

The Spy in Black

This remarkable film is notable for several reasons. Most importantly, it marked the first collaboration between Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger and although it would be three years before they formally announced their partnership as The Archers, they worked together on this production by Alexander Korda with great excitement. It was clear from the outset that they shared ideas about what a film should be and that they were soon able to immediately understand what the other meant in their discussions about the script. Powell was contracted by Korda after the critical success of *The Edge of the World* in 1937.



Powell was given the script by Korda after the project he had been working on, *Burmese Silver* (which he had been researching in Burma), was put on hold. Pressburger had eventually joined his compatriot Korda's network of Central European filmmakers when he came to the UK in 1935. He was an experienced screenwriter and a highly cultivated man. Korda, still at this time the major figure in the British film industry, asked Pressburger to work with Powell on *The Spy in Black* because it was part of a contract that he had made with Columbia Pictures to produce modestly-budgeted features. Powell was chosen because of his experience of directing 'quota quickies' and delivering them on time and within budgets. *The Spy in Black* already had a script, an adaptation of a 1917 novel by the Orkney writer J. Storer Clouston. Unfortunately, the script wasn't very good according to Powell and he and Pressburger set about re-writing it. The story is set in Orkney in 1917 and follows the attempt by a German U-boat captain to liaise with German agents ashore and to lead a raid on the British Grand Fleet anchored in Scapa Flow.

In 1938 Korda still controlled Denham Studios, one of the most modern in Europe, but London Films was struggling. Its films might be successful at home, but they were less so in the biggest market



in North America, hence the Columbia contract which should generate profit. Though the budget was modest, Powell and Pressburger had the use of Denham's facilities plus access to its contracted stars. In this case that meant the great German actor Conrad Veidt who had left Germany with his Jewish wife in 1933 when the Nazis took control of Ufa, the leading German studio. Opposite him in the cast was Valerie Hobson, already a leading lady and star performer at just 21 and after four successful years as a film actor. Powell recalls that he and Pressburger worked out a new script in discussion around a table with the two stars.

Denham had great facilities and this meant that productions were assumed to be prepared for shooting on the sound stages and the open spaces close to the studios. After his experience making *The Edge of the World* on Foula in Shetland, Powell was keen to get 'on the ground' (and on the water) in Orkney. He persuaded the studio to let him take a small crew (including some of his *Edge of the World* crew) up to Orkney where he carried out research, shot location footage and collected still photographs to aid set construction. He was also able to cast several Scottish actors including George Summers and Grant Sutherland from the Foula shoot and Hay Petrie. Petrie appeared in several later films for The Archers, as did Marius Goring who became an important member of the troupe. Eventually the production was mainly completed at Denham but Powell's insertion of authentic location details gave it more appeal than most other studio films of the period.

The Spy in Black was completed by the end of 1938 but did not open in London until August 1939, just a few weeks before war with Germany was declared. In America it was re-named U-Boat 29 and opened in October 1939. It didn't get a general release in the UK and the US until later in October. It seems extraordinary now that a British film with this story should be released at the start of the Second World War and be seen in parts of Europe that would be invaded by Germany in 1940. Not only that, but the leading figure in the film was a German U-boat captain, shown to be an intelligent and formidable foe – rather a heroic figure and certainly not the evil monster of later propaganda films. Scapa Flow was still Britain's main naval base in 1939.

The Spy in Black was praised by many critics in the UK and the US, several of whom picked out the very capable direction of the film. Powell and Pressburger worked again with Conrad Veidt and Valerie Hobson in 1940 on the film *Contraband*. Veidt this time was a Danish sea captain caught up in another spy story onshore in London in the blackout (the US title for the film) of the 'phoney war'. Following *The Spy in Black*, *Contraband*, though tailored to avoid a 'sympathetic German' in the lead role, was another film seemingly at odds with the conventional notion of a propaganda film supporting the war effort. Powell and Pressburger, now very much in harness, would go on to make several more unusual but arguably very effective British propaganda films over the next five years.

Source

Michael Powell (1986) *A Life in Movies*, Heinemann

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