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A SECOND LOOK

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Michael Powell's bookends

The director's fine 'A Matter of Life and Death' is paired with the erotic curiosity 'Age of Consent.'

DENNIS LIM

In his long and jagged career, British director Michael Powell went from national treasure to forgotten figure and back again.

The Michael Powell Double Feature set, out this week from Sony, pairs two very different romantic dramas from his filmography: "A Matter of Life and Death," the 1946 mystical fantasy, a classic of 20th century British cinema, and "Age of Consent," a largely forgotten erotic idyll made in 1969 during a period of self-imposed exile in Australia.

Born in 1905, Powell began his career in the silent era and worked his way up through the ranks of the British film industry, directing what were termed "quota quickies," low-budget productions whose main purpose was to maintain a minimum number of British movies on local screens. In 1939, he began his storied collaboration with Emeric Pressburger, a Hungarian-born screenwriter who got his start in Germany and relocated to England after the Nazis came to power.

The partnership soon developed into an unusually close and intricate one: Powell and Pressburger set up their own production company, the Archers, and shared writing, directing and producing credits on an uninterrupted run of good-to-great movies in the 1940s: "The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp" (1943), "Black Narcissus" (1947), "The Red Shoes" (1948), "Gone to Earth" (1950).

"A Matter of Life and Death" began as a government-commissioned propaganda project to improve postwar Anglo-American relations. Powell and Pressburger responded to this assignment by fashioning a love story between British bomber pilot Peter Carter (David Niven) and American radio



American Cinematheque

HEAVEN SENT: David Niven, left, and Marius Goring in "A Matter of Life and Death," which began as a propaganda project to improve post-WWII British-American relations.

operator June (Kim Hunter), who receives what they both believe is his final distress call.

Plunging from a burning plane without a parachute, he survives — apparently because the heavenly emissary sent to ferry him to the afterlife was thwarted by the thick British fog. Peter and June fall madly in love but must defend the merits of their earthbound romance when the death-cheating airman is summoned to "the other world" to appear before a celestial tribunal.

Retitled "Stairway to Heaven" for its initial U.S. release (its distributor insisted on a less morbid title), "A Matter of Life and Death" reverses the "Wizard of Oz" color scheme. Heaven is a chilly black-and-white metropolis, while Earth is a lush Technicolor paradise. The vibrant palette both matches and intensifies the surge of emotions that drives the story.

The original PR mandate surfaces in the big trial — the prosecutor is a resentful Boston-

nian, killed in the Revolutionary War, and trans-Atlantic differences are aired and smoothed over. But the movie is above all a dizzying romance, a strange and affecting portrait of love as a salvation and a delirium.

Powell called "A Matter of Life and Death" his favorite of all his films. He was not nearly so enthusiastic about "Age of Consent," based on a novel by the Australian painter Norman Lindsay.

In the years between these films, he and Pressburger had gone their separate ways and fallen from critical favor as British movies leaned toward kitchen-sink realism. Powell could barely get a project off the ground after the hostile reception to "Peeping Tom," his 1960 thriller about voyeurism and violence. It is now considered a cinematic landmark, thanks largely to the efforts of Martin Scorsese, a devoted Powell champion who introduces both films in this set.

"Age of Consent" stars

James Mason as a successful Australian painter who leaves behind the Manhattan hustle for an immersion in nature. On an island off the Queensland coast, he looks for inspiration and finds it in the form of a young Helen Mirren, a beautiful wild child who becomes his frequently nude model.

Both mischievous and melancholic, the film meanders pleasantly between goofy slapstick and autumnal retrospection (Powell died in 1990). While it doesn't come close to his earlier achievements, it returns to his signature theme of obsessive artistic creation, perhaps most vividly played out in "The Red Shoes."

As was frequently the case with Powell, there are hints of self-portraiture. When Mason's character talks about what moves him to paint — "light, color, life, people, sensuality" — he could be speaking on behalf of Powell, one of cinema's great voluptuaries.

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