



**CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER
PROJECTING THE ARCHIVE**

The Queen's Guards

The Queen's Guards

Directed by: Michael Powell
Production Company: Imperial
Presented by: Twentieth Century-Fox
Produced by: Michael Powell
Associate Producer: Simon Harcourt-Smith
Production Manager: John Wilcox
Production Supervisor: Sydney Streeter
Associate Director: Sydney Streeter
Continuity: Eileen Hildyard
Story and Screenplay by: Roger Milner
From an idea by: Simon Harcourt-Smith
Director of Photography: Gerald Turpin
Cameraman: Derek Browne, James Bawden, Austin Dempster, Robert Huke, Skeets Kelly, Robert Walker, Dudley Lovell, Norman Warwick
Camera Operator: Derek Browne
Editor: Noreen Ackland
Art Director: Wilfrid Shingleton
Ladies Costumes by: Mattie
Wardrobe Mistress: Bridget Sellers
Wardrobe Master: Duncan McPhee
Make-up: James Hydes
Hairdresser: Anne Box
Original Music Composed and Conducted by: Brian Easdale
Military Music Played by: Mounted Band of The Horse Guards (The Blues), The Massed Bands, Drums and Pipes of The Brigade of Guards
Sound Recordist: H.C. Pearson, Red Law
Sound Editor: James Shields
Studio: Shepperton Studios
Cast:
Daniel Massey (*John Fellowes*)
Raymond Massey (*Captain Fellowes*)
Robert Stephens (*Henry Wynne Walton*)
Jack Watson (*Sgt Johnson*)
Peter Myers (*Gordon Davidson*)
Ursula Jeans (*Mrs Fellowes*)
Frank Lawton (*Commander Hewson*)
Anthony Bushell (*Major Cole*)
Cornel Lucas (*photographer*)
Jess Conrad (*Dankworth*)
Ian Hunter (*Dobbie*)
Duncan Lamont (*Wilkes*)
Elizabeth Shepherd (*Susan*)
Judith Stott (*Ruth*)
Jack Allen (*Brigadier Cummings*)
Laurence Payne (*Farinda*)
Eileen Peel (*Mrs Wynne-Walton*)
William Fox (*Mr Walters*)
Patrick Connor (*Brewer*)
William Young (*Williams*)
Jack Watling (*Captain Shergold*)
Andrew Crawford (*Biggs*)
Nigel Green (*Abu Sibdar*)
René Cutforth (*commentator*)
UK 1961
110 mins
35mm

+ intro by actor Jess Conrad and Josephine Botting, BFI National Archive Curator

As Britain's most original and imaginative filmmaker, Michael Powell's features have been extensively remastered, rereleased and pored over by academics and critics. But one or two titles have fallen between the cracks, most notably his last major British feature, *The Queen's Guards*. Shot in 1960 and released in October 1961, the film has a rather poor reputation, seen as *arrière-garde* in stark contrast to his preceding feature *Peeping Tom* (1960), which British cinema was clearly not ready for. Powell was still dealing with censorship issues relating to *Peeping Tom* when he began pre-production on *The Queen's Guards*. Securing funding from Twentieth Century-Fox, he set up Imperial Films with Sydney Streeter, who had worked on several Archers films in production roles, the choice of company name hinting at the film's tone.

The Queen's Guards was not a personal project but originated in an idea by Powell's friend Simon Harcourt-Smith, author of rather esoteric books, including *The Last of Uptake* (1942), an 'architectural fantasy' illustrated by Rex Whistler. Finding himself outside Buckingham Palace one day, Harcourt-Smith mused on what secrets the guards' poker-faces might conceal, and the story was born.

His treatment was expanded by Roger Milner, an actor/writer who was more comfortable with stage farce than film and whose screenplay ran to over 200 pages. Despite judicious cutting by Powell both on set and in the editing room, the first version was an unwieldy two and a half hours long. Further pruning reduced it to its eventual 110-minute running time, the main excision being a section depicting Mau Mau activity in Kenya.

The editing process was made trickier by Milner's complex flashback structure, which portrays the progression of guardsman John Fellowes from cadet to a key role in the Queen's birthday ceremony. Powell's vision for the film is clear from his notes to editor Noreen Ackland: 'Give me a picture where the parade... is the only thing that matters' – and the film undoubtedly offers an impressive record of the Trooping of the Colour as staged on 11 June 1960. These sequences apparently required nine huge three-strip Technicolor cameras, strategically placed to capture events from all possible angles.

The opening credits lay out Powell's stall, the slickly constructed montage of behind-the-scenes shots of preparations for the annual pageant kicking off the film in a suitably stirring manner. Powell was aware that it depended on the presentation of the ceremony for both its temporal structure and its visual impact and the CinemaScope footage emphasises the event's sheer scale, while also revelling in its precise choreography.

From the broad sweep of the Trooping of the Colour, the film immerses us in the life and thoughts of John Fellowes, played by Daniel Massey, in his first leading role. He adeptly portrays Fellowes's journey into manhood and emergence from the shadow of a heroic father and older brother to earn his own place in military history. As film historian Ian Christie has noted, the focus on the father and son relationship (reinforced by the casting of Raymond Massey as Fellowes Snr) echoes Powell's exploration of the effects of parental behaviour in *Peeping Tom*.

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

With thanks to



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

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

As John's rival-turned-friend Henry Wynne-Walton, Robert Stephens gives an equally compelling performance, while Ian Hunter's turn as laconic haulage contractor Dobbie is one of the film's highlights. Thanks to Powell's careful casting, the actors largely manage to resist the script's tendency to nudge characters into caricature, though Milner's dialogue, littered with military jargon like 'huzziff' and 'jankers', and pre-War attitudes to Empire impede identification. Watched today, the film is perplexing but fascinating. Publicity material tried to reconcile its various selling-points, ranging from HM The Queen in her first feature to 'Guest star Jess Conrad', adding pop tunes and sex appeal to what might have seemed a stuffy affair. The pressbook imagery contrasts the Guards' ceremonial role with their battle activity – specifically, an extended North African sequence in which the barbarism of local warring factions is one of the film's less palatable depictions. Meanwhile, *Woman's Own* had a colour spread on Swiss couturier Mattli's costumes, as worn by Elizabeth Shepherd and Judith Stott.

The reactions of the critics on the film's release reflected their confusion. Some found it overly jingoistic, its glorification of war and 'putting down the natives' anachronistic. But most recognised that Powell had managed to rise above stodgy material to create something visually impressive, Alexander Walker waxing especially lyrical in his *Evening Standard* review: 'As a pageant it is breath-taking. As a military ballet it knocks the Bolshoi into the wings. As tourist bait it is worth its weight in Fort Knox gold.'

Several reviewers took the opportunity to reflect on Powell's career, the *Times* characterising him as 'an individualist running riot in an art/industry inclined to imitation and conformity', while Dilys Powell asserted that 'the true filmmaker is still there, the man who understands what camera-plus-movement can do.'

Powell himself dismissed *The Queen's Guards* as 'the most inept piece of filmmaking that I have ever produced or directed', conceding that 'we should not have tried to compete with A.E.W. Mason' – author of the much-filmed imperial adventure story *The Four Feathers* (1902). Having invested £280,000 in the film, Twentieth Century-Fox deemed it 'unacceptable to American exhibitors' – a seemingly perverse decision, given the affection of Americans for the British monarchy and its pomp. In 1964 Powell contemplated acquiring the rights to release it there himself, but was advised he was unlikely to profit from it.

The widely held view that *Peeping Tom* killed Powell's career may be too simplistic: barely recouping its negative costs, this film's failure cannot have enhanced his chances of further funding. Yet, while undoubtedly flawed and problematic, *The Queen's Guards* deserves to be seen in its original widescreen Technicolor glory, so it can be reassessed and reintegrated into Powell's filmography. Hopefully it will emerge from obscurity soon.

Jo Botting, *Sight and Sound*, November 2023