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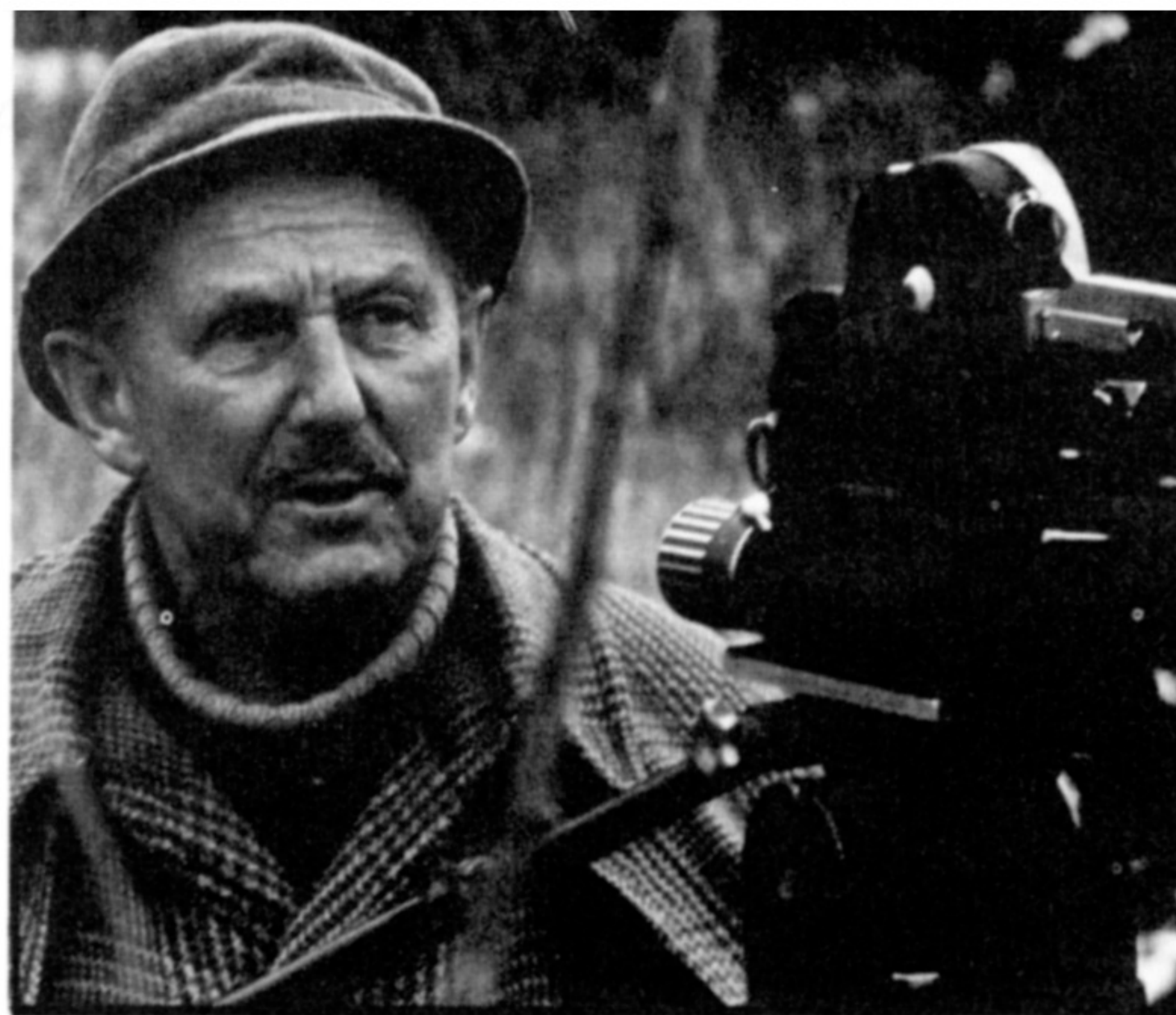


# MICHAEL POWELL

William K. Everson

The recent rediscovery of Michael Powell in this country (he was honored at the Telluride and Lincoln Center Film Festivals, and has been receiving critical attention elsewhere) is welcome and long overdue. His prior neglect is at least understandable in that many of his best films had virtually no distribution here, while others were so savagely cut as to be quite unrepresentative. Far less understandable is that Powell should also need to be discovered in his own country.

After years doing increasingly interesting "B" pictures, Powell began to attract serious attention in Britain in '37 with *The Edge of the World*, and consolidated his reputation through '39-42 with *The Spy in Black*, *Contraband*, *49th Parallel*, and *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*. Although good and highly individual films, they were also in one sense "traditional" British films: straightforward, tightly constructed melodramas with an undercurrent of humanity and comedy and, *Contraband* excepted, with a deal of outdoor location work. The British public (and press) love normalcy and tradition above all else, and they embraced Powell as a major new director. However, once he was established, Powell (then aligned with writer and co-producer Emeric Pressburger) had no intention of sticking to well-trodden paths. His first *chef d'oeuvre* was '42's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, considered so controversial in wartime Britain that Winston Churchill tried first to sabotage its production and then to delay its release. Thereafter, Powell became in a sense Bri-



Powell shooting in Hanover, NH

tain's own Orson Welles, clearly in love with the medium of cinema, anxious to experiment both in theme and technique. While Britain applauded the things that worked, it was quite intolerant of those that didn't. Since many of Powell's films had a thematic common denominator in that they dealt with escape or retreat from the contemporary world, he was accused (somewhat unjustly, when one examines the *content* of those films) of not facing up to realistic issues. Ironically, when he did just that - in a post-war film, *The Small Back Room* - nobody wanted it. It had appallingly poor distribution in Britain without any kind of circuit release, while in the US it was cut to about two-thirds its original length.

In Britain at the time, it was the solid but comparatively unadventurous craftsmanship of Carol Reed that was reaping all the critical plaudits. (And no discredit to Reed, who was a fine director: but his films now seem very much locked into their period, whereas Powell's are as fresh and undated as ever). Despite lovely, lyrical films like *I Know Where I'm Going*, Powell was dismissed as a bit of a misfire and a freak. (There are quirky common denominators in his films - as there are in the films of Hitchcock, Ford and all individual stylists). The final blow came with '60's *Peeping Tom* which had almost

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the same savage effect on his work as the Virginia Rappe scandal had on Fatty Arbuckle's career. Although stopping short of tarring and feathering him and running him out of Pinewood on a rail (though some British critics did that figuratively), the British industry effectively stripped Powell of his prestige and autonomy. From then on, he could no longer pick and choose his subjects, control the conditions under which they were made, or count on liberal budgets. Powell was too good a film maker to turn out dull movies, but his sparse post-*Peeping Tom* movies gave him far fewer opportunities. Interestingly enough, *Peeping Tom* (the most savagely attacked British film since *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* of a decade earlier) was made in the same year as Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which initially was the recipient of similar critical onslaughts. Hitchcock of course had sufficient clout to ride out the storm, though had he made the film in England its commercial success there might have been seriously curtailed. Now both films are more than vindicated, and regarded as genre classics.

Powell, in his 70's, is an astonishingly vigorous man still, both physically and mentally. In recent years he has been busying himself with a projected co-production with Russia on the life of Pavlova — which seems, alas, to be coming to naught since the Russians have very definite ideas about plodding, straightforward biographical narratives, and have little sympathy for interwoven destinies and influences, which was at the heart of Powell's conception. However, he did take surviving members of his cast and crew from the original *The Edge of the World* back to the island where it was shot, and filmed a new prologue and epilogue to update the film's forthcoming reissue. Nothing of the original film has been changed, but the new footage adds a good deal of poignancy in showing how the

islanders' lives have changed since the film was made. Scottish actor John Laurie, never one to pull his emotional punches, is most moving in his 40-years-later reunion with the locals.

Throughout '80 Powell has been busy in the United States. He writes - novels, scripts for planned films, his autobiography - and, a new and very enjoyable area for him, he teaches and lectures. In recent months he has introduced his films to audiences at Brown University in Rhode Island, at the University of California in Berkeley, and elsewhere. Upcoming is a seminar in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the year will be climaxed by a large scale retrospective of his films at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

For the first three months of '80, Powell was artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire — impatiently waiting the long-promised and long-delayed winter snows. (When they finally arrived, they were spectacular, and came at a conspicuously inconvenient time in the shooting of a film he was making with students!) I was able to join him for a weekend, and it was obvious that his students both loved and respected him, being won over by both his films (new to many of them), his knowledge and experience above and beyond the world of film, and perhaps most of all for his sense of humor — which *any* film-maker needs in *any* college where film is not considered a major art. In a faculty get-together one rather aggressive dowager challenged him to "defend" film's right to be considered on the same level as other arts. To meet these and other (often insensitive and quite personal) challenges, Powell is admirably equipped: he is unpetrable, has a ready wit, and has the ability to answer and demolish the challenger with such tact and charm that they often don't realize quite *how* they have been deflated! His intimate knowledge of American film is often quite surprising too: not the

overall knowledge of history and achievement that one would expect any good filmmaker to possess, but a far more specialized knowledge born of genuine affection for the field. For example, at one point the name of Rowland Brown came up — and Powell, who hadn't seen the three films that Brown had directed since they were released in the early '30s, was obviously an ardent admirer of his unique style, and discussed them in detail.

Much of his stay at Dartmouth was devoted to guiding a student crew through a production of *The Ring of Erreth-Akbe*, a segment from *The Tombs of Atuan*, part of an acclaimed saga-trilogy. The students had written the script (though some moments of curious puckish humor, when queried, proved to be Powell's own additions to lighten the mood and shorten exposition) and initially Powell was merely to supervise their direction. Ultimately however, and at their request, his supervision *became* the direction. But everything about the film was the students' own work and they painted and built all the sets. (Imposing looking prop trees, designed for an upcoming theatrical presentation of *Desire Under the Elms*, were not allowed to be pressed into dual service).

Most of the film, which has a *She*-like flavor, is set in underground catacombs - designed stylistically rather than realistically, very much in the old Ufa tradition, and also sectionally, so that chunks of rock walls and doorways could be rearranged to create new angles and even new sets. Fortunately, Hanover houses a lodge or secret society which holds its meetings in a most impressive tomb-like edifice, vaguely Egyptian in design, and surrounded by (in wintertime) apparently lifeless trees. Powell had been able to utilize this before the snows came for some impressive exterior establishing shots, and during the weekend that I was there, was to do the first day's "studio" shooting. Powell elected to use the basic

stage of the college theatre for his studio, because of the variety of lighting systems available, the generous space, and also the added camera mobility offered by the various trap-door and elevator systems on the stage.

On the first day of shooting, the pace was unhurried and unambitious. As long as the two planned sequences were filmed that day (and they were) he was content to let the crew work at its own speed, encountering the inevitable difficulties and unanticipated problems, and solving them. Only when they got too immersed in detail, worrying about intricacies of lighting and forgetting about the basics (including the actors, waiting in the wings, enthusiasm evaporating while technical matters were pursued) did he intervene to hurry them along. At one point I vainly thought I might make a contribution by suggesting a Roger Corman-like economy, indicating how if one flat were reversed and a different camera angle utilized, a whole "new" set could be created. But Powell, as always, was way ahead of me and showed that he knew not only his Corman but also his Sam Katzman. He left the flat exactly where it was, and created a "new" set just by a change of lighting and angle.

It was particularly rewarding to watch the way Powell literally drew a performance from his non-actress "star", Hillary Frasier, a 14-year-old student at a local ballet school with no experience (or ambitions) as an actress, although with an outstanding potential as a dancer. (The Dartmouth student body hadn't been able to come up with the right kind of face to suit; some extraordinarily attractive young ladies had presented themselves, but their particular charms would have headed the film more in the direction of a Hammer erotic/horror essay, which he wanted to avoid. Powell decided to investigate the students of the ballet school, and the

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CORRECTION: A typo in Herbert G. Luft's *Tin Drum* letter (June/July) cited Ernst Lubitsch's birthplace as Austria; it was of course Berlin.

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## MICHAEL POWELL

### *Continued*

selection of Hillary Frasier was the result). With remarkable patience, Powell guided her performance, toned down her tendency to mime, fed her just a little more information each take so that her understanding of the role grew slowly and confidently. Her own grace and intelligence, plus Powell's handling of her, resulted in the beginnings of a performance of solid maturity by the end of that first day. Incredibly too, as the day progressed, and the lighting and pacing were refined, she even *looked* more mature in successive set-ups.

It was obvious that the whole crew was learning a tremendous amount from their three-month exposure to Powell as friend, teacher, and now production co-worker. Nothing Powell does in film - or for film - is ever wasted, and I am quite sure that the experiences of this group of talented youngsters under his tuition will pay off in their professional film-making and acting in a few years. But watching the care, love and dedication that he lavished on the four-thousand dollar student production, one couldn't help but hope that he'd be behind professional cameras again before too long. America discovered Powell rather late; Powell himself has discovered America belatedly. It would be nice to hope that both sides might remedy that oversight, and that Powell might now be given an opportunity to work in Hollywood — or perhaps better still in San Francisco, where the film-making “feel” for independence and experiment exemplified by Francis Ford Coppola and Wim Wenders, so matches his own.