

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH MICHAEL POWELL

Michael Powell directed such vibrant film classics as *The Red Shoes* (1948), *Black Narcissus* (1947), and *Tales of Hoffman* (1951) in collaboration with his long-time partner Emeric Pressburger. *Peeping Tom* (1960) was Powell's first solo feature, a startling thriller about a murderer who films his victims. In August 1989, Powell made one of his last public appearances at the Museum of the Moving Image. He presented *Peeping Tom* in the film series *Hollywood Beyond Sunset*, and spoke passionately about his life and career.

Discussion with Michael Powell following a screening of *Peeping Tom*, moderated by Richard Koszarski, Curator of Film (August 13, 1989):

RICHARD KOSZARSKI: Mr. Michael Powell. (Applause)

MICHAEL POWELL: Does [the microphone] work alright? Good. I made one or two notes but I hope I won't need them. (Laughs) Making a film is an art. And so if you want to make good films, you have to trust one another. This is sometimes—in fact, frequently—forgotten in the process of the film industry. And really, since the time I came in, in the 1920s, and the time I shall be going out, very shortly... (Laughter) there hasn't been a great deal of improvement. (Laughter) There have been wonderful things done; and somehow, it goes back like a wave and starts all over again. Part of the trouble was history. This century belongs to films. Films are a kind of folk lore, a new folk lore. And this century is full of film folk lore. Well, that's endless. The material that's there is endless. But what has happened is the films have become so technical that people have rather forgotten how to tell a good story simply.

For instance, before the war, you see, films were first silent. Then gradually sound crept in. First of all, people were quite satisfied to have a camera photographing an orchestra playing. Later on, it occurred to somebody that they might like a story like that, too. So right up to the time of the Second World War, first silent and then talkie films came in, and so everything had to be readjusted to that. Then came the war, which gave me and other makers of films in England the chance to really say

something that we believed in. But in America, it went on until you had to drop everything and win the war—which America did in record time, one of the great miracles of this century. But by then Hollywood, of course, had also plunged into the war. And then it had—for ten years after that—it had to keep on patting itself on the back and telling you what had been done. (Laughter) During that time, of course, nobody noticed that a surprise for us crept up behind us with a sandbag—which turned out to be CinemaScope. All these new things like CinemaScope and VistaVision were being invented. All these things were highly depressing to people who were artists and could tell a story without necessarily saying it had to be elongated (Laughter) or that people all had to be... (Laughter) So in movies, more and more we were getting mixed up. We plodded on and—particularly in England, of course, because there's room to plod in England. (Laughter) No room here. (Laughter) I haven't said a word about Hollywood, have I? (Laughter)

I'm talking about films. I don't care where the film is made. I've just seen this magnificent exhibition of all these German directors and actors, you know, who were exiled and first of all had created one of the first very great centers of filmmaking, which was full of creative activity and full of love and excitement and that sort of thing. This is necessary for making good films. And I've got a feeling that this is approaching again. I suppose it will depend a good deal upon critics and writers and writers on films. But I get the feeling that a good time is coming again. And then they'll think of something else to torpedo. (Laughter) Ah, but we'll see. I shall be in the next century by then.

And so I made one or two notes about this little film you're going to see. After Emeric Pressburger and I broke up our partnership—which had lasted for twenty films—imagine! I think it's a record. But partnership of that kind, collaboration of that kind, is very rare, and of course, is one of the reasons that has held films back. Because to collaborate properly with your partner, first of all you have to be very generous. And second, you have to be very jealous. You conquer the jealousy and then you can be generous. (Laughs)

So I worked with Emeric Pressburger, who was a Hungarian Jew, and a wonderful man, and a born dramatic writer. [Director and producer] Alex Korda brought us together. And as soon as I heard him expound on *The Spy in Black*—take an awful script, turn it inside out, explain what was wrong with it, and drop about half the story—because there was far too much story. You can have too much story—I thought to myself, “This is the man I've been looking for.” And so after that, we made literally—count them—twenty films together. But then gradually, for various reasons—domestic reasons, some of them, love, hate—gradually we drifted apart. We decided—we never quarreled—we decided not to make any more films together. Which of course was silly anyway, because we did. (Laughter) But we didn't make them any longer as a team, a creative team. And so sometimes the love was lacking. And I can assure you that love is essential in making a film.

In this little film here... Oh, yes. I scribbled out a few names. A lot of them had worked with me before. But first of all, of course, comes the writer. Leo Marks had never had a feature film made before. He was a remarkable little demon. His father had a very famous bookshop in Charing Cross Road. They made a film about it. Do you remember the—“Something Charing Cross Road?”

AUDIENCE MEMBER: 84 [*84 Charing Cross Road* (1987)].

POWELL: Well, that was his father. And he's furious about that, because he didn't make any money out of it. (Laughter) But he was sent down to me by another producer. You see? Friendship throughout. This chap, too, was called Danny Angel. It's a very good name. And so I looked on him as my guardian angel because he said, “Have a look at

this fellow. I know you're looking for somebody, now that you and Emeric are no longer together. He's been doing some work for us on codes.” I think it was a story about the French underground in the war. [Actor] Virginia McKenna, *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958), or some ridiculous title like that. (Laughter) Anyway, he said, “See this man because he's crazy, and so are you, and you might get on.” (Laughter) So, duly, Leo Marks turned up at my apartment, smoking a cigar—he had just taken the band off it—and looking very like a code himself. He was very dark and secretive, and spoke *very gently, like this*. He still does. If you talk to him on the telephone, it's like that.

And so we discussed several ideas. He wanted to make a double agent story, naturally, because he'd been head of a coding department all through the war, and he knew an awful lot of very good and very dirty stories. (Laughter) I said, “I'm not interested in Secret Service and codes and that sort of thing. What about a film about Freud?” Because by now I'd sized him up, you know? (Laughter) So we worked on that for a couple of weeks, conferencing. And suddenly we heard John Houston had announced that he was going to make a film about Freud. What on earth John was up to, I can't imagine. Anyway, he did make it. [*Freud* (1962)] Let's pass over that. (Laughter)

And I had to find a new one. And by this time Leo Marks had been watching me for some time, at various meetings, and with other people. And this morning he said to me, “Mr. Powell, how would you like to make a film about a young man who photographs the women he kills?” I said, “Oh, yes!” (Laughter) I said, “That's me! (Laughter) It's a great idea, let's go.” He said, “Well, how do we go about it?” I said, “Well, you've probably got the idea in your head now. Why don't you come around twice a week and bring you what we've written? We'll go over it and talk about it, and evolve the script that way, together. You'll write without me bothering you in the room. That should work.”

So that's what we did. Every evening at nine o'clock he would turn up, twice a week, at my apartment, smoking this new cigar. I think he wore a hat, too; always very formal, and always with very good ideas and very good stuff. I said, “There's too much dialogue.” He said, “Mr. Powell, you can't tell a story without dialogue.” I said, “Oh, yes; I can. And

if you write these long dialogue scenes, you'll find they're on the cutting room floor." He said, "Well, no doubt we can compromise."

So we completed the script and we were rather pleased with ourselves. It's more or less the script of the film you're going to see. And I took it to Anglo-Amalgamated, a little firm run delightfully by two delightful fellows called Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy. Nat Cohen was very keen on it, and I said to him, "What do you think of Lawrence Harvey for the young man in the story?" "Oh, that would be great! Can you get him?" I said, "Well, yes; he's working next door in the studio at Shepperton [Studios, London] and he's just finishing up a film—he was making *Room at the Top* (1959)—and I've told him about this, and he wants to do it." "Oh, well if you can get Lawrence Harvey..."

And then, "I got some terrible blonde floozy." (I've forgotten who she was). Anyway, he didn't say that of course. He said, "I've got a lovely young girl for the other part!" (Laughter) I said, "Well, I don't know. That girl's 21, you know, and I wouldn't like her to play a girl who wasn't 21, and wasn't like a girl who feels like 21. And also, I don't care about her looking wonderful. It's up here, I want her." "Oh, well, if you get Lawrence Harvey..." et cetera.

And then suddenly, Lawrence Harvey came into my stage from his stage, and said "Mickey, they're crazy about my film. They've seen all the rushes in Hollywood. I've got an offer to play opposite Elizabeth Taylor in *Butterfly—Butterfield? Butterfield 8* (1960), that's right. And he said, "And what's more, they want to sign me up, and I'll play with all the Hollywood leading ladies. Because they haven't had a new leading man to play with or to go to bed with (Laughter) for a long time." I said, "Well, can't you do this first, Larry? I mean, you can do this film first, and then do the rest of the program." (Laughs) But he wouldn't. I don't blame him. (Laughter) Got to grab a chance like that when it comes.

So then I had to find somebody. And at a party, I ran into Karl Böhm, who was a young Austrian, the son of Karl Böhm the great conductor. And he wanted to be a conductor, too, but of course his father didn't like that idea very much, and so he was thinking of turning actor. I had seen him in a big film in Austria called *Sissi* (1955), S-I-double S-I, and then there was *Sissi Emperess* (1956). Did any

of you ever see it? You've heard of it? Anyway, you ought to dig up some stuff on it. Alain Delon was in it too. Yes, I remember seeing the film. People in England never see foreign films, so they didn't know about it. So I said to Nat Cohen—He said, "Everything going alright?" I said, "Oh, everything's going splendidly. Oh, by the way, Lawrence Harvey can't be in the film, but I've got Karlheinz Böhm instead." He said, "Who?" I said, "Karlheinz Böhm." He wasn't pleased about that at all. (Laughter) I said, "He's very good, very sensitive; I'm sure he can play the part, and what's more he understands the part, and I like him and he likes me."

So we got over that hurdle for a bit, but everything went on like this for a long time. They always had a reason for not letting us play together. And if we're not playing together, how the hell are we going to make a good film? For instance, Otto Heller was one of *the* great cameramen and I'd always wanted to work with him. He shot this film, and Gerry Turpin was his operator. Now one thing you must remember if you're ever going to make a film yourself: An operator's job is to keep the actor and keep the story right in the middle of the picture. If not in the middle, at least as close up as you possibly can. And this boy, Gerry Turpin, was a genius at it. He would follow the story right into the mouth of the actor and out the other side! (Laughter) I mean, no questions. Is the camera staying here and the actor moving around? If the actor moved, the camera was ahead of him. He was a genius. And Otto Heller was one of the great old men of the cinema. He'd been a producer in the silent days. He and Anny Ondra, who played the blonde girl in Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), the first English talkie, had a company together. Anny Ondra—who was a charming girl, lovely blonde, like Hitchcock loved all of his life... She was a beautiful girl. She was Czech, I think. She must have been Czech. [Anny] Ondráková, her [full] name is. That's it. She was Czech. It didn't matter in those days what you were, of course. And it doesn't matter today, does it? But you'd think, the way people talk, that it does. Is that too complicated? (Laughter) Not sure; not sure.

Anyway, I had this wonderful operator and this wonderful cameraman who understood exactly what to leave out. That's the great secret in making a film, you know. You've got everything there, then leave most of it out. (Laughter)

Well, there were several more people. Brian Easdale—who did the music for *The Red Shoes*, and also he did *Black Narcissus*, which I understand you've seen recently—wonderful composer. He said, "Oh, piano. Piano all the way through. It must be piano, because the camera and the projector were all the time turning, turning, turning, and I can do that with the piano." So he did it with the piano. I said, "Well, at the end, I want a bang-up finish." He said, "Oh, you *want* a bang-up finish." I said, "A real old bang-up finish; full orchestra and everything." "Oh, fine." So he was in.

The point is that this film was good because we all loved doing it, and we all understood what the other one wanted, and we all cared what the other one wanted—and I can assure you that is very rare in the film business. I mean even Martin Scorsese, a great friend of mine, who I think is a great director and gets the right sort of people around him, you know, he can't always get that... You know, that time and that feeling, and the sureness that all the people around him are loving him and knowing exactly what he's trying to get. I'll talk about that afterwards. How about the film, no? (Applause)

(Screening of *Peeping Tom*; Applause)

POWELL: I haven't seen it for a long while. Bit too much... I'm glad you liked it. Now, that was a film that was made with love by everybody. Yet when it was shown to the critics, they hated it! (Laughter) They didn't just think it was unnecessary to make it, they just *loathed* it, and they couldn't say why. But they killed it. They killed it for twenty years. I made that—I think I made it about thirty years ago. You get to my age, you don't remember what time is it. I think it was about thirty years ago.

Karl and I were just two dreamers. We came to the premiere in London in dinner jackets, black tie, and saw it together with all the—everybody; a special critics' invitation and people. And they all came out afterwards and passed by us, and nobody spoke to us. Just like in the movies. (Laughter) And the press came out the next day saying, "What a terrible, disgusting, loathsome piece of shit. (Laughter) For God's sake, wash it down the toilet. Take it all." They used language like that. And I was just dazed. I had no idea the critics were so innocent. (Laughter) They're supposed to tell us what we should be doing. I wouldn't like to think what they

thought that I should have been doing instead. Nobody would want to see it.

So I said to the distributor, little Nat Cohen, "Look, let's do what somebody did years and years ago when they made a film out of a Broadway play, *Mother God Damn*." It all took place in a warehouse, and that was a bit new then. And I said, "Let's take space in all the papers and say, 'This is what the critics say about this, this unbelievable abuse. Come yourself, and judge for yourselves.' [It will] keep the film running; it'll do." Because we all loved each other, you see. We shouldn't have loved that distributor, I realize that now. He certainly didn't love us. (Laughter) But they wouldn't do it. They took it off that night. They yanked it. And it was booked already for all around the country, and they probably made about fifty prints.

By the way, this is a 16mm print tonight. Very good, I thought it was. But there must be quite a lot of good 35mm prints knocking about in England, because they took it out of the circuit, they took it out of release. Anglo-Amalgamated sold it to somebody for television, and showed it in black-and-white here. And it took me a long time—later on, when I had the chance, with the help of Martin Scorsese—we discovered where the negative was and what sort of state it was in, and saved it. That's it.

KOSZARSKI: Can we take some questions? (Applause) Are there any questions; yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Was that your voice reading from his father's book?

POWELL: Yes. (Laughter) And that was my son, the little boy. You see, I thought it was pretty far out to say to somebody what we were casting for, and my son thought it was great fun! (Laughter) Which is the only way to do it, really. Only way to do any horror film, I think.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How many of your films did Moira Shearer appear in?

POWELL: Well, she was in *Tales of Hoffman* (1951), of course. Wonderful in that. We just got a new color print of it, a new color negative in England, and you'll be seeing it here, I think, fairly soon. It

had its premiere in America—at the opera, the old Met. But at the time, it only had a limited release here... And she was wonderful in that. She did the dancing doll and she did the girl at the end. And the most wonderful thing in *Tales of Hoffman* was that [conductor and musical arranger] Thomas Beecham made an arrangement of the music of the first act, because I wanted to have a ballet for Moira. We had a seven or eight minute ballet. We called it the Dragonfly Ballet. It was about two dragonflies, the girl and the man. The man was Edmond Audran, who was the husband of Ludmilla Tchérina. He was a very good dancer; French. And Moira, I've never seen her dance so wonderfully as the dragonfly in that. And then of course, she was in *The Red Shoes* (1948). How's that for a piece of underplaying? (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is there any chance they'll re-release a 35mm print of *A Matter of Life and Death*, [also known as] *Stairway to Heaven* (1946)?

POWELL: Oh, I don't know. Who knows these days, you know? (Laughter) For years, we've been making films. When I started, first of all, they told us the life of a film was a couple of years, or at most three, and then it would all be cut up, negative and positive, and used for mandolin picks. (Laughter) That was the first ten, fifteen years of films. Then later on they said, "Well maybe there'll be a market for some. We'll keep a lot of the prints." A lot of the negatives, they didn't keep. A lot of prints, they didn't keep. And then the war came. The Americans were producing at that time, oh, I think it was about 500 pictures a year. Astonishing time. And then when the war came, it was something new. Meanwhile, of course, television had come, and there was continually something new to occupy the money boys' attention. Which is one of the reasons why you get such bloody awful films during that time: because all the attention, all the money went on what you were doing and what you were making.

That's still going on, of course, but it's a little bit better now. And I've got a feeling there might be just time to squeeze in a little bit of a renaissance, where people love films and make them because they want to make them, and because they love the story... and then, of course, it'll come around again. It's wonderful, this century. You're awfully lucky to be living in this century. Sometimes when I

look back and think that actually, I fell in love with making films when I was about nine years old—and look at me, I'm eighty-three now. I can't believe it now! (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Mr. Powell, since I have the last question I'll take advantage of it and say on behalf of all of us, you've given us a very, very special time, and we thank you. How was it that directors such as yourself, who knew that you were making art, and the love that went into it... how was it that directors such as you never were able to collect and save [your films] for posterity, in such a special way, for yourself and for us?

POWELL: Well, thanks for the... (Applause) We have done a good deal about it. You see, I came in at just the right time. And I knew this was the art for me, I knew this was the life for me. And as I can't make films anymore, I'm writing about them. I published the first volume of my autobiography [*A Life in Movies* (1986)]. The idea is to show what happens to somebody who's devoted entirely to this new art. In the end, I hope it'll be three volumes. The second volume I'm just finishing now. [*Edge of the World* (1990)] And I've already written the last chapter. (Laughs) And then the third volume would be all artifacts and music and budgets and schedules and things like that.

Exactly doing what you say, gathering together all this experience into one place—it's always been the curse of the film business, and particularly in England. Here, at least there are some big markets and a certain amount of money available for looking after negatives and looking after prints. But in England, Emeric Pressburger and I were practically the only small company who were looking after their negatives and prints, and watching very carefully what happened to our pictures, because we were just lucky enough to start just before the war, and so a lot of people weren't available, a lot of people went back to America. So I had all this really sacred belief in the work we were doing. At least ten of our films now are under our more or less direct control, and that's why, with the help of the British Film Institute, we've got some new negatives being done of the color films and things like that. But it should be, of course, automatic for a great company to do that. And I'm very glad you brought it up. (Applause) Thank you.

TRANSCRIPT



The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pannonia Foundation.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall, and City Council Member Eric N. Gioia.

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