

Document Citation

Title	Michael Powell and Powell & Pressburger
Author(s)	William K. Everson
Source	<i>Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	1980 Dec 29
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	They're a weird mob, Powell, Michael, 1966

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

11 West 53 Street, New York, N. Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

THEY'RE A WEIRD MOB

MICHAEL POWELL

and

POWELL & PRESSBURGER

November 20, 1980 - January 5, 1981

Monday, December 29 (6:00)

Thursday, January 1 (2:30)

(THEY'RE A WEIRD MOB. 1966. Australia/Great Britain. Produced and directed by Michael Powell for Williamson (Australia)/Powell (Great Britain). Associate Producer: John Pellatt. Assistant Director: Claude Watson. Screenplay: Richard Imrie, from a novel by John O'Grady. Photography (Eastmancolor): Arthur Grant. Editor: G. Turney-Smith. Art Director: Dennis Gentle. Music: Laurence Leonard. Songs: "Big Country," "In This Man's Country" by Reen Devereaux; "I Kiss You, You Kiss Me," by Walter Chiari. Cretan Dance by Mikis Theodorakis. Sound: Don Saunders, Bill Creed. 122 minutes.

With: Walter Chiari (Nino Culotta), Clare Dunne (Kay Kelly), Chips Rafferty (Harry Kelly), Alida Chelli (Guiliana), Ed Devereaux (Joe), Slim de Grey (Pat), John Meillon (Dennis), Charles Little (Jimmy), Anne Haddy (Barmaid), Jack Allen (Fat Man in Bar), Red Moore (Texture Man), Ray Hartley (Newsboy), Tony Bonner (Lifesaver), Alan Lander (Charlie), Judith Arthy (Dixie), Keith Petersen (Drunk Man on Ferry), Muriel Steinbeck (Mrs. Kelly), Gloria Dawn (Mrs. Chapman), Jeanne Dryman (Betty), Gita Rivera (Maria), Doreen Warburton (Edie), Barry Creyton, Noel Brophy, Graham Kennedy.

The first of two quite ambitious features that Powell made in Australia in the mid-60's, THEY'RE A WEIRD MOB was unreleased in the United States (not even to television) and its showing at the Museum constitutes an American premiere. With the current interest in (admittedly somewhat more pretentious) new Australian movies, it is rather surprising that this one hasn't been picked up for belated U.S. distribution, especially as there are far greater affinities between Australians and Americans than between Australians and the British. (Among other things, the British are very unsympathetic towards immigration to their shores, while the Australians depend on it, much as America used to in its younger days).

The idea of a British director handling an Italian immigrant's concept of life in Australia is fraught with dire forebodings. Far too many co-productions with mixed talents and mixed themes have wound up as disasters. This one would seem to have had additional problems in that the book was a runaway best-seller in Australia, and was very local in its humor and theme, reflecting Sydney life--and rivalries with the rest of Australia, and Melbourne in particular. And since Australian humor is much broader than British, the subtlety and taste of a Michael Powell might well have defused its vitality. But rather surprisingly, it works well: it is never overwhelmingly dramatic or funny, but manages to be close enough to a slice of life to be human and appealing, and just sufficiently larger than life to be amusing. Powell remarked recently that he became increasingly disturbed while co-writing THE PURSUIT OF GRAF SPEE because he had to stick to established facts and "I don't like to be hemmed in by facts...I like to use my imagination." Despite the apparently realistic nature of the film, it does allow his pendulum to swing back in the other direction. The "facts" can certainly be disputed, since British sources give the author of the original book as one John O'Grady, whereas the film's credits correctly give Nino Culotta (also the name of the film's hero) as the author. Culotta also wrote a sequel--but it is known that it was an assumed name. He was an immigrant, but probably not an Italian

one, so there is some fabricating from the beginning, and Powell feels free to build on this with a number of whimsical episodes. A cement-mixing sequence is a minor tour-de-force of editing, and reminds one a little of the climax to King Vidor's OUR DAILY BREAD, but before it can be taken as seriously as that it sequesters into an amusing episode of distorted subjective camera work to indicate the hero's exposure to too much sun. There are also some nice visual jokes, and some whimsicalities in the musical scoring. To describe them would be to undercut their subtlety and surprise value, but they add a great deal to the charm of the film. The beautiful city of Sydney forms a spectacular backdrop to the story, but while Powell gives us the bay and the beaches, he also finds the quieter charm of side streets and grassy hills. The beach scenes incidentally confirm that Australia, over the past two decades, has been coming up with bigger and bouncier girls, and stuffing them into smaller bathing suits.

British critics, however, had still not forgiven Powell for PEEPING TOM, and despite the film's easy-going charm went out of their way to find things in it to criticize, likening it to "a women's magazine romance" (which it most certainly is not) and complaining that it takes time to get over "the grating speech of the average Australian" which, even if true, would hardly be Powell's fault. The British Film Institute's Monthly Film Bulletin did at least acknowledge its existence with a review, an honor that had not been accorded THE QUEEN'S GUARDS although (probably accidentally) a typographical error in the indexing makes it difficult to find!

A good deal of the film's success must be credited to its Italian star, Walter Chiari, who for a while seemed on the verge of becoming an international comedy stylist, a parallel perhaps to Ian Carmichael or the younger Peter Sellers, but who never quite made it outside his home territory. He not only has great charm and a sense of humor, but is also a good actor. It is difficult to drum up much sympathy for the awkward misfit we meet in the opening scenes, but his metamorphosis into a hard-working and ultimately stable contributor to his new community is done with delicacy and an understatement that Chiari might not have been allowed had he made it under an Italian director. The support cast includes the names of a number of Australian players familiar to us here, including Muriel Steinbeck, John Meillon and of course the ubiquitous Chips Rafferty, without whom no self-respecting slice of Australians would dare show its face.

Some of the jokes are admittedly a bit too regional, and there is an overly meticulous usage of all of the stock Australian slang phrases and expressions, but at least Powell manages to keep kangaroos out of Sydney, a feat that must have endeared him to the Australians. (They love kangaroos, but resent them being worked into films by virtually every visiting director, as though nobody would believe it was Australia without them!) Powell himself liked the film, and his own appraisal of it is rather an apt one: "A romp in Australia in the early American manner--like RUGGLES OF RED GAP, for instance--except that I'm not such a good director of the human comedy as Leo McCarey. There are very few McCarey's, but it had the same quality generally, and I was quite pleased with it."

-- © 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.