



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

The Thief of Bagdad

The Thief of Bagdad

Directed by: Ludwig Berger,
Michael Powell, Tim Whelan
©/Production Company:
Alexander Korda Film Productions
Distributed by: United Artists
Produced by: Alexander Korda
Associate Producers: Zoltan Korda,
William Cameron Menzies
Production Manager: David B. Cunynghame
Associate Directors: Geoffrey Boothby,
Charles David
Screenplay and Dialogue by: Miles Malleson
Scenario by: Lajos Biro
Chief Photographer: George Périal
Associate Photographer: Osmond Borradaile
Technicolor Director: Natalie Kalmus
Special Effects Directed by: Lawrence Butler
Supervising Editor: William Hornbeck
Film Editor: Charles Crichton
Production Designed in Colour by: Vincent Korda
Scenic Backgrounds: Percy Day
Costumes Designed by: Oliver Messel,
John Armstrong, Marcel Vertes
Musical Score and Songs by: Miklós Rózsa
Musical Director: Muir Mathieson
Sound Director: A.W. Watkins
Sound System: Western Electric Mirrophonic
uncredited
Additional Direction: Zoltan Korda,
William Cameron Menzies, Alexander Korda
Production Assistant: André de Toth
Co-ordinating 2nd Assistant Director: Jack Clayton
Camera Operator: Robert Krasker
Camera Assistant: Denys Coop
Special Effects: Tom Howard, Johnny Mills
Associate Designers: William Cameron Menzies,
Fred Pusey, Ferdinand Bellan
Orchestral Arrangements: Albert Srendry
Sound Assistant: John W. Mitchell
Studios: Denham Studios, General Service Studios
Cast:
Conrad Veidt (*Jaffar*)
Sabu (*Abu, the thief of Bagdad*)
June Duprez (*Princess*)
John Justin (*Ahmad*)
Rex Ingram (*Djinn*)
Miles Malleson (*Sultan*)
Morton Seltén (*the old king*)
Mary Morris (*Halima*)
Bruce Winston (*the merchant*)
Hay Petrie (*astrologer*)
Adelaide Hall (*singer*)
Roy Emerton (*jailer*)
Allan Jeayes (*the story teller*)
uncredited
Viscount (*the dog*)
Glynis Johns
John Salew
Norman Pierce
Frederick Burtwell
Otto Wallén
Henry Hallatt
Irmgard Spoliansky
Leslie Phillips, Cleo Laine (*extras*)
UK 1940©
106 mins

35mm – A BFI National Archive print (Sat 28 Oct)
and Digital (all other screenings)

Producer Alexander Korda originally assigned this *Arabian Nights*-style adventure – which had been a hit in its 1924 Hollywood version starring Douglas Fairbanks Sr – to the German director Ludwig Berger, but brought in Michael Powell when he was unhappy with Berger's vision for the film. When Berger refused to resign, Korda, in the most extreme example of his interfering tendencies, insisted on co-directing all of Berger's scenes, to the confusion of cast and crew and the disgust of Berger himself, who finally walked off the film. Korda strongly disapproved of Berger's style which, with its concentration on actors at the expense of the lavish sets, was almost the exact opposite to Korda's own approach as a director.

In the end, no fewer than six directors were involved in the picture. Powell handled many of the most spectacular sequences, including the celebrated scene in which the djinni (Rex Ingram) is released from the bottle. American Tim Whelan shot the battle scenes, and Berger was left with a few love scenes, most or all of which were later re-shot by Korda himself. When the production moved to America after the start of the war, Zoltan Korda and William Cameron Menzies shot additional footage there.

Despite its troubled production, *The Thief of Bagdad* was a great success when it was released in December 1940, its colourful fantasy offering audiences a welcome escape from the grim daily reality of war, at a time when both colour film stock and genuine fantasy were a rarity in Britain. As well as the spectacular effects, for which Laurence Butler won one of the film's three Academy Awards (the others were for cinematography and art direction), the film featured spirited performances, particularly from Sabu, already a star thanks to Korda's *The Elephant Boy* (d. Robert Flaherty/Zoltan Korda, 1937) and *The Drum* (d. Zoltan Korda, 1938) and the German star Conrad Veidt, whose sojourn in Britain had already included appearances in Powell and Pressburger's *The Spy in Black* (1939) and *Contraband* (1940).

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline

Alexander Korda, visionary and driving force behind the creation of *The Thief of Bagdad*, was by birth Hungarian. In the 30s he emigrated to Britain and set himself the task of producing films as big, as lavish and as internationally successful as the films then being made in Hollywood. In particular, Korda wanted to rival Disney. In 1937, when Disney was working on the full-length animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Korda proclaimed: 'I will do with living players what Walt Disney is doing with drawings.' Two years later, work started on the film with which Korda intended to make these words come true. He intended that *The Thief of Bagdad* should be more spectacular, more colourful, more magical and more breathtaking than anything that Hollywood had ever produced. Inspired by this vision, Korda kept a close personal watch on every aspect of the production. Nobody was left to get on with their job in peace. This is exemplified by an anecdote from the time. It was said that on one of his regular tours of the studio Korda inspected a set that his brother Vincent had designed and was building. Korda was instantly dismissive, saying: 'Vincent, you are crazy. This set stinks! Go away, get a lot of men, make it four times bigger – and paint it all crimson!'

STARVED FOR TECHNICOLOR: FANTASY AND SPECTACLE

A Matter of Life and Death

Mon 16 Oct 20:45 (+ intro by Thelma Schoonmaker and Kevin Macdonald); Sun 29 Oct 12:10; Sat 4 Nov 15:00; Tue 7 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by academic Lucy Bolton); Sun 19 Nov 18:30

Black Narcissus

Wed 18 Oct 20:50; Sun 22 Oct 18:30; Wed 8 Nov 18:15; Sun 12 Nov 18:50; Thu 16 Nov 20:50; Sat 18 Nov 20:50; Mon 20 Nov 20:45 (+ intro by author Mahesh Rao)

The Thief of Bagdad: An Arabian Fantasy in Technicolor (aka The Thief of Bagdad)

Fri 20 Oct 20:30; Tue 24 Oct 14:40; Sat 28 Oct 15:00; Sun 26 Nov 12:00

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In order to be able to rival Disney, *The Thief of Bagdad* had to achieve not only coloured sets, but also coloured effects. It was the first film to attempt this on a grand scale. (There had been a few minor colour effects in *The Wizard of Oz*, made a year earlier.) Special effects in colour need much more care and precision than special effects in black-and-white, because the colours used in the effect have to match perfectly the colours used in the live action. If they do not, then audiences find the result on the screen unconvincing. *The Thief of Bagdad* brought together a range of late 30s special effects techniques – and ultimately won an Oscar for them. There are matte shots, achieved by placing a mask over part of the camera lens when live action is being recorded, so that a portion of the film remains blank till filled by a painting. The flying horse was created by this method. There are also miniature models, such as the Temple of the Dawn, which on the screen looks like a skyscraper. By contrast, some of the props really were gigantic, such as the Djinni's foot in certain shots. Finally, there were optical effects, which involved splitting the screen into halves, with the Djinni on one side, and Abu on the other. By this means Rex Ingram was made to look hundreds of feet taller than he really was.

Born in 1924, Sabu, the young Indian actor playing the thief of the title, was regarded as being as important to the film's success as the special effects were. As a result of his appearance in *Elephant Boy* in 1937, and in *The Drum* in 1938, he was an internationally-known child star – the only one that British cinema has ever produced. (Such big names as Freddie Bartholomew and, much later, Hayley Mills, achieved stardom through their appearance in American films, rather than British.) Because of the outbreak of war, *The Thief of Bagdad* took so long to make (from March 1939 to October 1940) that some people think Sabu looks much older in certain shots than in others. At the end of the film he flies off on the carpet 'to have some fun' – while he is still young enough to enjoy it.

Terry Staples

A contemporary review

In this most lavish production the carefully planned colour scheme and the skilful use of the camera make the film one of the most satisfactory colour films yet created. The story is as loose as that of any pantomime, to which type of play the film can be compared. Sabu makes an excellent thief and goes through his adventures with an almost Cockney nimbleness of wit and hand. June Duprez and John Justin make a pair of handsome lovers and Conrad Veidt is the wickedest of Grand Viziers. The most polished performance of all is that of Miles Malleon as the old Sultan of Basra with a passion for mechanical toys. Extensive use is made of trick photography and this is the least satisfactory aspect of the production.

Monthly Film Bulletin, January 1941