

## Document Citation

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# The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

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A FREE AGENT

NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON A FRIEND

MICHAEL POWELL

and

POWELL AND PRESSBURGER

November 20, 1980 - January 5, 1981

Sunday, January 4 (2:30)

Monday, January 5 (2:30)

Two films from the "Espionage" Television Series (I.T.A.): A FREE AGENT  
and NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON A FRIEND

A FREE AGENT. 1964. Great Britain/U.S.A. Michael Powell. Produced by George Justin for Herbert Brodtkin/MGM. Executive Producer: Herbert Hirschman. Associate Producer: John Pellatt. Assistant Director: Jake Wright. Screenplay: Leo Marks. Photography: Geoffrey Faithfull. Camera Operator: Alan McCabe. Editor: John Victor Smith. Production Designer: Wilfred Shingleton. Art Director: Anthony Wollard. Music: Benjamin Frankel. Sound Recordist: Cyril Smith. Sound Editor: Dennis Rogers. 48 minutes.

With: Anthony Quayle (Philip), Sian Phillips (Anna), Norman Foster (Max), George Mikell (Peter), John Wood (Douglas), John Abineri (Town Clerk), Ernst Waldner (Watch Factory Mechanic), Gertan Klauber (Innkeeper), Vivienne Drummond (Miss Weiss).

NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON A FRIEND. 1963. Great Britain/U.S.A. Michael Powell. Produced by George Justin for Herbert Brodtkin, Ltd MGM. Executive Producer: Herbert Hirschman. Associate Producer: John Pellatt. Assistant Director: Bruce Sherman. Screenplay: Mel Davenport. Photography: Ken Hodges. Camera Operator: Herbert Smith. Editor: John Victor Smith. Production Designer: Wilfred Shingleton. Art Director: Tony Woolard. Music: Malcolm Arnold. Sound Recordist: David Bowen. Sound Editor: Dennis Rogers. Titles: Maurice Binder. 48 minutes.

With: George Voskovek (Professor Kuhn), Donald Madden (Anaconda), Mark Eden (Wicket), Julian Glover (Tovarich), Pamela Brown (Miss Jensen).

The television film has been a useful way of discovering and training new directorial talent (though never as prolific in this direction as the "B" movie of the 30's and 40's), a convenient (and none-too-exacting) last stop for the old-time director approaching retirement, and very occasionally, a prestige event showcasing the talents of a major director who rarely worked in television.

Michael Powell hardly fits into any of these categories, and it is interesting that these two films from an MGM/British television series don't particularly look like television films. To Powell, film is film, whether it be a big budget theatrical special, a television thriller, or more recently, an ambitious student-film undertaken at Dartmouth College. All were made the best way he knew how, given the magnitude of budget (or lack of it) and without any special consideration for the medium of ultimate exhibition. True, these two films, like most television films, have very few characters and a great deal



of dialogue. But these were characteristics of television which influenced the writing of the scripts; once those scripts were handed to Powell, he seems to have ignored the fact that they were for television, and regarded them instead as he must have regarded those pre-EDGE OF THE WORLD films like THE PHANTOM LIGHT, as features that had to be ingeniously handled to look much more expensive than they actually were.

Both films are excellently photographed and have a good deal of depth in their interior sets. Much of NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON A FRIEND is set in a schoolroom. While it would be easy enough to suggest a schoolroom by making sure that there was a blackboard or a globe of the world in every shot, Powell prefers to remember that schoolrooms also had rows of desks--and to shoot from the back row intermittently, convincing us that this is a schoolroom and not the corner of a cramped TV studio. The outdoor locations are extremely well chosen too, and in A FREE AGENT the budget was at least liberal enough to allow for some location shooting at a ski-lift, and a neat matching up with back-projected studio inserts.

Quite obviously neither film represents a major Powell work, but both reflect efficiency, craftsmanship and a continuing enthusiasm for the art of filmmaking. Interestingly, neither film tries to create artificially dramatic climaxes to precede the commercial breaks. Admittedly, British television production has never been particularly aggressive in that respect, and has never had the need of American television to grab and hold audience interest, often by flagrantly dishonest or misleading means, when the commercials come on. However, with a view to overseas (and hopefully American) markets, even British television writing has had to be fragmented to a degree to accommodate the eventual commercial insertions. While credit for good taste must obviously go to the writers as well, still Powell has the happy knack in these two films of avoiding "sock" cliff-hangers. Instead, he makes the most out of the dramatic situation at hand by carefully maintaining the even keel that he has built up. NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON A FRIEND is the more traditional of the two in its building of suspense to a relatively predictable ending, but A FREE AGENT seems by far the better, and perhaps the more recognizably Powell, of the duo. The script by Leo Marks, who also wrote PEEPING TOM four years earlier, ultimately turns out to have the same kind of nightmarish quality as that film--although its climax requires an alert audience that is prepared to think about the labyrinthine complications that might have ensued. In fact, the whole premise of the story--not really revealed until the final moments--might well have been expanded, and the present story reduced to little more than a prologue. Then perhaps we might have had a film that was to the spy thriller what PEEPING TOM was to the horror film. To say more would be to spoil the enjoyment of the film as is...but perhaps it isn't too late to plant the seed for a later expansion.

-- © William K. Everson

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.