



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

Red Ensign + The Night of the Party

Red Ensign

Directed by: Michael Powell
Presented by: Gaumont-British Picture Corporation
Controlled by: Gaumont-British Distributors Ltd.
Executive Producer: Michael Balcon *
Producer: Jerome Jackson *
Dialogue: L. Du G. Peach
Original Story: Jerome Jackson, Michael Powell
Photography: Leslie Rowson
Film Editor: Geoffrey Barkas
Art Direction: Alfred Junge
Costumes: Gordon Conway
Sound Recordist: G. Birch
Recorded by: British Acoustic Film
Studio: Shepherd's Bush Studios
Cast:
Leslie Banks (*David Barr*)
Carol Goodner (*June MacKinnon*)
Alfred Drayton (*Manning*)
Frank Vosper (*Lord Dean*)
Campbell Gullan (*Hannay*)
Percy Parsons (*Arthur Casey*)
Fewlass Llewellyn (*Sir Gregory*)
Henry Oscar (*Raglan*)
Allan Jeayes (*Jock Grierson*)
Donald Calthrop (*MacLeod*)
Henry Caine (*Bassett*)
John Laurie (*Forsyth*) *
Frederick Piper (*MacWilliam*) *
George Carney (*Lindsay*) *
Jack Lambert *
UK 1934
66 mins
Digital 4K

The Night of the Party

Director: Michael Powell
Production Company:
Gaumont-British Picture Corporation
Producer: Jerome Jackson *
Assistant Director: Bryan Wallace
Scenario: Ralph Smart
Original play and dialogue: Roland Pertwee,
John Hastings Turner
Photography: Glen MacWilliams
Art Director: Alfred Junge
Costumes: Gordon Conway
Recording: S. Jolly
Cast:
Malcolm Keen (*Lord Studholme*)
Jane Baxter (*Peggy Studholme*)
Ian Hunter (*Guy Kennion*)
Leslie Banks (*Sir John Holland*)
Viola Keats (*Joan Holland*)
Ernest Thesiger (*Adrian Chiddiatt*)
Jane Millican (*Anna Chiddiatt*)
W. Graham Browne (*General Piddinghoe*)
Muriel Aked (*Princess Maria Amelia of Corsova*)
Gerald Barry (*Baron Cziatch*)
Cecil Ramage (*Howard Vernon*)
John Turnbull (*Inspector Ramage*)
Laurence Anderson (*defending counsel*)
Louis Goodrich (*the judge*)
Disney Roebuck (*butler*)
Gordon Begg (*Miles*) *
UK 1934
63 mins
Digital 4K

* Uncredited

Red Ensign

In his twelfth film in four years, Michael Powell directed his own story of an ambitious shipbuilder, David Barr (Leslie Banks), and his attempt to turn around the fortunes of the British shipping industry during the depression of the 1930s. Visionary and uncompromising – and not afraid to break the rules – Barr can be seen as the first of a number of Powell's screen alter-egos, who would include Eric Portman's Colpeper in *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) and Roger Livesey's Dr Reeves in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), and culminate in his own appearance in *Peeping Tom* (1960). Like Colpeper, Barr is a morally complex hero, who is prepared to commit fraud in order to overcome the opposition of his narrow-minded colleagues.

With a campaigning tone which would become familiar in his wartime dramas such as *49th Parallel* (1941) and *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (1942), *Red Ensign* (1934) was one of the director's favourites of his early works. The film's attitude to labour relations – a trade union activist is exposed as a plant representing an unscrupulous rival, and the workers are expected to go without pay for the good of the company – adds some weight to critic Raymond Durnat's claim that Powell represented 'High Tory' values. At the same time, the film draws on the work of the Soviet master Sergei Eisenstein in its romanticism of industry.

Made for Gaumont-British as a 'quota quickie', the film has been read as a plea for intervention to develop the British film industry, as well as a kind of manifesto for Powell's kind of cinema, challenging the emerging documentary movement. As Powell himself put it: 'It was the first time that Michael Powell himself realised that there was something special about a Michael Powell film, something going on on the screen, or behind the screen, which you couldn't put your finger on, something intriguing, aloof, but in the long run memorable.'

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline

The film starts with a montage of idle shipyards and a flurry of written titles: 'For over 200 years the British Mercantile Marine has carried the Red Ensign to every port in the world. Today many of our ships lie idle for want of cargoes. Shipyards are deserted. The distress flag is flying. This is the story of David Barr, shipbuilder, and his fight to bring back prosperity to British ships'. The film thus announces a strategy in strong contrast to that of John Grierson's celebrated documentary movement, which was likewise concerned with social issues and with imperial trade (it was initially sponsored by the Empire Marketing Board) but which distrusted the use of the personal story to carry a propaganda message. In turn, Michael Powell was never slow to express his dislike of documentary methods and of the documentary hegemony in British film culture, and *Red Ensign* bears this out in the purposeful way it uses a triangular love affair to resolve its political story: David Barr fights the cautious businessman Lord Dean, both for the affections of heiress June MacKinnon, and for the use of her money to finance his construction programme.

Powell pointedly gives a minor character the name of Grierson and has him pointed out as 'the best riveter in the yard'. The film has some strong documentary footage, put together in a style that evokes Soviet montage, but is not afraid of embracing the theatrical in terms of sets and acting style. This blend, and the strong crusading tone of the film, prefigure the distinctive kind of patriotic work Powell would do in wartime in partnership with Emeric Pressburger, in films like *49th Parallel* (1941) and *A Canterbury Tale* (1944). *Red Ensign* is of equal interest as an early Powell film and as a document of 1934, one which now seems to be as much about the British cinema as about British shipping. Barr campaigns to have the Board of Trade impose a quota on the shipping industry: this will support British shipbuilding

Powell before Pressburger

Rynox + Hotel Splendide

Mon 16 Oct 18:10; Fri 10 Nov 18:10

His Lordship

Tue 17 Oct 20:50; Sat 4 Nov 12:20

The Fire Raisers

Wed 18 Oct 18:40; Sat 11 Nov 12:30

Red Ensign + The Night of the Party

Tue 24 Oct 20:30; Sun 5 Nov 14:40

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.

With thanks to



BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

by compelling British ship owners to buy a minimum proportion of their fleets from British yards. It is precisely the mechanism which the Board had been applying to the film industry since the Films Act of 1921 in the face of powerful opposition from many exhibitors and distributors. When Barr speaks out against the short-sightedness of his board's policy of 'internationalism', he is told that 'we're here to discuss business, not patriotism', and replies that 'patriotism is good business, can't you see that?' In the words of Geoff Brown (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1981): 'the temptation to equate Barr's struggle to make an all-British ship with the emerging work of Powell (and indeed Michael Balcon, his executive producer) is irresistible'.

Charles Barr

The Night of the Party

By 1933 the partnership of director Michael Powell and producer Jerry Jackson had made nine bona fide 'quota-quickies', some of which had even been favourably received by the critics, and also by producers who, however, were chiefly impressed, in John Russell Taylor's words, by '... his professionalism in bringing in his films on time and within their tiny budgets.' On the strength of these, they obtained a contract to make four films for Gaumont British, then run by Michael Balcon, who later became better known for his running of Ealing studios in the '40s and '50s. It and British International Pictures were at that time the two biggest companies in the British film industry, so this was a considerable step up for Powell and Jackson.

The team was meant to provide its own scripts and shoot them for a cost of around £12,000. In the event they only wrote two of their own films, *The Fire Raisers* and *The Red Ensign*, which were book-ended by two scripts based on stage plays which were released as *The Night of the Party* and *The Phantom Light*.

The Fire Raisers was the first of the four films to be released by Gaumont, but *The Night of the Party* was actually completed first: according to Powell, its release was held up because it was too short, and so three days' worth of extra scenes were shot after Banks and Powell completed their next project. Based on a play with the prototypical title of *Murder Party* (which was used for the American release of the film), the film is a whodunnit in which an after dinner game of 'murder' turns deadly shortly after all the lights are turned out. Needless to say, most of the guests have a good reason for hating the victim.

The Night of the Party is a most theatrical piece; in fact it practically never sets foot outside the studio, with the majority of the action confined to only four sets. To make it visually interesting Powell and his American cinematographer Glen MacWilliams used a number of shots with mirrors, to make the angles more unusual and more efficient. The party itself is well handled, and the scenes in the dark for the 'Murder' game are atmospherically photographed, while Muriel Aked steals most of her scenes in her humorous portrayal of the Princess Amelia of Corsova(!). Powell was flattered to be offered a piece with a cast that included Malcolm Keen, Ian Hunter, Leslie Banks and Ernest Thesiger (as the wonderfully named 'Adrian Chiddiatt') who all give good value for money. None the less he later remembered it as 'a bad film from a bad script, from a very poor play and not very successful', and although it only got respectful reviews, the film represents several important 'firsts' for Powell. It was the first of the three films Leslie Banks made for him at Gaumont (he would later also appear in *The Small Back Room*); it was also the first of four 'quickies' that he made starring Ian Hunter (who later turned up in *The Battle of the River Plate*); it was also the first contact that Powell had with Art Director Alfred Junge, with whom he would later work on seven films and who would play a crucial role in the distinctive visual style of Powell's work as one half of the Archers with Emeric Pressburger.

Sergio Angelini, BFI National Archive