

IT'S A SIN

Bronson (2009)

WEST END GIRLS

Diana (2013)

IT'S A SIN

Blinded By The Light (2019)

OPPORTUNITIES (LET'S MAKE LOTS OF MONEY)

Tetris (2023)

ALWAYS ON MY MIND

All Of Us Strangers (2023)

RENT

Saltburn (2023)

deleted, had been put out in the late 80s). By then, however, the British Film Institute had deemed it important enough to get a full bells and whistles release, complete with commentary, booklet and featurettes. Thirty-six years on, the Pet Shop Boys' only film deserves its status as an underloved classic of its kind. Because it's not *Help!*, it's not *The Young Ones*, it's absolutely its own thing. Like the Pet Shop Boys themselves, there's nothing else quite like *It Couldn't Happen Here*. ■