



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

The Spy in Black

Smith

Directed by: Michael Powell
Production Company: Embankment Fellowship Centre
Producer: R.M Lloyd *
[Story] By: Major Lloyd
Photographed by: Bernard Browne
Cast:
Ralph Richardson (*John Smith*)
Flora Robson (*Mary Smith*)
Wally Patch (*Harry Jones*)
Allan Jeayes (*employer*)
UK 1939 10 mins
35mm

The Spy in Black

Directed by: Michael Powell
Production Company: Harefield Productions
Presented by: Alexander Korda
Produced by: Irving Asher
Assistant Director: Pat Jenkins *
Screen Play by: Emeric Pressburger
Scenario by: Roland Pertwee
Based on a story by: J. Storer Clouston
Photographed by: Bernard Browne
Camera Assistant: Gerry Massey-Collier *
Supervising Film Editor: William Hornbeck
Film Editor: Hugh Stewart
Assistant Editor: John Guthrie *
Art Director: Frederick Pusey
Supervising Art Director: Vincent Korda
Music Composed by: Miklos Rozsa
Musical Director: Muir Mathieson
Sound Director: A.W. Watkins
Sound Assistant: John W. Mitchell *
Sound System:
Western Electric Mirrophonic Recording
Cast:
Conrad Veidt (*Captain Hardt*)
Sebastian Shaw (*Lieutenant Ashington*)
Valerie Hobson (*the school mistress*)
Marius Goring (*Lieutenant Felix Schuster*)
June Duprez (*Anne Burnett*)
Athole Stewart (*The Rev Hector Matthews*)
Agnes Laughlan (*Mrs Matthews*)
Helen Haye (*Mrs Sedley*)
Cyril Raymond (*The Rev John Harris*)
George Summers (*Captain Walter Ratter*)
Hay Petrie (*James, the ship's engineer*)
Grant Sutherland (*Bob Bratt*)
Robert Rendel (*admiral*)
Mary Morris (*chauffeuse*)
Margaret Moffatt (*Kate*)
Kenneth Warrington (*Commander Denis*)
Torin Thatcher (*submarine officer*)
Bernard Miles (*Hans, hotel receptionist*)
Esma Cannon (*Maggie*) *
Skelton Knaggs (*German orderly*) *
Jack Lambert (*passport official*) *
Brian Herbert (*corporal guarding POWs*) *
Graham Stark (*pageboy*) *
UK 1939 83 mins
35mm

* Uncredited

The screening on Sun 29 Oct will be introduced by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator

For his first project at Alexander Korda's London Films, Michael Powell was introduced to young Hungarian screenwriter Emeric Pressburger for this World War I drama. The pairing was a propitious one – *The Spy in Black* was a hit both here and in the US (under the name *U-Boat 29*), and one of the most successful partnerships in British cinema was born.

Released on the eve of World War II in August 1939, *The Spy in Black* makes an interesting contrast with the later *49th Parallel* (1941), made as an unambiguous propaganda film. Although both feature a U-boat commander as a villain, Captain Hardt (Conrad Veidt) is a very different character to his counterpart in *49th Parallel*, Lieut. Hirth (Eric Portman). The film goes to some lengths to humanise him in the early part of the film, showing his easy friendship with his colleague Schuster (Marius Goring), and he is altogether a more honourable German.

Filmed in the Orkneys, *The Spy in Black* marked Powell's second visit to the Scottish islands, following his breakthrough film *The Edge of the World* (1937). He was already completely in love with their bleak beauty, and he was back again a few years later to film *'I Know Where I'm Going!'* (1945).

By now, Powell was almost a veteran – *Spy* was his 26th film as director – but this was his first major project, and the light touch and confidence he displayed is surprising. Notably, the minor characters are rounded, believable and treated with respect, quite different from the crude caricatures common in British films of the period, and a step forward from the more stereotyped Welsh villagers in Powell's earlier *The Phantom Light* (1935).

In one particularly impressive sequence, in which Hardt makes his way past patrolling guards to establish contact with the 'schoolmistress' who he believes to be his ally, Powell showed a rare ability to blend humour and suspense, a gift most commonly associated with Hitchcock, whose position as undisputed master of British cinema was now vacant following his departure for Hollywood.

The starstruck Powell and Pressburger were thrilled to be working with a hero of the German cinema, Conrad Veidt, star of the expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919). A strong cast also included Valerie Hobson, June Duprez and Marius Goring; all would work with Powell again.

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline

A contemporary review

This intricate story is gripping from beginning to end, and very skilfully directed. It has abundance of thrilling incidents, effective suspense values, and spectacular sea-scenes. The climax is grim but logical. The acting is outstandingly good. Conrad Veidt is brilliant in the lead. He is throughout a tragic if slightly sinister figure, and wins respect and sympathy as a patriot with the qualities most admirable and admired in soldier, sailor, or airman of any nationality – loyalty, courage, obedience, and steadfast endurance. Valerie Hobson is delightful as the schoolmistress showing resource and humour. The remaining players are all excellent in their different ways. The technical qualities are very good indeed. The atmosphere is realistic and convincing, the photography noteworthy. Pictures of Scapa Flow, of the Orkney Islands, and of the Fleet are particularly effective.

Monthly Film Bulletin, March 1939

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

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