



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

The Fire Raisers

The Fire Raisers

Directed by: Michael Powell
Presented by: Gaumont-British Picture Corporation
Distributed by: W. & F. Film Service
Producer: Jerome Jackson *
Assistant Director: Bryan Wallace
By [Screenplay]: Michael Powell, Jerome Jackson
Photography: Leslie Rowson
Film Editor: D.N. Twist
Art Direction: Alfred Junge
Costumes: Gordon Conway
[Sound] Recordist: A.F. Birch
Recorded on: British Acoustic Film
[Recorded] at: Shepherd's Bush Studios
Cast:
Leslie Banks (*Jim Branton*)
Anne Grey (*Arden Brent*)
Carol Goodner (*Helen Vaughan*)
Frank Cellier (*Corbett Brent*)
Francis Sullivan (*Stedding*)
Laurence Anderson (*R.M. 'Copper' Twist*)
Henry Caine (*Bates*)
George Merritt (*Sonners*)
Joyce Kirby (*Polly*) *
Wally Patch (*Price, the trainer*) *
Ben Welden (*Bellini, Stedding's henchman*) *
Danny Green (*Stedding's henchman*) *
UK 1933
74 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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After a prolific run of 'quota' films, Powell signed to Gaumont-British on a four-film deal, where he benefited from better facilities and higher budgets. His first production was this atmospheric thriller about an insurance man in over his head with a gang of arsonists. A clear step up, the film boasts some well-staged set-pieces and is often surprisingly tough.

James Bell

The Fire Raisers was the first production in a four-picture deal between Michael Powell and his writing partner Jerome Jackson and Michael Balcon's Gaumont-British studio. Gaumont-British was then one of the two biggest companies in the British film industry (alongside British International Pictures), so this was a considerable step up for Powell and Jackson.

The film cost around £12,000 to produce, a bargain even in those days, and featured West End stage star Leslie Banks in the lead role. 'It was the first time that I had worked with a great actor,' Powell later wrote. 'He was an actor's actor. He had speed and he created magic.' Banks appeared in three further Powell films, including Powell's early favourite, *Red Ensign* (1935).

Described by Powell as 'a sort of Warner Brothers Newspaper Headline Story' and based on a contemporary scandal about Leopold Harris, an insurance assessor convicted of arson, *The Fire Raisers* is a mixed success. The narrative moves at great speed, and Banks' performance is restrained and elegant. But the direction is often crude and lacks the subtlety and genuine insights of Powell's later work.

Two scenes do stand out, however. In the first, Branton's assistant Bates (Henry Caine) is tied up and interrogated by Stedding (a chilling Francis L Sullivan) and his men, who suspect him of double-crossing them. We don't see Bates being beaten. Instead, Powell cuts from Bates to the faces of each of the interrogators. As the camera gets closer and closer to the men's faces, the editing gets faster, until holding on an extreme close-up of Bates' face, at which point he faints.

In the most atmospheric scene, Branton (Banks) returns to his office looking for Bates. The office has been wrecked. As Branton takes this in, he hears a faint tapping sound. Branton looks around, and sees a window blind cord tapping against the glass. He pauses and realises that there is another noise, coming from inside the large wall safe. He opens it to find Bates inside, bruised and near death. The scene, played without music, convincingly underscores an air of brutality.

Ann Ogidi, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk (with thanks to Sergio Angelini)