



The Elusive Pimpernel

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Directed by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Production Companies: London Film Productions, British Lion Film Corporation, Archers Film Productions
Produced by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Assistant Producer: George R. Busby
Assistant Director: Sydney S. Streeter
Continuity: Doreen North
Written by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
From a romance by: Baroness Orczy
Photography: Christopher Challis
Technicolor Colour Director: Natalie Kalmus
Camera Operator: Fred Francis
Chief Electrician: Bill Wall
Stills Photography: Fred Daniels
Process Shots: W. Percy Day
Editor: Reginald Mills
Production Designer: Hein Heckroth
Assistant Designer: Ivor Beddoes
Location Art Director: Josef Bato
Art Director: Arthur Lawson
Set Dresser: Scott Slimon
Supervising Scenic Artist: W.S. Robinson
Make-up: James Vining
Hair Stylist: Betty Cross
Music Composed, Arranged and Conducted by: Brian Easdale
[Played] With: The Philharmonia Orchestra
Sound: Charles Poulton, Red Law
Studios: British National Studios, London Film Studios Shepperton
uncredited
French Unit Manager: Charlot
Accountant: Philip Corbishley
2nd Assistant Director: Archie Knowles
3rd Assistant Director: David Tomblin
Production Assistant: Charles Orme
Production Secretaries: Gwladys Jenks, Marjorie Mein
Personal Assistant to Mr Powell: Bill Paton
Secretary to Mr Powell: Irene Leslie
Floor Runner: Lee Laurence
UNESCO Film Fellowship Student (Norway): N.H.R. Muller
French Assistant Director: Paul Pantaleon
Assistant Continuity: Joanna Busby
Technicolor Technician: George Minassian
Technicolor Assistant: Dennis Bartlett
Focus Puller: Bill Lee
Clapper Loader: Gerry Anstiss
Chief Electrician's Assistant: D. Collier
Camera Grips: Charles Webb, W. Anderson, I. Culver
Stills: Richard Cantouris
Assembly Cutter: Noreen Ackland
Assistant Editor: Derek Armstrong
2nd Assistant Editors: Frankie Taylor, Stephen Rowson
Assistant Art Director: Elven Webb
Chief Draughtsman: Maurice Fowler
Draughtsman: John Peters
Junior Draughtsman: Patricia Sladen
Draughtsman Trainee: Terry Ackland-Snow
Production Buyer: Jimmy James
Assistant Costume Designer: Bernard Sarron
Junior Costume Designer: Nandi Heckroth
Dress Supervisor: Ivy Baker
French Costumer: René Decrais
Wardrobe Master: Jack Dalmayne
Wardrobe Mistress: Ethel Smith
Studio Make-up Supervisor: Harold Fletcher
Music Assistant: Fred Lewis

Although *The Elusive Pimpernel* is a light-hearted romp that refuses to take itself seriously, it was the source of bitter recriminations and a subsequent lawsuit between its executive producers. The film was conceived as a co-production deal between Alexander Korda's London Films and Samuel Goldwyn, in which it was agreed that Goldwyn would fund half the film's production costs in exchange for US distribution rights. Korda had produced a version of Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* in 1935 (d. Harold Young) with Leslie Howard and Merle Oberon, and Goldwyn anticipated a colour remake that would emulate some of that film's international success. However, like David O. Selznick, who had worked with Korda on *Gone to Earth* (1950), the American mogul hadn't counted on the free-spirited filmmaking of Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger and their long-term creative collaborators including production designer Hein Heckroth, editor Reginald Mills and composer Brian Easdale.

Powell's suggestion to make the film as a musical was less than enthusiastically received by Goldwyn and Korda, and Pressburger continued to struggle with the script until he decided to abandon his straight approach and opt for an altogether more playful style. The use of vibrant Technicolor and the light-treatment of the story anticipate later period swashbucklers such as Richard Lester's hugely successful *The Three Musketeers* (1973), but dismayed Goldwyn, who refused to pay his share of the production costs. Powell and Pressburger were obliged to re-edit the film, but this failed to pacify Goldwyn. He and Korda promptly sued each other for breach of contract and *The Elusive Pimpernel* was eventually released in America in a further truncated form (and in black and white) as *The Fighting Pimpernel*.

Although both Powell and Pressburger were dissatisfied with *The Elusive Pimpernel*, the film itself is highly enjoyable. It features stunning location work in Bath, the Loire Valley and on Mont-Saint-Michel and there are numerous spirited and quirky moments, such as the intercut fireworks that suggest the force of Chauvelin's pepper-induced sneezes and the jaunty editing that visually echoes the rhythm of Sir Percy's poetry recitation in the Russian Baths. Hein Heckroth's understated sets (a few screens and pillars in the steam room for example) give precedence to the sumptuous costumes, with David Niven and Jack Hawkins' humbug-striped tailcoats and frilly lace cuffs commanding as much visual attention as Margaret Leighton's elegant ball gowns and satin nightdresses.

Nathalie Morris, BFI Screenonline

A contemporary review

The story is still good screen material, but it demands treatment on its own schoolboyish, energetic level. It is difficult to see why such skilled and experienced craftsmen as Powell and Pressburger should have chosen a subject so unsuited to their somewhat exotic tastes. If the intention was mildly to guy the Pimpernel type of adventure – as some incidents in the film suggest – the result is a failure. By slowing down the pace, adding unnecessary complications to the plot, and providing some prolonged, lavish but tasteless court scenes, the quality of excitement which should carry the film is quite lost. *The Elusive Pimpernel* is highly – often too highly – coloured, and has an artificiality quite different in character from that of the original.

Sound Mixer: George Adams
Sound Camera Operator: Bernard Hesketh
Boom Operator: Peter Butcher
Boom Assistant: Bryan Coates
Boom Maintenance: Norman Bolland,
George Barrett
Nautical Technical Adviser:
Lt Commander G.E. Mills
Master of Horse: A.G. Parry Jones
Publicity: Vivienne Knight
Assistant Publicity: Franz Berke, Jean Osborne

Cast:

David Niven (*Sir Percy Blakeney*)
Margaret Leighton (*Lady Marguerite Blakeney*)
Jack Hawkins (*Prince of Wales*)
Cyril Cusack (*Chauvelin*)
Robert Coote (*Sir Andrew ffoulkes*)
Arlette Marchal (*Comtesse de Tournai*)
Arthur Wontner (*Lord Grenville*)
David Hutcheson (*Lord Anthony Dewhurst*)
Charles Victor (*Colonel Winterbotham*)
Eugene Deckers (*Captain Merières*)
Gerard Nery (*Philippe de Tournai*)
Danielle Godet (*Suzanne de Tournai*)
Edmond Audran (*Armand St. Just*)
David Oxley (*Captain Duroc*)
Raymond Rollett (*Bibot*)
Philip Stainton (*Jellyband*)
John Longden (*the abbot*)
Robert Griffiths (*Trubshaw*)
George De Warfaz (*Baron*)
Jane Gil Davies (*Lady Grenville*)
Richard George (*Sir John Coke*)
Cherry Cottrell (*Lady Coke*)
John Fitzgerald (*Sir Michael Travers*)
Patrick Macnee (*Hon. John Bristow*)
Terence Alexander (*Duke of Dorset*)
Tommy Duggan (*Earl of Sligo*)
John Fitchen (*Nigel Seymour*)
John Hewitt (*Major Pretty*)
Hugh Kelly (*Mr Fitzdrummond*)
Richmond Nairne (*Beau Pepys*)

uncredited

Peter Copley (*tailor*)
Howard Vernon (*Comte de Tournai*)
Peter Gawthorne (*Chauvelin's servant*)
Archie Duncan, James Lomas (*men in baths*)
Sally Newland

UK 1950

109 mins

35mm – A BFI National Archive print

Please note, the archive 35mm print has occasional issues with picture and sound

The screening on Mon 13 Nov will include an introduction by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator

The general misconception is reflected in the casting of David Niven as the Scarlet Pimpernel. The actor wears a harassed, ill-at-ease expression, as if uncertain in what style to play the part. Cyril Cusack's Chauvelin, hissing in broken English (French characters speak either Cockney or broken English) and of sinister appearance, is at least more in keeping with the Orczy tradition.

Monthly Film Bulletin, December 1950

With thanks to

