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MICHAEL POWELL
and
POWELL & PRESSBURGER
November 20, 1980 & January 5, 1981

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I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING. 1945. Great Britain. Produced, written and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. for The Archers Production Company. Photography: Erwin Hiller. Associate Producer: George R. Busby. Editor: John Seabourne. Art Director: Alfred Junge. Music: Allan Gray. Sound: C.C. Stevens. (Learning Corporation of America). 92 minutes.

With: Wendy Hiller (Joan Webster), Roger Livesey (Torquil MacNeil), George Carney (Mr. Webster), Pamela Brown (Catriona), Walter Hudd (Hunter), Capt. Duncan MacKechnie (Captain 'Lochinvar'), Ian Sadler (Ian), Finlay Currie (Ruairidh Mor), Murdo Morrison (Kenny), Margot Fitzsimmons (Bridie), Capt. C.W.R. Knight (Colonel Barnstaple), Donald Strachan (Sheperd), John Rae (Old Shepherd), Duncan MacIntyre (His Son), Jean Cadell (Postmistress), Norman Shelley (Sir Robert Bellinger), Ivy Milton (Peigi), Anthony Eustrel (Hooper), Petula Clark (Cheril), Alex Faversham (Martin), Catherine Lacey (Mrs. Robinson), Valentine Dyall (Mr. Robinson), Nancy Price (Mrs. Crozier), Herbert Lomas (Mr. Campbell), Kitty Kirwan (Mrs. Campbell), John Laurie (John Campbell), Graham Moffat (RAF Sergeant), Boyd Stevens, Maxwell Kennedy, Jean Houston (Singers in the Ceildhe), Arthur Chesney (Harmonica Player).

I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING, one of the loveliest and most lyrical films ever made, came into existence almost by accident. Powell and Pressburger were waiting to get into production with their ambitious A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH (STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN) but there was a delay in the availability of Technicolor facilities. In order to keep busy, they decided on a fairly simple film for the interval. Pressburger had been kicking around a vague story idea about a girl trying desperately to get to a remote island (though he hadn't figured out why she wanted to get there or what she would do when she arrived). Powell had long wanted to get back to the Scottish highlands, an area that he loved but hadn't been able to use in a film since THE SPY IN BLACK. The plotline that was concocted was simple in the extreme--therein lies much of its charm--but the film itself turned out to be an elaborate, meticulously crafted film, with some complicated and time-consuming trick effects, far from the "little film" that had been envisioned. Fortunately it was a hit on both sides of the Atlantic (although its U.S.A. release was delayed by two years)both critically and with the public. Nevertheless, it was conceived and produced as a labor of love, and that love--for the countryside and for people and their traditions--is reflected in every foot of the film. Quite incidentally, it is such a relaxed and unified film, showing no sign of the manufacturing process, that it comes as somewhat of a jolt to learn that the hero--Roger Livesey--who appears constantly throughout the film, never once went to the highlands and did all of his work in the studio.

Its thesis is that love matters more than money or power, hardly a novel idea in 1945, nor one particularly in need of restating to a country involved in the problems piling up at the tail end of a long and devastating war. Yet it managed to be both timely and timeless, so that some thirty-five years after it was made it still seems perfectly valid, the war itself only a background. Doubtless its universality will enable it to remain a classic during the years to come just as Murnau's SUNRISE has become a permanent classic and for similar reasons.

Even while the credits are unreeling (with Denham Studios doubling as a factory) the narrative gets under way with a deft series of images. But far more important than the details of the plotting, which includes such mystical elements as a family curse, is the humanity, the carefully drawn characters, the love of sea and land and a way of life, and the great visual beauty.

Because it's a leisurely tale, there's time for small incidents to tell us a great deal about the characters. In the very first sequence Joan (Wendy Hiller), en route to Scotland to marry for money and security, says goodbye to her father in a rather elegant London restaurant. The father's uneasiness--he is a conservative banker, and is afraid of depositors seeing him in such grand surroundings--emphasizes the narrow class-conscious attitudes from which his daughter understandably wants to escape. At the same time, her rather too deliberately and haughtily ordering her soup to be taken away because it is now too cold, shows how anxious she is to step into her new role of wealth and power. Neither father nor daughter emerge as very sympathetic characters from this beautifully written sequence, but they do emerge as very real and human ones.

The train journey from London to Scotland provides Powell with his one justifiable chance to indulge in tricky technique. This has sometimes been considered a flaw in his direction, but if so it's a flaw born of enchantment with the film medium, and a desire to use and enjoy it to the full. However, undoubtedly realizing that filmic pyrotechnics would detract from the simplicity of his film, Powell limits his trickery to this one sequence before the story proper gets under way. There's an imaginative sequence wherein Joan falls asleep, while watching her wedding gown swaying to the rhythm of the train's movements, and dreams via superimposed negative images and humorously exaggerated low-angle shots, that she is marrying not a man but the huge industrial complex that he represents. Much of the journey is suggested by a charming miniature train chugging over tartan-like hills, accompanied by a song. This episode, not only very pleasing in itself, also suggests a gentle parody of the famous early documentary NIGHT MAIL. When Joan has to change trains, the transition is acheived by a direct cut from the top hat of a fawning official sent to greet her to the funnel of the second train belching smoke as it starts up. The whole train journey is whimsical and light-hearted, but with the arrival in Scotland the mood changes. It is almost as though Nature herself takes over, and from that point on Erwin Hillier's breathtakingly crisp photography captures every nuance of approaching storm, early morning mist,sunlight on the hills and stark silhouettes of seamen outlined against fog or crashing waves. One can almost feel the spray and the dampness of the mist rolling in from the hills.

As the film progresses, and gets geographically further and further away from civilization and the city, so does the division between the "rich" people and the "others" become more apparent. Despite the temporary levelling effect of World War II, class distinction has always been a dominant factor in

British society, and doubtless will be for a long time to come. The film makes no heavy-handed underlining of this fact; indeed, had it wished to do so it could have taken the easy (and traditional) route of making the aristocracy decidedly unsympathetic. As it is, the film's good natured affection seems to be extended to all; but the rich people are a somewhat stuffy lot, unable to comprehend the joys and emotions of a gathering of the clans to celebrate a couple's sixtieth wedding anniversary (a lovely sequence, this) any more than the fisherfold can understand why the industrialist wants to build his own swimming pool and stock his streams with trouts, with the ocean and its salmon all around him. Even the millionaire himself is jolly and a decent sort, and one feels mildly sorry for him when he loses his bride. The extreme youth and common sense of a young girl (a brief role, well-played by Petula Clark, then one of Britain's very few child stars) is also used to put the dullness of the rich in perspective. The free spirit of the highlanders seems to reach its peak with the introduction of Catrina (beautifully played by Pamela Brown) who bursts into her home with windblown hair, rain-soaked mackintosh and a brace of huge hunting dogs!

One of the factors most contributing to the success of I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING is the warm and rich performance by Wendy Hiller, whose relatively few appearances in British films made every one an event, yet at the same time made one lament all the more for the missed opportunities and the films she might have made. This was her first film since "Major Barbara" in 1941; her next would not be until OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS in 1951, by which time her youth was behind her. In I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING, even though her character is deliberately shallow at first and even unsympathetic, she manages to make the audience share her dilemma--grudgingly respecting her determination, yet at the same time recognizing in her hidden fires of passion and humanity that cry out for a more romantic solution. It's a magnificent performance, and since most of the other players are placid, all the attention is focused on it.

I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING is full of pictorial beauty, technical ingenuity (the whirlpool sequence is a masterly intermingling of location with studio sequences, no less than five negatives being juxtaposed in the climactic shot of the escape from the heart of the whirlpool), delightful and unpredictable sequences, and endearing characters. My own favorite touch is the insane yet typically British one of placing an area's only public telephone at the foot of a waterfall, so that all conversation is drowned out!

This retrospective is made possible through the support of The Roy and Niuta Titus Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., and with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.

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