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ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT

MICHAEL POWELL

and

POWELL & PRESSBURGER

November 20, 1980 - January 5, 1981

Thursday, January 1 (6:00)

Saturday, January 3 (2:30)

ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT (U.S. title: NIGHT AMBUSH). 1956. Great Britain.
Produced, written and directed by Michael Powell for The Archers/J. Arthur Rank. Associate Producer: Sydney Streeter. Assistant Director: Charles Orme. Based on the book of the same name by W. Stanley Moss. Photography (Vista-Vision): Christopher Challis. Camera Operator: Austin Dempster. Editor: Arthur Stevens. Art Director: Alex Vetchinsky. Music: Mikis Theodorakis. Music Director: Frederick Lewis. Sound: Charles Knott, Gordon K. McCallum. (Learning Corporation of America) 103 minutes.

With: Dirk Bogarde (Major Paddy Leigh-Fermor), Marius Goring (General Karl Kreipe), David Oxley (Captain Billy Stanley-Moss), Cyril Cusack (Sandy), Laurence Payne (Manoli), Wolfe Morris (George), Michael Gough (Andoni Saviolkis), Paul Stassino (Yani Katsias), Adeed Assaly (Zahari), John Cairney (Elias), George Egenious (Charis Zographakis), Demitri Andreas (Nikko), Theo Moreas (Village Priest), Takis Frangolinos (Michali).

It is clearly unfair to attack any director for not maintaining a permanent record of originality. Directors have to work and eat just like mere mortals, and frequently have to accept routine assignments in order to do so. Even this may be an unfair statement, since it is quite possible that at the time, amid a welter of war stories on the screen, this one seemed different and worthwhile. In any event, the comments made in the notes on the Powell/Pressburger film, THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE, apply equally as much to this film. There were just too many war films being made at the time. Changing the title to NIGHT AMBUSH in the United States and suggesting that it was an action-thriller didn't help either--especially as Universal opened it at the Sutton Theater in New York, thus exposing it to the New York critics who knew Powell and Pressburger's work and expected something more.

There is some element of mystery attached to the extent of Pressburger's participation in the film. It was the last film under the banner of "The Archers," and Pressburger was also planning his next film as a solo producer/writer, MIRACLE IN SOHO. It may well be that his writer credit, as part of the Archers team, was both a courtesy and contractual one. It is significant that the British Film Institute publication on their work does not list Pressburger for work on this film, while all sources, including, of course, the film itself give basic screenplay credit to W. Stanley Moss, author of the novel on which the film is based.

While it's a thoroughly professional job of filmmaking, it seems somewhat out of step with then-contemporary film fashions. Normally that was an asset with Powell and Pressburger; here it somehow assumes an arbitrary quirkiness. Unlike the retelling of the epic of the Graf Spee, this quite unimportant footnote to the history of the war does not seem particularly worth chronicling. And as if to underline that, it has a curious tongue-in-cheek quality. Nobody seems to be taking it entirely seriously, the grimmer aspects of war are played down, and it looks constantly as though it is going to turn into the kind of spoof of war film that BEAT THE DEVIL represents--a tough, hard-bitten adventure yarn. However, it never does so, and the air of whimsicality suggests that Powell's own delightfully ebullient personality was wholly in command, needing but lacking the subliminal restraints heretofore exercised by Pressburger's collaboration.

-- © William K. Everson

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Suggested reading: "Powell Pressburger and Others," edited by Ian Christie (British Film Institute, London, 1978). Available in MoMA Bookstore.