



23 SEPTEMBER 2019

## **ARCHERS ASSEMBLE: CREATING THE POWELL-PRESSBURGER PARTNERSHIP**

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A talk about Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger obviously shouldn't start at the beginning. If we follow the dream-like logic of many of their films, it should probably start at the end, or even later. In fact, Powell showed the way, when he ended his second volume of memoirs, *Million Dollar Movie*, with a visit to Pressburger at his Suffolk retreat, Shoemaker's Cottage. He has Emeric explain what the secret of their partnership: 'you and I know what it means... The only secret is that we are amateurs. Telling a story is not a business. It is an art, and we are different from other artists because we were left alone by Arthur Rank for ten years to go our own sweet way, thinking we were professionals.'

That imagined visit is actually dated to the day of Pressburger's death, in February 1988, and it was published five years later, after Powell's own death. Like the endings, and beginnings, of many of their great films, it offers an enigmatic clue to what made their work remarkable, and probably unique in 1940s cinema. Both Powell and Pressburger had benefited from a hard schooling in film construction during the 1930s. Pressburger had worked his way up in the script department of UFA, Europe's most professional film organisation, before he was forced to start again, in another language, in Paris after Hitler came to power; and yet again, in yet another language in Britain, working for fellow-Hungarian Alexander Korda. Powell had left a fairy-tale world in the south of France, working for Rex Ingram's runaway MGM unit, to try to break into British cinema at the start of the sound era. Twenty-four brutally cheap films later, he had learned his craft as a director: making a surprising proportion of silk purses out of what were often sow's ears in the hardscrabble world of quota production.

So when they first met in 1939, they were in fact anything but amateurs.

And a lasting partnership between this whimsical Englishman and refugee Hungarian must have seemed unlikely, as war loomed. What brought them together was another rescue job – and a remarkable set of circumstances. The rescue would emerge as *The Spy in Black*, with its two brilliant opening sequences, set in Germany and Orkney.

What Pressburger, as a contract writer on Alexander Korda's staff, had managed to do was give shape and promise to a thriller set around the British navy's main base during the first World War in Scapa Flow. He had also created an attractive vehicle for the great German actor, Conrad Veidt, otherwise expensively underemployed by Korda; and invested the relationship between Veidt's U-boat captain and a seductive British agent, played by Valerie Hobson, with a sense of real attraction. Outside of their countries being at war, these would clearly have fallen for each other.

And indeed Powell and Pressburger had in some sense also fallen for each other, as if recognising some quality in the other which they guessed might make their collaboration stronger. I was privileged to know both of them during the last decade of their lives, and to help bring their films back into circulation. So I was able to witness how this affection was still present, nearly half a century after they had met, and after many years of their films being forgotten and almost impossible to see. The 1980s would see a series of discoveries and restorations, which gave us the films of *The Archers* that many of you will know well. But during the 1970s, these were almost impossible to see, except at a very few places, such as the Electric Cinema on portobello Road. When the lights went up between films at that eccentric palace of delights, some unexpected enthusiasts could sometimes be seen. But as late as 1978, the National Film Theatre had to be coaxed to present a complete retrospective of their work,



before, during and after the years of collaboration. What followed was a tidal wave of enthusiasm that made the pair belated celebrities, feted at many tributes and retrospectives. I'm tempted to compare it to the rediscovery of J. M. W. Turner in the 20th century as Britain's great painter, after years of neglect.

But let us go back to that moment in 1939, when *The Spy in Black* had just been released. A month later Britain was once again at war with Germany, and within six weeks, a German U-boat had torpedoed an elderly British battleship at the Scapa Flow base. Events were making Powell and Pressburger's film seem all too topical; and the idea of its hero being a German submarine commander still seems unlikely, even if the setting was World War One. But all of the films they would make together in the following seven years took an oblique, sometimes eccentric view of what the war was about, and what lessons Britain needed to learn. They were certainly propaganda, but of an unusually intelligent kind, which is why they remain fascinating for audiences many years later.

So how did Powell and Pressburger manage to work together in the early years of the war? This wasn't due to support from either Korda or even Arthur Rank at first. It was initially through sheer ambition and audacity, taking advantage of the unusual wartime context. A Ministry of Information had been created, with the art historian Kenneth Clark briefly at the head of its films division. And it was Clark who invested government funds in enabling Powell and Pressburger to develop their *49th Parallel* – the only wartime feature film to be part-funded in this way. Pressburger later recalled how he had struggled to find a theme that would address the main propaganda aim of that moment: how to persuade America to enter the war against Hitler?

Korda was working on the same problem, also faced with the determination of many Americans not to become embroiled in Europe's war. His solution was to make a film about Nelson, disguised as a romantic tale of Emma Hamilton and the naval hero. But Emeric and Michael wanted to deal directly with the present challenge, and devised the ingenious plan of showing how easily an escaping German crew could cross Canada, separated only from America by the dotted line of the 49th Parallel. Visiting America and meeting some of its varied immigrant communities allowed them to portray a democracy in which everyone had a reason for resisting the Nazi propaganda that is so ardently delivered by Eric Portman's Lt. Hirth.

Making contact with a new range of actors was part of the key to realising their growing ambition. Portman would remain central to one of their most interesting attempts to penetrate the ideology of Englishness, in *A Canterbury Tale*, playing the initially unsympathetic figure of the frustrated country squire, who wants to impart his hard-won knowledge to the 'new pilgrims' brought to Canterbury by the war. Another vitally important actor for Powell and Pressburger also made his debut in *49th Parallel*. The Viennese Anton Walbrook had initially come to Britain to play Prince Albert, in two films about Queen Victoria. But with the outbreak of war, he found a new role as 'the good German', articulating Powell and Pressburger's determination to explain that not all Germans were Nazis, first as the Hutterite settler in *49th Parallel*, and then as Theo in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, which I'll be discussing in detail in the next lecture.

*49th Parallel* turned out to be a supremely well-timed gamble, made on an epic scale across Canada, with many guest star appearances, and launched in October-November 1941- just weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour precipitated America's entry into the war. It would confirm Powell and Pressburger's determination to think ahead, and make films that addressed complex future propaganda issues, such as *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, *A Canterbury Tale* and ultimately *A Matter of Life and Death*.

But how did Powell and Pressburger become 'The Archers', benignly supported and left alone by Arthur Rank? Durable partnerships were not unknown in 1940s British cinema. Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat would take turns to write or direct, and the Boulting Brothers would alternate producing and directing. But there were quite specific conditions in the British cinema of the early 1940s that encouraged close partnership. Through a series of shrewd business deals, combined with unforeseen opportunities, the flour-miller Arthur Rank rapidly became a near-monopolist of British cinema between 1936-1941. Having bought into distribution, he soon acquired a series of studios and chains of cinemas – a vertically integrated structure that meant he could control the whole cinema process from production to exhibition. But not only control: the Rank organisation, or empire, needed to have a



steady flow of 'product' to feed its hungry screens. And the solution turned out to be forming a stable of small-scale production companies, united under its umbrella and sharing common production and financial facilities, but largely free to follow their creative instincts. These so-called 'independent producers' included such future celebrities as David Lean, as part of Cineguild, Launder and Gilliat as Individual Pictures, and Powell and Pressburger as The Archers.

Each of these functioned differently, and perhaps only the Archers were serious about being a creative company, rather than a marriage of convenience. But what they shared through the mid-1940s was remarkable freedom from commercial pressures, and the certainty that their productions would be efficiently and widely exhibited. Some of IPL's output was ruinously expensive – notably the films based on Shaw plays by Gabriel Pascal – but others were efficiently made at Rank's studios and successful at the box-office. And although it has often been said that Rank had no creative interest in the films produced under his banner, Powell and Pressburger found him highly sympathetic to the paths they wanted to follow. As a devout Methodist, he had hopes that they might produce a version of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; and the theme of 'modern pilgrimage' in *A Canterbury Tale* was certainly congenial, even if that film was considered unsuccessful at the time. Indeed, the appearance of Bunyan as a character in the heaven of *A Matter of Life and Death* might be considered a personal thank-you to their benefactor.

But The Archers had other ambitions as well. The target that became their logo, with arrows thudding into it, was accompanied by a verse from James Agate they adopted as their motto, reflecting that – 'tis better to miss Naples than hit Margate'. Their version of Englishness remained cosmopolitan, with Powell quoting Kipling, one of his favourite authors: 'what do they know of England who only England know?'. And Pressburger, having settled in the country that gave him refuge from Nazism, would in some ways become 'more British than the British', as his fellow-Hungarian friend George Mikes wrote. But after the demands of wartime propaganda, the directions they would follow, in *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes*, reflected a more critical perspective on national identity – with the heroines of these two films cruelly challenged by being taken out of a pre-war England.

I imagine everyone here knows that Powell and Pressburger signed their films with the unusual joint credit, 'written, produced and directed by MP and EP'. The decision to adopt this signature was initially met with surprise, and scepticism by Powell's agent, Christopher Mann, who had played a part in setting up the Independent Producers structure. Why would a director want to cede any of his hard-won status to a mere writer? But for Powell, it marked the recognition that he had found a kindred spirit, a film-maker who thought instinctively in terms of the shape and structure of screen stories. And for Pressburger, it was no less an epiphany: an Englishman who could think as he thought, and even anticipate what he was going to say and write.

During the years when film studies was establishing itself as an academic discipline, the so-called 'auteur theory' exercised a powerful influence over what was studied and valued. I'm sure this damaged, or delayed the recognition of Powell and Pressburger – and I remember many battles in the 1980s to insist on adding '... and Pressburger'. I'm sure you don't need persuading today of this essential joint-authorship. And in the next two lectures in this series, I will be revisiting two of The Archers' wartime films, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *I Know Where I'm Going!*, discussing how they were conceived, and received, in 1943 and 1945, and how they may be considered today, with all the contextual information we now have. And I'm going to leave you with the explanation that Michael Powell gave of their partnership in 1985, at what would be their last joint public appearance, at the National Film Theatre, with one of their most ardent admirers sitting in the front row to pay his own tribute. (Martin Scorsese).