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THE SMALL BACK ROOM

MICHAEL POWELL

and

POWELL & PRESSBURGER

November 20, 1980 - January 5, 1981

Thursday, December 18 (6:00)

Saturday, December 20 (2:30)

THE SMALL BACK ROOM. 1949. Great Britain. Produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, for The Archers/London Film Productions. Screenplay: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, Nigel Balchin from the novel by Nigel Balchin. Photography: Christopher Challis. Camera Operator: Freddie Francis. Editors: Reginald Mills, Clifford Turner. Production designer: Hein Heckroth. Art Director: John Hoesli. Music: Brian Easdale. Nightclub music: Ted Heath's Kenny Baker Swing Group. Sound: Alan Allen. 108 minutes.

With: David Farrar (Sammy Rice), Kathleen Byron (Susan), Jack Hawkins (R.B. Waring), Leslie Banks (Colonel Holland), Michael Gough (Stuart), Cyril Cusack (Corporal Taylor), Milton Rosmer (Professor Mair), Walter Fitzgerald (Brine), Emrys Jones (Joe), Michael Goodliffe (Till), Renee Asherson (ATS Corporal), Anthony Bushell (Colonel Strang), Henry Caine (Sgt-Major Rose), Elwyn Brook-Jones (Gladwin), James Dale (Brigadier), Sam Kydd (Crowhurst), June Elvin (Gillian), David Hutcheson (Norval), Sidney James (Knucksie), Roderick Lovell (Pearson), James Carney (Sgt Groves), Roddy Hughes (Welsh Doctor), Geoffrey Keen (Pinker), Bryan Forbes (Dying Gunner), Robert Morley ('A Guest'-The Minister), Richard Nielson (G.I.).

Whether light or serious in tone, virtually all of the Powell-Pressburger films of the 40's were either escapist or dealt with themes of escape and/or withdrawal from the contemporary world, a linking motif that seemed to irk the critics. THE SMALL BACK ROOM was not designed to answer those critics or to bow to them--but it was Powell and Pressburger's only really serious look at the (comparatively) contemporary British scene, retreating only to the extent of dealing with the latter days of the war. Its sole hint of fantasy was in a bizarre surrealist delirium-tremens sequence inspired by THE LOST WEEKEND. As a piece of filmmaking it was one of their best, and as a dramatic thriller it was realistic, moving, satiric, and (particularly in its prolonged climax of the de-fusing of a bomb) almost unbearable in its suspense. And in the days of a far from permissive screen, it managed to suggest a great deal about a far from conventional (by movie standards) relationship between hero and heroine. Though extremely well received by British critics, it had virtually no exhibition at all. There was no London premiere run, and no circuit booking--automatically condemning it to financial failure. Months after the press show, it finally emerged at a little theater in Golder's Green, a North London suburb, and subsequent bookings were only sporadic.

In this country, in much-edited form, it opened briefly at the 72nd Street Trans Lux Theater, and again virtually disappeared. (Television, usually much maligned for its own butchery of film, for once can take a bow, since it did

finally present the film in its complete form). The cutting in this country consisted both of minor trims, starting with the very first scene, and went on to embrace two complete sub-plots, one of them involving Leslie Banks, who thus was reduced to one very brief scene at the end of the U.S. version! The cutting was carefully done, and since virtually all of the sub-plots were removed there were no jagged scars left showing. The key scenes were left intact. Oddly there were no censor-dictated cuts, but the rhythm and the balance of the film were totally disturbed. The protagonist's triumph is somewhat minimized in the U.S. version since the bomb-dismantling scene becomes merely a matter of personal discipline and courage, whereas, in the original, it was the proverbial last-straw added to other problems and frustrations.

The delirium sequence apart, THE SMALL BACK ROOM perhaps now seems one of the more conventional Powell/Pressburger films, but if so it also seems one of the most meticulously crafted. The editing, the crisp use of sound, and above all the total avoidance of musical scoring in the climactic bomb sequence make that episode both a tour-de-force and a model of its kind. Quite incidentally, THE SMALL BACK ROOM is one of the Powell films that most impressed Martin Scorsese, who points to the night club sequence as being of definite influence on certain scenes in his own NEW YORK, NEW YORK.

THE SMALL BACK ROOM marked the reunion of Powell and Pressburger with Alexander Korda, with whom they had not worked since 1940. At this particular time the Rank Empire was becoming more economy-prone and more commercial-minded. There was less room for experimentation and "prestige" production under the current policy, and Rank's key filmmakers--David Lean, Carol Reed, Launder and Gilliat--joined Powell and Pressburger in making the move to the Korda company, a move that was quite certainly justified via the artistic, if not always the monetary, results.

-- © 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.