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Friday November 20th, 7.30pm

The Tales of Hoffmann (U)

dirs: Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger

**starring: Moira Shearer, Leonide Massine, Robert Helpmann,
Robert Rounseville**

sponsors: Rob and Val Sargent

Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger met with Sir Thomas Beecham, who suggested that they film Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*. The real Hoffmann, born in Königsberg in 1776 and raised by his uncle and grandmother, found refuge in writing bizarre tales which have been compared to those of Franz Kafka. These tales were adapted into an opera by Jacques Offenbach in 1880 as the composer's final completed work; he died just a few months before the premiere in February 1881. Sir Thomas had given the first UK performance of the work in 1910 and, as its leading authority, became musical director for the film, personally auditioning over 50 singers.

At Beecham's invitation, American opera star Robert Rounseville made his first trip to Europe and his film debut as Hoffmann. His only other screen role was to be in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, five years later. Ann Ayars also made her debut as a vocalist, despite having previously made six (non-singing) appearances under contract to MGM. All other vocals would be dubbed and mimed by dancers and actors while, in addition to most of *The Red Shoes* ballet company, the production secured the services of Sadler's Wells choreographer Frederick Ashton – his first work for the cinema.

The Tales of Hoffmann is undoubtedly the most opulent, most expensive, most courageous and most exhausting effort yet made to bring opera to the screen. The obvious care and effort that have gone into Hoffmann, the sometimes memorable contrived passages of virtuosity in the first half make one reluctant to insist on the collapse of the work as a whole. Sometimes the sensation is like hurtling through an art gallery in an express train with the steam whistle at full blast. Sometimes it is like sitting on a whirling roundabout sucking a peppermint stick. Not for a single moment will *The Tales of Hoffmann* move you to laughter or tears. Probably the material itself is quite intractable, but the trouble is that behind all the effects, the strivings, the opulence and the apparatus, there seems no clear sense of direction, no single purpose at all. In this way it is the most spectacular failure yet achieved by Powell and Pressburger, who seem increasingly to dissipate their gifts in a welter of aimless ingenuity.

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Another view (Tom Huddleston, Time Out)

In 1951, three years after the success of their ballet tragedy 'The Red Shoes', filmmaking duo Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger at last had the chance to realise Powell's lifelong dream of creating an entirely 'composed' film. Their goal was to blend music, art, design, movement and every cinematic trick at their disposal. The basis would be French composer Jacques Offenbach's final, uncompleted 1870s opera.

It's a fantastical tale of jealousy and nostalgia as Hoffmann (Robert Rounseville), believing himself spurned by the object of his desire (Moira Shearer), recounts to the occupants of a theatre bar three tales of love and loss. One of the most visually sumptuous films ever shot, 'The Tales of Hoffmann' is resplendent



in primary colours – one for each of the three stories – and crammed with the kind of visual ellipses, dissolves, painterly backdrops and sly visual tricks that were Powell's stock-in-trade. It's a more self-consciously artful film than its predecessor; an admirable spectacle rather than an entrancing human story. But as a work of pure, imaginative cinema, it comes close to genius.

Synopsis: A young poet named Hoffman broods over his failed romances. First, his affair with the beautiful Olympia is shattered when he realizes that she is really a mechanical woman designed by a scientist. Next, he believes that a striking prostitute loves him, only to find out she was hired to fake her affections by the dastardly Dapertutto. Lastly, a magic spell claims the life of his final lover.

Credits:

Stella and Olympia: Moira Shearer

Hoffmann: Robert Rounseville

Lindorf, Coppelius, Dapertutto and Dr Miracle: Robert Helpmann

Kleinzach and Cochenille: Frederick Ashton

Nicklaus: Pamela Brown

Luther: Meinhard Maur

Partner to Stella in Dragonfly ballet: Edmond Audran

Andreas: Philip Leaver

Spalanzani, Schlemil and Franz: Léonide Massine

Giulietta: Ludmilla Tchérina:

Directors: Michael Powell/Emeric Pressburger:

Assistant Director: Sydney Streeter

Cinematography: Christopher Challis

Art Direction: Arthur Lawson

Production design: Hein Heckroth

Costume Design: Hein Heckroth, Ivy Baker

Editor: Reginald Mills

Make up: Constance Reeve

Music: Jacques Offenbach

Libretto: Jules Barbier

Script: Dennis Arundell, Emeric Pressburger, Michael Powell

Sound: John Cox, Ted Drake

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, The Sadler's Wells chorus

Conductor: Thomas Beecham

Produced by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

UK, 1951. 128 mins

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Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

The partnership of English director Michael Powell (1905-1990) and Hungarian-born writer Emeric Pressburger (1902-1988) was one of the most inspired in the history of British cinema, producing a body of films notable for their passion and fantasy and quite unlike anything produced in a national cinema traditionally dominated by 'realism'.

The pair quickly distinguished themselves with their well executed propaganda films, including *49th Parallel* (1941) and *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), but the spectacular Arabian Nights fantasy *Thief of Bagdad* (1940), co-directed by Powell without Pressburger, was an early taste of the fantasy which would increasingly inform their films.

In 1943 they established their own production company, Archers Film Productions, and began their most distinctive and personal phase, producing a run of vivid, passionate and beautiful films, including *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946 - shown by LFS in 2001), *Black Narcissus* (1947) and *The Red Shoes* (1948).

The partners separated in 1957, and Powell went on to make the intense psychological horror *Peeping Tom* (1960), the critical backlash against which all but finished his career. Fortunately, the pair lived long enough to see their work gain new fans in the late 1970s and '80s.

Mark Duguid (BFI)

The Archers' Film Company

In 1943 Powell and Pressburger incorporated their own production company, Archers Film Productions, and adopted a distinctive target logo which began each film. The joint credit "Written, Produced and Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger" indicates their joint responsibility for their own work and that they weren't beholden to any studio or other producers. [2]

In a letter to Wendy Hiller in 1942, asking her to appear in *Colonel Blimp*, Pressburger explicitly set out 'The Archers' Manifesto'. Its five points express the pair's intentions:

1. *We owe allegiance to nobody except the financial interests which provide our money; and, to them, the sole responsibility of ensuring them a profit, not a loss.*
2. *Every single foot in our films is our own responsibility and nobody else's. We refuse to be guided or coerced by any influence but our own judgement.*
3. *When we start work on a new idea we must be a year ahead, not only of our competitors, but also of the times. A real film, from idea to universal release, takes a year. Or more.*
4. *No artist believes in escapism. And we secretly believe that no audience does. We have proved, at any rate, that they will pay to see the truth, for other reasons than her nakedness.*
5. *At any time, and particularly at the present, the self-respect of all collaborators, from star to prop-man, is sustained, or diminished, by the theme and purpose of the film they are working on.*

They began to form a group of regular cast and crew members who were to work with them on many films over the next twelve years. Hardly any of these people were ever under contract to The Archers. They were hired film by film. But Powell and Pressburger soon learnt who they could work well with and these people enjoyed working with them. When Raymond Massey was offered the part of

the Prosecuting Attorney in *A Matter of Life and Death* his cabled reply was "For The Archers anytime, this world or the next."

He knows what I am going to say even before I say it –
“ maybe even before I have thought it – and that is very rare. ”
You are lucky if you meet someone like that once in your life.

Pressburger on Powell

He'd stood the story on its head, he'd turned a man into a woman and a woman into a man, he'd altered the suspense, he'd rewritten the end... I was rejoicing that I was going to be working with someone like this.

Powell on first meeting Pressburger

Powell and Pressburger also co-produced a few films by other directors under the banner of The Archers: *The Silver Fleet* (1943), written and directed by Vernon Sewell and Gordon Wellesley, based on a story by Emeric Pressburger and *The End of The River* (1947) directed by Derek N. Twist to which both Powell and Pressburger contributed un-credited writing. Both Sewell and Twist had worked with Powell & Pressburger previously on other films and were being given their first chance as directors.

Generally, Pressburger would create the original story (for all their films from 1940–1946 and *The Red Shoes*) and write the first draft of the script. They would then pass the script back and forth a few times – they could never work on it together in the same room. For the actual dialogue, Pressburger would know what he wanted the characters to say but Powell would often supply some of the actual words.

They would both act as producers, perhaps Pressburger slightly more so than Powell, since he could soothe the feathers ruffled by Powell's forthright manner. They became their own producers mainly to stop anyone else interfering, since they had a considerable degree of freedom, especially under Rank, to make just about any film they wanted.

The direction was nearly all done by Powell, but even so The Archers generally worked as a team, with the cast and crew often making suggestions. Pressburger was always on hand, usually on the studio floor, to make sure that these late changes fitted seamlessly into the story.

Once the filming was finished, Powell would usually go off for a walk in the hills of Scotland to clear his head, but Pressburger was often closely involved in the editing, especially in the way the music was used. Pressburger was a musician himself and had played the violin in an orchestra in Hungary.

When the film was finally ready and Powell was back from the Highlands, it would usually be Powell that would be the front man in any promotional work, such as interviews for the trade papers or fan magazines.

Because collaborative efforts such as Powell and Pressburger's were, and continue to be, unusual in the film industry, and because of the influence of "the auteur theory" which elevates the director as a film's primary creator, Pressburger has sometimes been dismissed as "Michael Powell's scriptwriter", but Powell himself was the first to say, in many interviews, that he couldn't have done most of what he did without Pressburger.

Our next screenings

November 24th: The Time Is Now film - Thelma and Louise (USA 1991. Cert 15). 6.30pm, EMMTEC Building University of Lincoln. Free parking available:

November 25th: The Time Is Now film - Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer (UK/USA 2013. Cert 18). 7pm, EMMTEC Building University of Lincoln. Free parking available:

These films are the last we will be screening before Christmas and the New Year. We return on January 8th, with

Wild Tales (Argentina, 2014. Cert 15)

In 6 separate stories (each laced with black humour) love and deception, the return of the past, a tragedy, or even everyday violence push the characters towards the abyss and into the undeniable pleasure of losing control.

Argentine superstar Ricardo Darin (*The Secret in Their Eyes, Carancho*) is part of a terrific ensemble cast in Damián Szifón's superbly entertaining film which confirms once more that Latin American cinema is in a class of its own.

We would like to wish all our members and guests a very Happy Christmas and look forward to seeing you in 2016