



A Canterbury Tale

A Canterbury Tale

Directed by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Production Company: Archers Film Productions
Produced by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Production Manager: George Maynard
Assistant Director: George Busby
Written by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Photographed by: Erwin Hillier
Edited by: John Seabourne
Production Designed by: Alfred Junge
Music Composed by: Allan Gray
Music Conducted by: Walter Goehr
Sound Recorded by: C.C. Stevens, Desmond Dew
Exteriors Recorded by: Alan Whatley
Sound System: Western Electric
Period Advisor: Herbert Norris
Thanked in credits: Dean and Chapter of Canterbury, The Very Reverend the Dean of St Albans, Mayor of Canterbury, Corporation of Canterbury, Women's Land Army, United States Army, Citizens of Canterbury, Men and Women of Kent
Narrator: Esmond Knight
Made at: Denham Studios
Logo: D&P Studios

uncredited

Production Company: Independent Producers
2nd Assistant Directors: John Arnold, George K. Aldersley
3rd Assistant Director: Parry Jones
Continuity: Patricia Arnold
Camera Operator: Cecil Cooney
2nd Camera Operators: George Stretton, Desmond Dickinson
Focus Puller: Eric Besche
Clapper Loaders: Derek Browne, S. Shrimpton, Jim Body, J. Demaine
Stills: Ian Gibson-Smith
Special Portraits: Fred Daniels
Back Projection: Charles Staffell
Models: W. Percy Day
Assistant Editor: David Powell
2nd Assistant Editors: Roger Cherrill, Jim Pople
Draughtsmen: Elliot Scott, William Kellner, Harry Hurdell, Herbert Westbrook
Make-up: George Blackler
Sound Camera Operator (Interiors): Winston Ryder
Sound Camera Operator (Exteriors): Sidney Hayers
Exteriors Boom Operator: George Paternoster
Interiors Boom Operator: Gordon K. McCallum

Cast:

Eric Portman (*Thomas Colpeper, J.P.*)
Sheila Sim (*Alison Smith*)
Dennis Price (*Sergeant Peter Gibbs*)
Sergeant John Sweet (U.S. Army) (*Sergeant Bob Johnson*)
Esmond Knight (*Seven-Sisters soldier/village idiot*)
Charles Hawtrey (*Thomas Duckett*)
Hay Petrie (*Woodcock*)
George Merritt (*Ned Horton*)
Edward Rigby (*Jim Horton*)
Freda Jackson (*Prudence Honeywood*)
Betty Jardine (*Fee Baker*)
Eliot Makeham (*organist*)
Harvey Golden (*Sergeant Roczinsky*)
Leonard Smith (*Leslie*)
James Tamsitt (*Terry Holmes*)
David Todd (*David*)
Beresford Egan (*PC Overden*)
Antony Holles (*Sergeant Bassett*)
Maude Lambert (*Miss Grainger*)
Wally Bosco (*ARP warden*)
Charles Paton (*Ernie Brooks*)

Probably Powell and Pressburger's most personal and unusual film, *A Canterbury Tale* bewildered critics and audiences on its release, but has since come to be seen as one of their very best; Pressburger himself later declared it his favourite.

The film is structured as a mystery story, but its real purpose is to add a spiritual dimension to the propaganda message of earlier films like *49th Parallel* (1941) and *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (1942). There are no Nazis in *A Canterbury Tale* and, although the war provides its backdrop, the focus is on identifying a distinctively moral and spiritual English identity, in direct opposition to the harsh material objectives of fascism.

The film offers a vision of an England with its spiritual roots in the countryside exemplified by the beauty of Kent – the county of Powell's birth – an England which its increasingly urban population have neglected for too long. Evoking Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the film charts the progress of a select band of modern pilgrims. As the trio of land girl Alison (Sheila Sim), American officer Bob (John Sweet) and British officer Peter (Dennis Price) converge on Canterbury Cathedral, each receives a 'blessing', bringing his or her most fervent wish to life. The film's peculiar power owes much to Eric Portman who, as the enigmatic Thomas Colpeper – local Justice of the Peace, prophet and one of Powell's many screen alter-egos – delivers an intense and complex performance, just as he had in *49th Parallel* three years earlier.

Despite the trappings of Christianity, particularly the grand finale in the cathedral, the film's strange atmosphere seems at times closer to paganism than Anglicanism, and the most memorable character, a mysterious man who pours glue in the hair of local women who fraternise with soldiers, resembles a fairytale bogeyman. Critics were particularly uncomfortable with the morally ambiguous figure of the glue man, and many remembered this in their outrage at Powell's 'unsavoury' solo work *Peeping Tom* (1960) 16 years later.

Eerie and resonant, *A Canterbury Tale* is perhaps the most complete expression of Powell's fascination with the mystical power of landscape, which is also visible in works like *The Edge of the World* (1937), *I Know Where I'm Going!* (1945), *Black Narcissus* (1947) and *Gone to Earth* (1950).

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline

A contemporary review

Girls in a Kent village are frightened to go out after dark because of a mysterious 'glue man' who puts glue on their hair. A land girl (Sheila Sim), a British sergeant (Dennis Price), and an American sergeant (Sgt. John Sweet, U.S. Army), track down this villain.

That is the simple 'popular' story in this film, but it is interwoven with another – a tale of four people who come to Canterbury to receive a blessing or to do penance, even as Chaucer's pilgrims did. It is questionable whether this marriage of novelette and philosophy succeeds, but none will deny the beauty instilled into the often story, this sometimes whimsical, vaguely mystical pastoral of Canterbury and its surrounding hills. For translating this loveliness to the screen the excellence of Erwin Hillier's photography is an important factor.

Jane Millican (*Susanna Foster*)
 John Slater (*Sergeant Len*)
 Michael Golden (*Sergeant Smale*)
 Graham Moffatt (*Sergeant 'Stuffy'*)
 Esma Cannon (*Agnes*)
 Mary Line (*Leslie's mother*)
 Winifred Swaffer (*Mrs Horton*)
 Michael Howard (*Archie*)
 Judith Furse (*Dorothy Bird*)
 Barbara Waring (*Polly Finn*)
 Jean Sheppard (*Gwladys Swinton*)
 Margaret Scudamore (*Mrs Colpeper*)
 Joss Ambler (*police inspector*)
 Jessie James (*waitress*)
 Kathleen Lucas (*passer-by*)
 H.F. Maltby (*Mr Portal*)
 Eric Maturin (*Geoffrey's father*)
 Parry Jones Jnr (*Arthur*)
 uncredited
 Harriet Petworth (*prioress*)
 Glyn Rowlands (*doctor of physics, pilgrim*)
 UK 1944
 125 mins

35mm – A BFI National Archive print (Sat 11 Nov)
 and Digital (all other screenings)

The screening on Wed 25 Oct will be introduced
 by academic Thirza Wakefield

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His exteriors carry authentically the atmosphere of the weald and, aided by
 impressive studio sets and shots of the Cathedral itself, his interiors are equally
 eloquent. Hillier's material has been edited with a sure touch, although both
 editing and direction generally sometimes proceed to a tempo much too
 leisurely. There is much else of good in this film – its expressive background
 music, its observant characterisation of many varied types, its wide awareness
 of the historical background no less than the warlike background of today, the
 unusual naturalness evoked from practically everyone in it, even its crowds. In
 the leading roles, Portman does a conscientious job with a difficult role, Sweet
 creates charm without over-sentimentalising and Price is brisk and efficient.

Monthly Film Bulletin, June 1944

CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

Rynox + Hotel Splendide

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

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

Farewell Abschied

Tue 17 Oct 18:40 (+ intro by filmmaker Kevin
 Macdonald); Wed 1 Nov 20:40

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

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 Edge of the World

+ Return to the Edge of the World

Fri 20 Oct 18:20; Wed 8 Nov 20:30; Wed 15 Nov
 20:50

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

The Spy in Black + Smith

Sat 21 Oct 15:30; Sun 29 Oct 15:30 (+ intro by
 Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator)

The Boy Who Turned Yellow + Heavenly Puss

Sun 22 Oct 12:00

49th Parallel

Sun 22 Oct 12:20; Mon 6 Nov 20:30

One of Our Aircraft Is Missing!

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

Red Ensign + The Night of the Party

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

A Canterbury Tale

Wed 25 Oct 20:20 (+ intro by academic Thirza
 Wakefield); Sat 11 Nov 14:50; Fri 24 Nov 20:35

The Elusive Pimpernel

Sat 28 Oct 12:20; Mon 13 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by
 Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator)

Gone to Earth

Sat 28 Oct 18:20; Wed 22 Nov 20:45;
 Sat 25 Nov 17:50

Silent Cinema: The Magician + The Riviera

Revels + intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI National
 Archive Curator
 Sun 29 Oct 15:00

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp

Sun 29 Oct 17:20 (+ intro by Kevin and Andrew
 Macdonald); Sun 5 Nov 17:45; Thu 23 Nov 17:45;
 Sun 26 Nov 14:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Stephen
 Fry)

Paths to Partnership: Powell + Pressburger before The Archers

Tue 31 Oct 18:30

Projecting the Archive: The Queen's Guards +
 intro by Josephine Botting, BFI National Archive
 Curator
 Thu 2 Nov 18:20

Twice upon a Time

Mon 6 Nov 18:10 + extended intro by James Bell,
 BFI National Archive Senior Curator

Philosophical Screens:

A Matter of Life and Death

Tue 7 Nov 20:20

Centre Stage: The Leading Women of Powell + Pressburger

Thu 16 Nov 18:20

Ill Met by Moonlight

Fri 17 Nov 20:40; Sat 25 Nov 12:40

The Battle of the River Plate

Sat 18 Nov 18:20; Mon 27 Nov 20:30

Behold a Pale Horse

Sun 19 Nov 11:50 Wed 22 Nov 17:50

The Wild Heart

Sun 19 Nov 15:10

Miracle in Soho

Mon 20 Nov 18:10; Sun 26 Nov 18:30

Library Talk: The interior life of an archive: an evening with the Michael Powell Collection

Mon 27 Nov 18:00