



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

His Lordship

His Lordship

Directed by: Michael Powell
a Westminster Films Ltd production
Presented by: Westminster Films Ltd
Produced by: Jerry Jackson
Production Manager: Walter Tennyson
Assistant Direction: Milton Field
Screen Play by: Ralph Smart
From the novel 'The Right Honourable' by:
Oliver Madox Hueffer
Photography: Geoffrey Faithfull, Arthur Grant
Editing: A. [John] Seabourne
Art Direction: Frank Wells
Construction: W. Saunders
Music and Lyrics: Walter Leigh, Ronald Hill,
Paul Bergen, Richard Addinsell,
V.C. Clinton Baddeley
Music/Lyrics: Eric Maschwitz *
Musical Direction: Maurice Winnick
Dances: Max Rivers
Sound: Michael Rose
Sound System: RCA Photophone
Made at: Nettlefold Studios (Walton-on-Thames)
Cast:
Jerry Verno (*Bert Gibbs*)
Janet Megrew (*Ilya Myona*)
Ben Welden (*Washington Roosevelt Lincoln*)
Polly Ward (*Leninia*)
Muriel George (*Emma Gibbs, Bert's mother*)
Peter Gawthorne (*Ferguson, the butler*)
Michael Hogan (*Comrade Curzon*)
V.C. Clinton Baddeley (*Comrade Howard*)
Patrick Ludlow (*Hon. Grimsthaite*)
Ian Wilson (*man listening to the speech*) *
Valerie Hobson (*last girl in park montage*) *
Anna Lee (*scrub girl chorine*) *
Ray Noble (*orchestra leader*) *
UK 1932
72 mins
Digital 4K

* Uncredited

The remastering of *Rynox*, *Hotel Splendide*, *His Lordship*, *The Fire Raisers*, *Red Ensign* and *The Night of the Party* has been supported by Matt Spick and the Charles Skey Charitable Trust.

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SIGHT AND SOUND

The second production of Powell and Jerry Jackson's Westminster Films company, *His Lordship* stands as a fascinating oddity – a musical satire of the British class system that, although received poorly at the time, now looks highly enjoyable, with a very British sense of humour and endearingly memorable songs. Long believed lost, a print was eventually found following the BFI's 1992 'Missing Believed Lost' campaign.

The film upends the usual British snobberies by having Verno play a plumber who discovers to his horror that he is, in fact, a hereditary Lord – something he keeps a secret from his fiancée Leninia (Polly Ward) because, as her name might indicate, she is a communist who disapproves of such privilege. Ralph Smart's witty script is full of colloquial 1930s dialogue, and Powell makes smart use of location footage, with the result that *His Lordship* today offers unlikely windows into its time – even sending up the British susceptibility to Hollywood PR. It also introduced audiences to the wonderful Muriel George, best remembered for her part in Cavalcanti's *Went the Day Well?* ten years later; here she plays Bert's mother, making her film debut aged 50.

However, the contemporary response was damning. The film was reportedly barracked from the screen when it opened at London's Dominion in September 1932, and the trade press seized on it as an example of the apparent damage the quota system was doing to the prestige of British cinema. Tellingly, this is a charge similar to many of those levelled by some contemporary reviewers at Powell and Pressburger's 1940s masterworks. Even at this early stage of his career, Powell was already confounding the narrow strictures imposed by many in the British film industry.

James Bell

One of Michael Powell's early 'quota quickies' (he made seven in 1932 alone), *His Lordship* is a light and frothy musical comedy that intriguingly anticipates many of Powell's far greater films. The way the musical numbers are integrated organically into the action anticipates *Tales of Hoffmann* (1951) and *Oh... Rosalinda!!* (1955), its portrait of the complexities of the English class system as seen through the eyes of foreigners would later find more eloquent expression in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), and there's even an alarming hint of *Peeping Tom* (1960) in a close-up of an abandoned photograph of film star Ilya Myona being speared by a park-keeper's stick.

However, audiences of the time were oblivious to this, and the film's critical and commercial reception was very poor. *Kinematograph Weekly* complained that it was too ambitious for its own good, saying that 'This effort, which starts off as a musical comedy, drifts into burlesque, then finishes up in a rich satirical vein, is neither flesh, fowl, or good red herring.' This is hard to deny, but it also shows that Powell's ambitions were racing ahead of his budgets even at this very early stage.

The premise promises much: Cockney plumber Bert Gibbs inherits a peerage from his father, which complicates his relationship with his avowedly communist fiancée Leninia, after two trouble-making Bolsheviks spill the beans. But in the meantime, Bert has been embroiled in a scheme concocted by overbearing American publicity agent Washington Lincoln that involves him

POWELL BEFORE PRESSBURGER

Rynox + Hotel Splendide

Mon 16 Oct 18:10; Fri 10 Nov 18:10

His Lordship

Tue 17 Oct 20:50; Sat 4 Nov 12:20

The Fire Raisers

Wed 18 Oct 18:40; Sat 11 Nov 12:30

Red Ensign + The Night of the Party

Tue 24 Oct 20:30; Sun 5 Nov 14:40

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marrying and divorcing a Russian-born film star in order to raise her profile and give him some much-needed cash.

But in practice, most performances tend towards broad caricature, and only Jerry Verno (in his fourth film for Powell) is particularly convincing as the hapless Bert. In fact, despite budgetary limitations, Powell does better with musical numbers, with their choreographed secretaries, photographers, Beefeaters and ermine-clad peers. The camera is impressively mobile for an early sound film, though this may have been for reasons of efficiency, in order to minimise the need for multiple camera set-ups.

Following its commercial failure, *His Lordship* vanished for six decades and was long believed lost (as many of Powell's 'quota quickies' still are). However, following the BFI's 'Missing Believed Lost' campaign, a print was discovered in a private collection and screened at the 1997 London Film Festival.

Michael Brooke, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

The initial reception afforded *His Lordship* was not too positive. It became clear quite soon that low budget British films were becoming stigmatised by the 'quickie' films, and often they were booed by the audience. This happened with *His Lordship*, which resulted in the Cinematograph Exhibitors Organisation arranging a meeting with United Artists to see if they could be released from their contracts.

Seen today in fact, the film appears to be one of the first signs of the distinctive eccentricity, vigour and sly humour that became much more marked in Powell's later collaborations with Emeric Pressburger. Unlike most of the films of this period in his career, this is neither a melodrama nor a thriller, but an ambitious musical that combines a complicated plot and musical numbers with a fluid visual style clearly emulating its American counterparts. Particularly memorable are scenes in the large (for a quota film) municipal park set, filmed in long fluid takes; the musical sequence in which various publicity photographs are staged and which involve Verno changing costume several times in quick succession; and the literal *deus ex machina* at the climax, in the form of an autogyro. It is also Powell's first musical and one of the first real indications of the importance of music in his later work.

Sergio Angelini