

ely
film
society

feb
2018

the
notes

We hope to have tonight's showing introduced by **Thierry Bonnaud**. Thierry is a research chemist based in Cambridge, film-maker, qualified French projectionist, founder of the Cambridge Super 8 Festival and a member of the Michael Powell Society.

coming up @ kings lynn

- Thursday 8th March 6pm: Pre-Film Meal at the Riverside followed by 7.30pm **THE SENSE OF AN ENDING**
- CLOSE-UPS EVENT Thursday 15th MARCH 7.30-9.30pm **Public Enemies on Screen**

Further details at klccc.uk

A Canterbury Tale

Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, UK 1944

Written, produced and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, loosely based on *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer

Sgt. John Sweet, U.S. Army
 ... Bob Johnson
 Dennis Price Peter Gibbs
 Sheila Sim Alison Smith
 Eric Portman Thomas Colpeper
 Charles Hawtrey Thomas Duckett
 Esmond Knight
 ... Narrator / Seven-Sisters
 Soldier / Village Idiot
 Eric Maturin Geoffrey's Father

Music..... Allan Gray
 Cinematography.....Erwin Hillier
 Editor John Seabourne Sr.



It's 1943, and you're tasked to drum up propaganda support for the allied war effort. What do you? Well, if you happen to be a maverick filmmaking duo of an English auteur-director and a Hungarian screenwriter you'll start off by assembling a key production talent of anti-Nazi emigrés; then round up an all-British cast—and throw in an American non-actor co-lead for good measure. Now for the story. Create a

'journey of self-discovery' movie, but make it cryptic. Turn it into a detective mystery set in a bucolic landscape, and saturate it with mystical religiosity. Oddities abound in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's now classic *A Canterbury Tale*, without doubt one of the most peculiarly British films of all time—delightfully eccentric and flawed, yet mesmerizing and rapturous. The film is an intensely idiosyncratic celebration of Powell's childhood milieu of Kent—a pastoral

England of wheelwrights and horse-drawn carts, and Turner-esque clouds. Powell loved the drama of clouds and often delayed shooting clear skies until they swirled above. According to his widow, Thelma Schoonmaker, when at home he even preferred scything to mowing the lawn. Loosely based on *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer, the film evokes the central theme of "eccentric characters on a religious pilgrimage" to illuminate the wartime experience

(both rustic and metropolitan), and to encourage wartime Anglo-American friendship and understanding. As the tide of war turns towards the defeat of Nazism, the film provides an almost idyllic counterpoint. However, despite the film's rural setting, its backdrop is ever present through the film's noir expressionist cinematography, which in turn compounds the misery and pending defeat of Germany. Indeed, Pressburger once boasted, "Goebbels considered himself an expert on propaganda but I thought I'd show him a thing or two."

The plot follows three young strangers, each on a journey to find some form of blessing or redemption (consciously or otherwise). Alison Smith (Sheila Sim) is a Women's Land Army girl—mourning the death of her RAF pilot beau; Peter Gibbs (Dennis Price) is a cynical ex-cinema organist now transplanted as a British Army Sergeant on manoeuvres; and Bob Johnson (played by John Sweet, a real serving Army Sergeant from Oregon) is an American GI en route to Canterbury to meet his girlfriend. The trio are flung together when their train is waylaid in the wartime blackout at a railway station in the fictitious small Kent town of Chillingbourne near Canterbury. As they leave the station together Alison is attacked by an assailant in uniform who pours glue on her hair, before disappearing into the shadows. It turns out to be the latest in a series of attacks on other women. Peter and Bob vow to help Alison catch the culprit and the three spend the weekend sleuthing the mysterious 'glueman', enlisting the help of the locals, including several young boys who play large-scale war games.

The offender turns out to be a local magistrate, Thomas Colpeper (Eric Portman), a gentleman farmer and prophet-like community leader, who also gives local history lectures to soldiers stationed in the district. On the Monday morning, the three catch the train to Canterbury having solved the case, with Gibbs intending to report Colpeper to the police. When Colpeper joins them in their compartment., they confront him only to discover that his motive is to prevent the soldiers from being distracted away from his lectures by female company and to help keep the

Johnson: Why do you, from sunrise to sunset, and at odd hours throughout the night... have to drink tea?

Gibbs: I shouldn't be too noisy about it if I were you.

Johnson: But I hate the stuff.

Gibbs: Well, after Pearl Harbor you Americans joined the honorable company of tea drinkers. Don't forget that the Nazis and Japs have knocked down every country they've tried to, except the tea drinkers - China, Russia and England. So, long live drinking tea.

local women faithful to their absent British boyfriends. In Colpeper's words, Chaucer's pilgrims travelled to Canterbury to "receive a blessing, or to do penance". On arrival in Canterbury, devastated by wartime bombing, the three receive their respective blessings. Alison discovers that her boyfriend has survived after all; his father. Bob receives long-delayed letters from his sweetheart—now a WAC in Australia. Peter gets to play the large organ at Canterbury Cathedral, before leaving with his unit. He decides not to report Colpeper to the Canterbury police, as he had planned to do. Here, the film reaches its jubilant finale with a parade of soldiers marching through the city.

Shot mostly on location in Kent, the opening railway scene was filmed at Selling railway station (between Faversham and Canterbury), with shots of Chilham, Fordwich, Wickhambreaux and other villages near Canterbury making up the the fictitious town of Chillingbourne. The central location of the film's ending, Canterbury Cathedral itself, was out of bounds and boarded up, with the organ moved into storage—though exteriors revealed the extent of bomb damage in the wake of the Baedeker raids of May-June 1942. By the use of clever perspective, large portions of the cathedral were recreated within the studio by art director Alfred Junge.

Despite Powell's recent move to colour film, war shortages meant a return to the black and white stock that cinematographer Erwin Hillier was familiar with. The film blends a palette of British Neo-

Romanticism and realism—nodding to the documentary style of Humphrey Jennings and the German Expressionist use of chiarascuro, which cinematographer Hillier worked to great effect. Born in Germany to English-German Jewish parents, Hillier had worked for Fritz Lang at the famous Weimar UFA studios before emigrating to England.

As explored in Powell and Pressburger's previous film *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), and more notably later in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), the film also highlights the mistrust and thawing of the Anglo-American relationship through Johnson's problems with, and gradual and mutual acceptance of, the differences and common ground with the villagers. These include: his bemusement at local police not carrying guns; unfamiliarity with the British blackout; and his American sergeant's stripes (chevrons) being upside-down compared with British ones (a repeated joke). These differences dissolve in a wonderful scene when Johnson visits the local wheelwright, when both identify with the commonality of traditional craft.

After filming, Sweet served out the remainder of the war before returning to the United States, where he made a few vain attempts at an acting career before settling back into his original profession of teaching. As a serving US Army soldier, he was not allowed to earn money for other work, so he donated his entire \$2,000 actor's fee to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—an incredibly poignant social gesture, which almost echoes the blessing Sweet's character receives in the film. With the war over Powell was forced by the studio to completely re-edit the film for the U.S. release, replacing Esmond Knight's narration with Raymond Massey, and filming 'bookends,' which introduced Kim Hunter as Sergeant Johnson's girlfriend to make the film more contemporary.

**NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
WILD STRAWBERRIES**
(Ingmar Bergman, Sweden
1957)

Monday 19 March

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