



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

# The Battle of the River Plate

## The Battle of the River Plate

Directed by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger

©/Production Company: Arcturus Productions

Presented by: The Rank Organisation

Released by: J. Arthur Rank Film Distributors

Executive Producer: Earl St. John

Produced by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger

Associate Producer: Sydney Streeter

Production Manager: John Brabourne

Production Controller: Arthur Alcott

Assistant Director: Charles Orme

Continuity: Betty Harley

Written by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger

Director of Photography: Christopher Challis

Camera Operator: Austin Dempster

Special Effects: Bill Warrington, James Snow

Editor: Reginald Mills

Production Designer: Arthur Lawson

Assistant Art Director: Donald Pictou

Artistic Adviser: Hein Heckroth

Make Up: Geoffrey Rodway

Music Composed by: Brian Easdale

Musical Director: Frederic Lewis

Sound Recordists: C.C. Stevens,

Gordon K. McCallum

Sound Assistant: Harry Fairbairn \*

Sound System: Westrex Recording System

Sound Editor: Arthur Stevens

Naval Adviser: Captain F.S. Bell

Technical Adviser on prison sequences:

Captain Patrick Dove

Thanked in credits: The Admiralty, The Royal New

Zealand Navy, The Indian Navy, United States

Navy, The Uruguayan Navy, The British Merchant

Navy, Mediterranean Commander-in-chief,

Portsmouth Commander-in-chief, Lady Harwood,

Admiral Sir W. Edward Parry, Admiral Sir Charles

Woodhouse, The National Council of Government of

Uruguay, The Friends of Uruguay Society,

The River Plate Veterans Association, Commander

United States Sixth Fleet, Officers and men of

the Royal Navy, Royal Dockyards Ministry of

Defence (Navy)

Publicity: Jean Osborne \*

Made at: Pinewood Studios

Cast:

John Gregson (*Captain Bell, HMS Exeter*)

Anthony Quayle (*Commodore Harwood, HMS Ajax*)

Ian Hunter (*Captain Woodhouse, HMS Ajax*)

Jack Gwillim (*Captain Parry, HMNZS Achilles*)

Bernard Lee (*Captain Dove, MS Africa Shell*)

Lionel Murton (*Mike Fowler*)

Anthony Bushell

(*Mr Millington-Drake, British Minister*)

Peter Illing (*Dr Guani, Foreign Minister Uruguay*)

Michael Goodliffe

(*Captain McCall, British naval attache*)

Patrick Macnee (*Lieutenant-Commander Medley*)

John Chandos

(*Dr Langmann, German minister Montevideo*)

Douglas Wilmer

(*M. Desmoulins, French minister Montevideo*)

William Squire (*Ray Martin*)

Roger Delgado (*Captain Varela, Uruguayan navy*)

Andrew Cruickshank (*Captain Stubbs, Doric Star*)

Christopher Lee (*Manolo*)

Edward Atienza (*Pop*)

April Orlich (*Dolores*)

Peter Finch (*Captain Langsdorff, Admiral Graf Spee*)

Maria Mercedes (*Madame X*) \*

John Schlesinger (*German officer*) \*

John Le Mesurier (*padre*) \*

Anthony Newley, Nigel Stock

Made towards the end of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's creative partnership, *The Battle of the River Plate* is based on the British Navy's triumph over a German 'pocket battleship', the *Graf Spee*, in the early months of the second world war. Rarely included in discussions of their great works, *The Battle of the River Plate* was nevertheless Powell and Pressburger's most commercially successful film.

The gallant heroism of both the British Navy and the German Captain Langsdorff, who scuttles his own ship rather than face defeat, strongly appealed to Powell and Pressburger. Indeed, so fond of the story was Michael Powell that he published a novel, *The Last Voyage of the Graf Spee*, retelling the story in the hope that, as he wrote in the book's introduction, future generations of children would 'read it and absorb it into their experience'.

Echoing the friendship between the British and German officers Wynne-Candy and Schuldorff in Powell and Pressburger's earlier *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, an important subplot in *The Battle of the River Plate* explores the relationship of Langsdorff and Captain Dove of the British merchant vessel *Africa Shell*. Like Wynne-Candy and Schuldorff, Dove and Langsdorff find that, while their two nations are at war, as individuals they have much in common.

Made some 11 years after the end of the war, the sympathetic treatment of the German enemy was less controversial than *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* had been in 1943. Its year of release also meant *The Battle of the River Plate* was not required to be as propagandist as *49th Parallel*. Instead, like so many other war films of the period, it fed the public's insatiable appetite for stories of British victories at a time when the country was still suffering from the economic hardships brought on by the financial cost of the war.

Justin Hobday, BFI Screenonline

## A contemporary review

Why do British filmmakers revert so often to the War for inspiration, ten years after its end, and what need in their audience do these films, probably the most consistently popular output of British studios, particularly satisfy? These questions were prompted by the appearance of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's reconstruction of *The Battle of the River Plate*, which marks a return to a 'realist' subject after their excursions into the never-never land of Offenbach and Strauss.

Adopting a straightforward, semi-documentary technique, the new film traces the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* through her battles with the British cruisers *Ajax*, *Exeter* and *Achilles*, satirises the diplomatic wrangles which followed the ship's seeking refuge in Montevideo harbour, and ends with the dramatic scuttling of the pride of the German navy. The events are real enough: their realisation tends to be cool and rather formal. Of all the personalities involved in the drama, the most compelling and perhaps the most tragic was the *Graf Spee*'s Captain, Hans Langsdorff, a dedicated professional officer who tempered his allegiance to the German cause with a civilised regard for the rights of prisoners; and Peter Finch's strong and sympathetic performance manages to indicate these qualities. The producers, however, having decided that the battle itself must remain the central point of interest, have presented it

*(British officers aboard Graf Spee)* \*  
Richard Beale (*Captain Pottinger, Ashlea*) \*  
Diane Herman \*  
Robert Crewdson \*  
Tita Dane \*  
UK 1956©  
119 mins  
35mm

\* Uncredited

With thanks to



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inevitably from the British viewpoint, relegating Langsdorff to the background. At the *Graf Spee*'s death he briefly reappears, a stern, defeated figure, accepting the condolences of a British captain with grave politeness – but there is no mention of his subsequent suicide. Having rejected this opportunity for a full-length character study, the film becomes a war exercise without a firm dramatic centre.

On a surface level, the result is serious and decent, if hardly new. Some beautiful seascapes (notably the opening shot), spacious VistaVision camera work, a good deal of documentary attention to detail on board ship, and a reasonable simulation of the effects of shell fire, successfully fill in the background. The actual progress of the battle remains a little vague, where a more documentary use of diagrams or aerial shots might have made clear the relative positions of the cruisers. The ships' officers, types rather than characters, are competently portrayed in the service tradition. Anthony Quayle, as the Commodore in charge of the action, breaks rather uneasily away from the stereotype, with a performance that takes on a decidedly theatrical emphasis. His hearty asides, suggesting a certain schoolboyish glee in the panoply of war, disrupt the even tempo of a generally sober battle reconstruction.

And so the aftermath is reached. A high-powered American radio commentator describes the last hours of the *Graf Spee* against the hubbub of a polyglot café complete with leggy South American chanteuse; there is some talk of the 'twilight of the Gods'; and Captain Langsdorff rounds off the story with a gesture suggesting honour to both sides. This final sequence achieves a certain tense authority – the massed crowds on the waterfront, the dark hulk of the *Graf Spee* moving slowly away from her moorings – though the film's methods are such that the emotions evoked are fundamentally exterior ones. Perhaps therein lies part of the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this review. The producers have taken great pains to be fair to both the British and the Germans – the film suggests that the conflict is conducted by gentlemen who observe the rules of the game. It is surely an ironic comment on the world today if audiences are now able to look back on the war, almost nostalgically, as a time when personal allegiances were firm and clear-cut, unsullied by the doubts and fears of an uneasy peace.

John Gillett, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1956-57