



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

Contraband

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Directed by: Michael Powell
Production Company: British National Films
Produced by: John Corfield
Associate Producer: Roland Gillett
Production Management: Anthony Nelson Keys
Assistant Director: William Reidy *
Original Story & Screen Play by:
Emeric Pressburger
Scenario by: Michael Powell, Brock Williams
Director of Photography: F.A. Young
Camera Operator: Skeets Kelly *
Editing: John Seabourne
Settings: Alfred Jünge
Music Composed by: Richard Addinsell
[Music] Directed by: Muir Mathieson
'White Negro' Cabaret Designed/Executed by:
Hedley Briggs
Recording: C.C. Stevens
Sound Assistant: John W. Mitchell *
Cast:
Conrad Veidt (*Captain Andersen*)
Valerie Hobson (*Mrs Sørensen*)
Hay Petrie (*Axel Skold, mate of S.S. 'Helvig'*)
Hay Petrie (*Erik Skold, chef of 'Three Vikings'*)
Esmond Knight (*Mr Pidgeon*)
Raymond Lovell (*Van Dyne*)
Charles Victor (*Hendrick*)
Henry Wolston (*1st Danish waiter*)
Julian Vedey (*2nd Danish waiter*)
Sydney Monckton (*3rd Danish waiter*)
Hamilton Keen (*4th Danish waiter*)
Phoebe Kershaw (*Miss Lang*)
Leo Genn (*1st Brother Grimm*)
Stuart Latham (*2nd Brother Grimm*)
Peter Bull (*3rd Brother Grimm*)
Dennis Arundell (*Lieutenant*)
Harold Warrender
(*Lieutenant-Commander A.C. Ellis, R.N.*)
Joss Ambler
(*Lieutenant-Commander Ashton, R.N.R.*)
Molly Hamley Clifford (*Baroness Hekla*)
Eric Berry (*Mr Abo, professor of Finnish*)
Olga Edwardes (*Mrs Abo*)
Tony Gable (*Miss Karoly*)
Desmond Jeans (*1st Karoly*)
Eric Hales (*2nd Karoly*)
John Roberts (*Hanson*)
Manning Whiley (*manager of 'Mouse Trap'*)
Eric Maturin (*1st passport officer*)
John Longden (*2nd passport officer*)
Paddy Browne (*singer in 'Regency'*)
Nicholas Phipps (*man in car offering lift*) *
Torin Thatcher (*sailor*) *
Esma Cannon (*restaurant assistant*) *
Bernard Miles (*man lighting pipe in blackout*) *
Mark Daly (*taxi driver*) *
Michael Shepley (*boisterous man in 'Mouse Trap'*) *
Cameron Hall *
UK 1940
91 mins
35mm
A BFI National Archive print

* Uncredited

The screening on Mon 23 Oct will be introduced
by Miranda Gower-Qian, BFI Inclusion Lead

Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's second collaboration neatly captures the darkness and disorientation (both literal and metaphorical) of London during the early stages of the war, while also explaining the importance and working methods of the British contraband controls. Although made as a propaganda piece with the support of the Ministry of Information, *Contraband* never sacrifices storytelling to dry and instructional factual detail.

Instead, the film falls more obviously into the genre of the comedy spy-thriller, of which Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) are prime examples. The attraction between the stubborn but charming Captain Andersen (Conrad Veidt) and the feisty Mrs Sorensen (Valerie Hobson) is sophisticatedly handled as the pair fall into various tricky situations throughout the course of the film. Touches such as Hobson's cigarettes, which carry a coded message, and the 'Patriotic Plaster Products' busts of Chamberlain ('They always said he was tough,' comments Veidt as he uses one to knock out the German spy) all add a sense of playfulness despite the film's serious purpose.

Although the distinctive joint credit, 'Written, Produced and Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger', was yet to be created (this would happen with 1943's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*), *Contraband* features several members of the Archers production team that Powell and Pressburger would form in 1942. John Seabourne would edit four more Powell and Pressburger pictures before the end of the war, and production designer Alfred Jünge relished the opportunity to create dazzling cabaret club sets on a fraction of the budget he was given for E.A Dupont's classic silent films *Moulin Rouge* (1928) and *Piccadilly* (1929). Actors Esmond Knight, Raymond Lovell and Hay Petrie provide sturdy and memorable support and would all go on to work with Powell and Pressburger again.

Contraband also sees a reprisal of the sparkling chemistry between Conrad Veidt and Valerie Hobson, following their successful pairing in 1939's *The Spy in Black*. In both films, Pressburger created roles for Veidt that allowed him to escape the stereotyping that often plagued German actors in British films, particularly during this period. Veidt was grateful for the opportunity to move away from the image of the dour and menacing German, and is as appealing as *Contraband*'s Danish captain as he was as an honourable U-boat commander in *The Spy in Black*.

Nathalie Morris, BFI Screenonline

A contemporary review

This exciting story is dramatically put over and excellently directed. The comparison between the British and German methods of dealing with neutrals is not too heavily stressed and is all the more convincing as a result. Conrad Veidt, as the resourceful, courageous, captain gives a brilliant performance, while Valerie Hobson not only looks charming but acts extremely well as Mrs Sorensen. Hay Petrie, who plays two parts, provides some excellent comic relief.

Monthly Film Bulletin, April 1940

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

Notes may be edited or abridged | Browse online at theb.fi/programme-notes

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