

Michael Powell: 1905 - 1990

Twenty years after the death of Michael Powell - one of the most imaginative and daring directors in the history of cinema - his films remain relevant to today's film industry, inspiring psychological thrillers such as Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2009) and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010). Although over sixty years have passed since the height of Powell's success, when the masterpiece *The Red Shoes* (1948) was nominated in multiple categories at the 21st Annual Academy Awards ceremony, his films continue to move and inspire new audiences.

Currently on display in the Bill Douglas Centre is a case exhibiting artefacts that trace the trajectory of Powell's career. The items you can see on display tell of a career that was both visionary and wide-ranging, encompassing a variety of genres. Powell's filmography is remarkably diverse, featuring war propaganda films, lavish fantasies and tragic melodramas. Over the course of his career, Powell's films both delighted and shocked critics and audiences: the items on display in the Michael Powell case document the rich, eclectic body of work Powell left upon his death in 1990.

Born in 1905, the young Powell was inspired to forge a career in cinema by the silent films of the 1910s and early 20s. He rose quickly through the ranks, proving himself a capable and efficient director with the large number of 'quota quickies' he made between 1930 and 1936. 'Quota quickies' were cost-effective crowd-pleasers, and Powell produced them at a remarkable rate; in 1935, six full-length directorial efforts by Powell were released in cinemas. Items relating to this stage of Powell's career – such as pamphlets, cigarette cards and even an original, signed script from the 1936 feature *SOS* (released as *Her Last Affaire*) - can be seen towards the left of the case.

Powell's breakthrough came in 1937 with *The Edge of the World*, which tells the story of the diminishing population of a remote Shetland island fishing port. An article featured in the case entitled 'The Edge of the World' by F. Spencer Chapman, published in *Sight and Sound* on the film's release, argues that the film is the first of its kind as a 'documentary-drama'. Even at this early stage of his career, Powell was breaking new ground.

The Edge of the World brought Powell to the attention of the British film industry, in particular the powerful film producer and director Alexander Korda. It was Korda who introduced Powell to Hungarian-born writer Emeric Pressburger. Together, Powell and Pressburger formed a creative partnership that went on to produce some of British cinema's most beloved films. Under the banner of 'The Archers', Powell and Pressburger produced a series of films that are now acknowledged as classics. The items located at the centre of the display, relate to this most famous period of Powell's career. In a special Powell and Pressburger issue of *Film Comment* housed in the Bill Douglas Centre's collections, editor Richard T. Jameson notes that the films of Powell and Pressburger "were weird, original, uncategorizable, and some-how exotic in way that even Hollywood – where exotica was a stock-in-trade- never came near" (18). The unique exoticism of Powell's films, opposed to "dreary and dull"

English movies to which, according to Jameson, American audiences were accustomed, demonstrates the significance of Powell's work in establishing "a national cinema to look up to" (Combs 20).

At first, Powell and Pressburger were commissioned to make films that supported the war effort, such as 'The Spy in Black' (1939), and 'Contraband' (1940). As their work gained popularity, the content of their films became steadily more wild and romantic. The supernatural romance *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) was widely praised for its ambitious, high-concept storyline and striking visuals. *Black Narcissus* (1947) – about a small group of Nuns who set up a convent in a remote Himalayan valley – received acclaim for its superb performances and atmosphere of quiet, building menace. The release of Powell and Pressburger's most iconic and commercially successful film, *The Red Shoes*, came in 1948. Despite being famously reviled by J Arthur Rank - British cinema's most powerful producer at the time, and also the man who financed the film – *The Red Shoes*' innovative use of colour, music and ballet captivated audiences worldwide.

The book *Arrows of Desire* by Ian Christie, which can be seen at the centre of the case, documents the films' influence, along with many other films of Powell and Pressburger. Christie has been the leading force in the revival of Powell's work and *Arrows of Desire* - open on pages that feature some of Hein Heckworth's Oscar-winning concept art for *The Red Shoes* - gives readers a comprehensive insight into these fascinating films.

After a long and fruitful partnership, Powell and Pressburger parted ways in 1957 to pursue projects independently. Powell's first solo effort in over twenty years was *Peeping Tom* (1960), a dark, psychologically complex film that seeks to unsettle the viewer by directly implicating them in the crimes it depicts. *Peeping Tom*'s precise, analytical treatment of voyeurism and murder proved too much for viewers when it was released, perhaps no surprise considering that many of those in the audience would have had fond memories of the lush, romantic Powell films of the forties. In a review that begins with the words "another reputation crashes", Colin Bennett of *The Age* wrote that *Peeping Tom* was "the most revolting film I have seen for many years" (Bennett 1961). Audiences seemed to share Bennett's opinion, for the film was met with poor box office takings and effectively destroyed Powell's career.

Peeping Tom was only reassessed due to the efforts of Martin Scorsese, who personally organized funds for the film to be re-issued in America in the late 1970s. Due to the advent of home video and DVD, *Peeping Tom* has gained an ever-widening fan base and is now hailed as a masterpiece of British horror. An article in the case from the film magazine *Total Film* features an interview from renowned editor Thelma Schoonmaker - Powell's widow - where she discusses the lasting impact of *Peeping Tom*.

Powell lived to see his work restored and celebrated, and released two autobiographies relating his experiences of the film industry – 'A Life in the Movies: An Autobiography' (1986, London: Heinemann) and the posthumously published

'Million Dollar Movie' (1992, London: Heinemann). The films of Powell and Pressburger are in the process of being restored and most are now widely available on DVD and Blu-Ray. *The Red Shoes* and *Peeping Tom* have recently been re-mastered in high-definition, and have been re-released in selected cinemas.

The films of Michael Powell are now acknowledged as some of the greatest and influential films ever produced, and Powell himself is considered one of Britain's most beloved directors. Richard Combs, in an article on *The Battle of the River Plate*, insists that Powell's films are "endlessly discoverable" (21). Thanks to the passion of restorers, film-enthusiasts and directors, Powell's films have once again been brought to the forefront of film culture and their place in the history of British cinema firmly re-established for future generations.

Works Cited:

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