



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

49th Parallel

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Directed by: Michael Powell
Production Company: Ortus Films
Sponsor: Ministry of Information *
Managing Director: John Sutro
Produced by: Michael Powell
Production Manager: Harold Boxall
Associates: Roland Gillett, George Brown
Associate Director: A. Seabourne
Continuity: Betty Curtis
Original Story/Screenplay by: Emeric Pressburger
Scenario by: Rodney Ackland, Emeric Pressburger
Director of Photography: Frederick Young
Special Backgrounds: Osmond Borrowdale
Cameramen: Skeets Kelly, Henty Henty-Creer
Editor: David Lean
Associate Editor: Hugh Stewart
Art Director: David Rawnsley
Associate Art Directors: Sydney S. Streeter, Frederick Pusey
Make-up: George Blackler *
Musical Score Composed by: Ralph Vaughan Williams
With: The London Symphony Orchestra
Musical Director: Muir Mathieson
Assistant to Music Director: Edward Williams *
Sound Supervisor: A.W. Watkins
Sound Recorders: C.C. Stevens, Walter Darling
Canadian Adviser: Nugent M. Clougher
Cast:
The U-Boat Crew
Richard George (*Kommandant Bernsdorff*)
Eric Portman (*Lieutenant Ernst Hirth*)
Raymond Lovell (*Lieutenant Kuhnecke*)
Niall MacGinnis (*Vogel*)
Peter Moore (*Kranz*)
John Chandos (*Lohrmann*)
Basil Appleby (*Jahner*)
The Canadians
Laurence Olivier (*Johnnie Barras*)
Finlay Currie (*Albert, the factor*)
On Ley (*Nick, the Eskimo*)
Anton Walbrook (*Peter*)
Glynis Johns (*Anna*)
Charles Victor (*Andreas*)
Frederick Piper (*David*)
Leslie Howard (*Philip Armstrong Scott*)
Tawera Moana (*George, the Indian*)
Eric Clavering (*Art*)
Charles Rolfe (*Bob*)
Raymond Massey (*Andy Brock*)
and
Theodore Salt, O.W. Fonger
(*United States customs officers*)
UK 1941
123 mins
35mm

* Uncredited

For their third collaboration, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger were engaged by the Ministry of Information to make a propaganda film. *49th Parallel* (1941; *The Invaders* in the US), was a concerted attempt to influence opinion in neutral America into supporting their government's entry into the war.

Pressburger proved an enthusiastic propagandist. As he later said, 'Goebbels considered himself an expert on propaganda, but I thought I'd show him a thing or two.' This is despite the fact that Pressburger's own status in Britain at the time was as an 'enemy alien'. On returning from Canada he found himself imprisoned and threatened with deportation, until Powell and the MOI intervened.

Pressburger's script, which won him an Academy Award for Best Original Story, charts the progress of a German U-boat crew stranded in Canada after the sinking of their craft off Hudson Bay. As the six crew members, led by the unflappable Corporal Hirth (Eric Portman), struggle to reach the neutral territory of the United States, they encounter a series of opponents, who serve to contrast Canada's democracy and ethnic diversity with the Nazis' moral bankruptcy.

The ruthless Hirth is a far cry from the more sympathetically portrayed German officer played by Conrad Veidt in Powell and Pressburger's earlier *The Spy in Black* (1939). Unburdened by doubts in himself or in his philosophy, he has no patience with weakness or sensitivity. But his arrogance is his undoing, for he repeatedly underestimates his opponents. The other Nazis each have their own distinct characters, and there is even a 'good Nazi', which attracted some criticism at the time.

German actress Elisabeth Bergner, the only woman in a leading role, jumped ship after shooting a few scenes in Canada; it became clear she had only signed on to get to America. Fortunately, she was very effectively replaced by the unknown Glynis Johns. Two other stars, Laurence Olivier and Raymond Massey, almost pulled out, and the MOI threatened to pull the plug due to budget overspend. When Hollywood giants David O. Selznick and Samuel Goldwyn showed an interest, however, J. Arthur Rank stepped in and provided the rest of the money. He – and the Treasury – made their money back comfortably: a success at home, the film became the biggest British hit to date in American cinemas.

49th Parallel was the first of two collaborations between Powell and Pressburger and the already highly regarded editor David Lean.

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline

Michael Powell on '49th Parallel'

I'd read a feature article by Beverley Baxter, a Canadian journalist very popular in London. It was about the fact that Canada had come into the war in spite of French Canadian resistance, and how eventually the influence of Canada would bring America into the war. He didn't absolutely say so but he hinted it. And so I said the same to [Kenneth] Clark [Head of the Films Division of the MOI] and, 'I'd like to gather together three or four people in whom I have confidence and we'll go over there and do the research.' He asked what the story would be and I said, 'How can we tell until we go? You send us and we'll

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49th Parallel

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Sun 22 Oct 15:10; Tue 31 Oct 20:40 (+ intro by film historian Ian Christie)

Contraband

Mon 23 Oct 17:50 (+ intro by Miranda Gower-Qian, BFI Inclusion Lead); Mon 30 Oct 20:30

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come back with a story.' And because we'd had successes with original stories and, I suppose, because I was full of drive, they put up £5,000 and in a week or two we were off. This was really the start of the MOI actually moving into feature films: they had approved the idea of making a film in Canada, the rest of the complications they left to us.

Emeric thought of the idea – the crew of a sunken German U-boat stranded in Canada – of *49th Parallel* about two days out on the boat. When we got to Halifax, we went straight to Ottawa. In those days, and even now, you can call a Minister direct on the telephone and he answers. I called all the people I thought we ought to have in on it – the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, Supply, the Prime Minister's secretary – and arranged a meeting next day. We had a big round-table meeting where I told them the story, making most of it up because I had only the basic idea from Emeric – who sat beaming throughout – and they promised us every possible support, gave us letters of introduction right across the continent.

By the time we came back, Duff Cooper was Minister of Information and the Treasury were rather naturally against the scheme because things were in a terrible state – France was falling and there was tremendous chaos. In spite of that I sold the idea to Duff Cooper and they put up, out of the Treasury, £50,000 in dollars. I was able to contact my actors and get off within about a month. Almost immediately after we landed my Chief of Construction, Sid Streeter, started to build the submarine in Halifax while I was already shooting; I think we started in the mid-west. We'd roughed the whole script out and then Emeric started to write the actual script with dialogue with Rodney Ackland. Emeric's English was still not first rate, but his grasp of the drama and the shape of the scenes was excellent. But he needed to work with an English dialogue writer.

They started on the first episode with Laurence Olivier while I went off to shoot the rest of the stuff off-the-cuff. We had to: we had to catch the harvest for the Hutterite sequence, then I had to shoot the stuff in the Rockies and then go up to Hudson Bay and round the Labrador coast to get the submarine scenes and the landing at the Hudson Bay post. All before it was too late, because if you're too late in the Hudson Bay the ice can be early. It was all working against time, but as we had complete control ourselves, nobody to argue with, we brought it all off. When we came back to England the Blitz was on. We had shot Raymond Massey's sequence with Eric Portman in a little documentary studio in Montreal because he was already in the Forces and couldn't come over. But the other actors who had given us their word, like Olivier who was in Hollywood when he promised me, Anton Walbrook and Leslie Howard who had promised before we went, they all kept their word.

That was really the start of wartime films, the proper start. Gabriel Pascal was making *Major Barbara* at that time but nobody was really swinging into wartime films as we were with the help of the MOI. From then on every film we made during the war sprang organically from the one we'd just made because, first of all, we were guessing a year ahead what the general position of the war would be and what would be the propaganda message. After all, films take a year to make and get out, particularly if you're writing, producing and directing them yourself, and so we had to be good guessers.

Michael Powell interviewed by David Badder, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1978-79