

Graham Greene off key when it came to lyrics

By HUGH DAVIES

GRAHAM Greene may have been incapable of writing a bad novel, but the musician John Barry yesterday recalled an awkward moment 35 years ago when he had to be honest with the author about his skill as a songwriter.

They met at the beginning of "a long, long journey" by Barry to bring Greene's *Brighton Rock* to the musical stage, a labour of love that moves into high gear this week as casting begins in London. The show opens at Islington's Almeida Theatre on October.

Barry yesterday recalled his difficult meeting in the late 1960s, when no other contemporary Englishman enjoyed so high a reputation for his literature. Greene had spent a week carefully crafting the lyrics for two numbers.

Barry said: "They were far too literal, too wordy. I had to tell him that lyric writing was not his forte."

Barry's odyssey began with a first meeting at the writer's flat at Albany, near Piccadilly



Attenborough in the 1947 film

Circus. "Graham, who liked music, said he wanted to have a crack at the lyrics," said Barry at his home in Oyster Bay, New York. "I replied, 'Lyric writing is a million miles from creating a novel. You are a very, very literal writer, and writing lyrics is the exact opposite of what you are. Brevity is the key.'"

"To illustrate what I meant, I sang two Irving Berlin numbers, beginning with *What'll I Do*. But he said: 'I'd

still like to have a go.' About a week later, he sent a page of foolscap packed, in very small type, with two songs he had written.

"We met again, and I was quaking inside, when I told him. I was as polite as I could be. He was a very bright guy. He took it very well. He totally accepted the situation. He could see exactly what I was getting at."

The project foundered shortly after, when Greene asked Barry and Wolf Mankowitz, the sardonic author of Cliff Richard's *Expresso Bongo*, to his flat.

"Roy Boulting [who filmed *Brighton Rock*] arrived unexpectedly, and all hell broke loose when he saw Wolf. They flew at each other, in front of myself and Greene. I've never heard such swearing. Both stormed out. There was a moment's silence. Then Graham said, 'Would you like a drink?'"

"To this day, I have no idea what the row was about. But it put paid to the project."

After another false start some years later, the producer Bill Kenwright



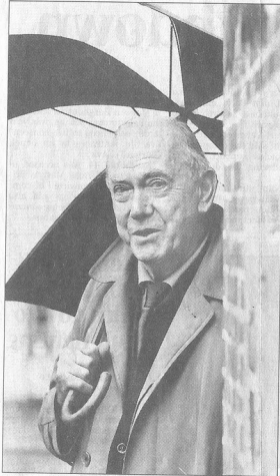
John Barry: 'The songs were too wordy. I had to tell I

came to him. "He remembered me talking about *Brighton Rock*, it being a marvellously dark story, and asked if I still wanted to do the show. Twenty-four hours later, he said, 'I've got the rights.' I said, 'Let's go.' And here we are."

An immediate priority was to get Don Black aboard. Black and Barry have been close for decades and in 1966 they won Oscars for *Born Free*. Black, the lyricist for *Bombay Dreams*, said from

New York, where his production, *Dracula Musical*, is opening on Broadway: "The show has the feel of the 1950s. I know the East End and Hackney, and can relate to Pinkie, the lead character."

In the 1947 Boulting brothers film, a 24-year-old Richard Attenborough's performance of his razor-wielding teenage gangster Pinkie, who not abide smoking or drinking but had no q



Graham Greene: he spent a week trying to write two songs

Graham Greene off key when it came to lyrics

By HUGH DAVIES

GRAHAM Greene may have been incapable of writing a bad novel, but the musician John Barry yesterday recalled an awkward moment 35 years ago when he had to be honest with the author about his skill as a songwriter.

They met at the beginning of "a long, long journey" by Barry to bring Greene's *Brighton Rock* to the musical stage, a labour of love that moves into high gear this week as casting begins in London. The show opens at Islington's Almeida Theatre on October.

Barry yesterday recalled his difficult meeting in the late 1960s, when no other contemporary Englishman enjoyed so high a reputation for his literature. Greene had spent a week carefully crafting the lyrics for two numbers.

Barry said: "They were far too literal, too wordy. I had to tell him that lyric writing was not his forte."

Barry's odyssey began with a first meeting at the writer's flat at Albany, near Piccadilly



Attenborough in the 1947 film

Circus. "Graham, who liked music, said he wanted to have a crack at the lyrics," said Barry at his home in Oyster Bay, New York. "I replied, 'Lyric writing is a million miles from creating a novel. You are a very, very literal writer, and writing lyrics is the exact opposite of what you are. Brevity is the key.'"

"To illustrate what I meant, I sang two Irving Berlin numbers, beginning with *What'll I Do*. But he said: 'I'd

still like to have a go.' About a week later, he sent a page of foolscap packed, in very small type, with two songs he had written.

"We met again, and I was quaking inside, when I told him. I was as polite as I could be. He was a very bright guy. He took it very well. He totally accepted the situation. He could see exactly what I was getting at."

The project foundered shortly after, when Greene asked Barry and Wolf Mankowitz, the sardonic author of Cliff Richard's *Expresso Bongo*, to his flat.

"Roy Boulting [who filmed *Brighton Rock*] arrived unexpectedly, and all hell broke loose when he saw Wolf. They flew at each other, in front of myself and Greene. I've never heard such swearing. Both stormed out. There was a moment's silence. Then Graham said, 'Would you like a drink?'"

"To this day, I have no idea what the row was about. But it put paid to the project."

After another false start some years later, the producer Bill Kenwright



John Barry: 'The songs were too wordy. I had to tell him that lyric writing was not his forte'

came to him. "He remembered me talking about *Brighton Rock*, it being a marvellously dark story, and asked if I still wanted to do the show. Twenty-four hours later, he said, 'I've got the rights,' I said, 'Let's go.' And here we are."

An immediate priority was to get Don Black aboard. Black and Barry have been close for decades and in 1966 they won Oscars for *Born Free*. Black, the lyricist for *Bombay Dreams*, said from

New York, where his latest production, *Dracula, The Musical*, is opening on Broadway: "The show will have the feel of the 1930s. I know the East End and Hackney, and can relate to Pinkie, the lead character."

In the 1947 Boulting brothers film, a 24-year-old Richard Attenborough gave the performance of his life as the razor-wielding teenage gangster Pinkie, who could not abide smoking or drinking but had no qualms

about cold-blooded murder. Lord Attenborough's son, Michael, is directing the new musical. He said: "Dad is dead chuffed. He thinks it's a bit of a hoot. I've talked to him a lot about it, as he also played Pinkie in the West End version in 1943."

Barry has scored 19 songs for the story of a seafaring gang war. He still has the two Greene songs in his attic. But Barry said: "I'm showing them to no one. I'd hate it if someone did that to me."