

Interview with Jack Cardiff, “enfant terrible” of Technicolor¹ - 7 June 1999

By Natacha Thiéry

How did you meet Michael Powell?

By the time I met him, Michael Powell was already beginning to have a big reputation as a very good director, he and his partner, Pressburger. They were a wonderful team. Michael Powell was volatile, brave, energetic; everything was quick. He was a little bit crazy sometimes; Emeric was the one who was more placid and more common-sense, saying “Wait a minute Michael, that might be a bit too much”, you know, and that was a very good combination. I didn’t know them of course, but they had a big reputation.

At that time, I was trying to get a break, to get my first feature film. I had worked with Technicolor for a few years, and been on Travelogues for two years, and my ambition was to work on a feature film. But it was the same old story, the producers would ask “What have you done?”, and I’d say “I haven’t done anything yet”, so no one would take the chance. I was doing a lot of second unit work, which is boring – just close-ups of letter writing, close-ups of a cigarette in an ashtray or something. But on one occasion I had to photograph a wall which had a dozen animals’ heads on it, all with horns, so it was difficult to light, as the horns made multiple shadows on the wall.

¹ Jack Cardiff was born in 1914. Both of his parents were actors, and he started as a child actor. He developed a strong interest for photography. He describes himself as the *enfant terrible* of Technicolor. He worked on *The Magic Box* and was the successful cameraman of three of Powell and Pressburger’s films: *A Matter of Life and Death* (*Une Question de vie ou de mort*, 1946), *Black Narcissus* (*Le Narcisse Noir*, 1947, for which he won an oscar), and *The Red Shoes* (*Les Chaussons rouges*, 1948).

He also worked with, amongst others, Alfred Hitchcock (*Under Capricorn*, *Les Amants du Capricorne*, 1949), Albert Lewin (*Pandora*, 1951), John Huston (*African Queen*, 1952), J. L. Mankiewicz (*The Barefoot Comtessa*, *La Comtesse aux pieds nus*, 1954), Henry Hathaway (*Legend of the Lost*, *La Cité disparue*, 1957), R. Fleisher (*Vikings*, 1958), John Guillermin (*Death on the Nile*, *Mort sur le Nil*, 1978). He has always been influenced by painting and remains one of the most celebrated cameramen in the history of cinema.

He also directed films, such as *Girl on a Motorcycle* (*La Motocyclette*, 1968), *Young Cassidy* (*Le Jeune Cassidy*, 1965), and *Sons and Lovers* (*Amants et fils*, 1960), adapted from a novel by D. H. Lawrence.

Was it on *Colonel Blimp*?

On *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* [1943], yes. Being a second unit, I had more time to take my time, and to do the lighting very carefully, so I suppose it was pretty good. I was just going to shoot it when I heard a voice saying: "Very interesting!", I looked round and there was the great Michael Powell looking at what I'd done. And he said: "Would you like to photograph my next film?". I answered "Yes, Mr Powell, I'd like that very much", so he said "Well, we start in three months", and he went away quickly – he was always very quick. I thought: "He just said that to be nice, he'll forget all about it."

I was in Egypt some time afterwards, again on second units, doing these series for *Caesar and Cleopatra* [Gabriel Pascal, 1945], and I had a telegram from Michael Powell saying: "Where the hell are you? We start in three weeks!", and I got permission to go back at once. So *A Matter of Life and Death* was my first big film. So I owe so much to Michael Powell. He was the one that gave me that vital break. And it was a wonderful film to start with, because it was a very important one, with lots of complicated and challenging tricks and brave ideas. And Michael Powell had a very good crew, a very good art director.

How was the atmosphere on the shooting?

Wonderful. Michael Powell had this ability to make people be, like himself, enthusiastic. And you felt working on the film that he was doing wonderful things. He was always getting the best out of everybody. *A Matter of Life and Death* was a very complicated film to work on because it was one of the first ones to use Technicolor *and* black and white, with a transition from black and white to colour, from colour to black and white, which was not easy.

How did you manage to do that?

We shot the black and white sequences with a black and white camera, but the penultimate one was done with a Technicolor camera, and that was printed in black and white, then they could make the transition, which worked very well. This was my first big film, and it was quite a big success. After that, automatically, his next film was *Black Narcissus*. That was also a piece of cake for any cameraman because the very essence of the film was the fact that the background of the film was in the Himalayas, and everything was so beautiful that it caused the failure of the nuns. So it was perfect for a cameraman. You also had this wonderful structure, the fact that the nuns had these oatmeal white costumes. It was a kind of pattern against

the colour. And because it was supposed to be so high in the mountains, we had to have a faint wind, breeze, on every scene, so it was perfect photographically.

The funny thing was that when we were preparing the film, we took it for granted we would go to India and do the real thing in India. And then, when the subject came up, Michael Powell said "No, we are going to do it all in the studio". We thought, "Oh, my God, this is going to be very difficult, to make all this beauty". But he was right. If we had gone to India, it would have been an enormous expense to take everyone there on location, so it was a very wise decision. We experimented with backings seen through the window. The conventional thing in those days was to have painted backings; we had some very good artists, which was very good, but never exactly right, there was always something phoney about it. So I suggested to Alfred Junge – who was our brilliant German art director – that we had black and white photographic backings, because the photographic backgrounds are more realistic than the paintings. Junge wanted to paint with ordinary paint. But I begged him not to do that because it would take away the realism. He agreed to have pastel chalk, so all that we needed to do was to rub a little bit of blue on the mountains in the distance, maybe some ochre and a touch of green sometimes. This was marvellous because we were able to preserve the photographic quality, so it looked very real and was a big success. And we shot the entire film in the studio. People didn't believe it because it was so real. In fact, we had one or two letters from Indian people saying they recognised some of the places!

For me this film was a wonderful opportunity, and that's the one I got the oscar for. Most oscars go to big big films, but *Black Narcissus* was not a big film, and wasn't very well known. So the fact that it got a reward for the photography was very gratifying. Towards the end of *Black Narcissus*, Michael Powell said to me: "Jack, what do you think about ballet?" I said: "Not much, I don't like it very much, all those sissies prancing about." He laughed and said: "Have you ever been to the ballet?", and I said: "No, I haven't". He said "Well, you'll have to go now, because our next film is *The Red Shoes*. I want you to absorb all you can about ballet. You'll have free tickets to go." I thought it was going to be a bore, but I must say, after a few times, I was completely hooked on ballet. I used to go and see the dancing classes, Madame Volkova, Margot Fonteyn... And I went backstage and looked in the dressing rooms, and studied the conditions of the lighting sources, I was really completely *au fait* with the ballet world in that sense.

That was the three films I made with Michael Powell. I shall always remember him as a great man, and he was the man who gave me the opportunity to start my career. I would have continued making films with

him, but there are always intervals between films, and after these films I was unfortunately working on other films.

Did you leave for America or did you stay in England?

I was in England most of the time; I only left for short trips. The Rank Organisation sent me over to Hollywood to study technical things. In America, they had been doing it for years, and they had a kind of easy-going efficiency. If something took over two or three minutes with ropes and things, they would do it with a spring clip – two seconds and it's done. In America, they had the grip department, these guys used to run-up a gauze to make a shadow very quickly..., they could do everything very quickly. Things we didn't have at that time. We tried to get the system, but we failed. Now we have an equivalent system; but in those days the unions stopped it. All was departmentalized – carpenters, electricians, and so on. I met Mr. Mole Richardson. He told me he had found a new type of lamp, called a Brute – that became famous, he had made the first two prototypes. I told him I was about to make a Ballet film, and talked him into letting me borrow the lamps, so I was the first one to use them. They were big lamps with a large even area, which came to be used all over the world.

You said you were very fond of painting. Were there painters in particular you were thinking of when you worked on *Black Narcissus* for instance?

Yes. I was thinking a lot about Vermeer and Caravaggio, because what I was intending to do on *Black Narcissus* was simplicity, and Caravaggio used to have one light coming out and Vermeer had this wonderful simplicity of light. When I've been giving talks to young people, I always urge them, if they want to succeed as cameramen, to study painting, because it is light. I was in love with paintings since I was very young. And one day I realised that painting is light. If you have a long shot of the countryside, or a bowl of fruit, it all has to be lit by a light from somewhere. It's the composition of light that makes the whole painting.

During the last twenty years, I became enamoured of Turner; he would have been a wonderful cameraman! He didn't just faithfully copy what he saw, he made the conditions of light as he wanted. If he was doing a seascape, willing to have an effect of chiaroscuro, he would have a big shadow in the foreground and in the distance he would put a tremendous hot light, like there was a break in the clouds. I'm making some filters now where I try to have the same sort of effects, which I hope to use very soon, what I call 'Turner Filters' – hot spots on exteriors, as if the sun was hitting spots.

Seeing *Amolad* again, I was struck by the black and white sequences at the court. They reminded me of silent cinema, with composed images, different fields of vision and wonderful depths.

Yes, in many respects, it was fortunate that Heaven was in black and white. And funnily enough, when I was talking to Michael Powell before the film started, I said to him: "I suppose Heaven will be in colour, and Earth in black and white." He said: "No, on the contrary, Heaven will be black and white". I said: "Why is that?", and he replied: "I'm doing that because everybody expects Heaven to be in colour, so I want to make something different", and that was his attitude, always – doing something different. So Heaven was in black and white. And it helped me tremendously, because if these enormous long shots had been in colour, I would have needed much more light, and it would have been difficult. And the huge stairway we had was a daring thing with a 12 horse power engine, it filled the whole studio. It was very high, and carried all these statues.

How did you shoot the famous sequence with the closing eyelid?

Looking at it yesterday, I thought it could have been a bit better; I thought it looked a little phoney. We were travelling underneath the eyelid... with the veins and blood vessels and so on... It was a very exciting film to do, like the other two with Michael Powell, each one extremely enjoyable. On *The Red Shoes*, Michael made a speech, he said we had to work very hard because it was going to be a great film. He was quite confident, he was always confident about it. But when Rank saw it for the first time, they thought it was a disaster, and they wouldn't allow a premiere. But thanks to an American and his wife, who had a small cinema in New York, the film ran for two years, until there was an enormous interest in America and it became famous. And it's amazing how many young people, fond of ballet, see it today and enjoy it.

In his memoirs, Michael Powell says David Farrar had violet eyes. What did you think of them?

I don't remember David having violet eyes. Maybe Michael was wearing sun glasses sometimes!... Liz Taylor had violet-blue eyes.

How was Farrar on the shooting of *Black Narcissus*?

He was extremely nice to work with. He was calm and collected, in fact all the actors on *Black Narcissus* were easy to work with. Deborah Kerr also was a very fine actress, and very beautiful. Technicolor can sometimes exaggerate things, and the public today is not really aware of colour subtleties. At the beginning, I said to Michael, knowing he would agree, that

we shouldn't have any lipstick on the nuns, because that would be ridiculous. I hate make up in general; it can be acceptable on women, but not on nuns. I made some tests, and the actual colour of their lips looked like lipstick, some had naturally red lips. So we had to put a flesh colour on their lips. In one of the great scenes of the picture, Kathleen Byron puts lipstick on her lips, that was one of those wanting scenes when she comes out before she tries to kill Deborah Kerr.

What about Anton Walbrook and Roger Livesey?

Anton Walbrook, on *The Red Shoes*, was amazing. Some people, when they play a part, don't seem to understand the character, but I felt he had studied the original Diaghilev completely. And at the end of the film, he was brilliant.

Do you think the character of Lermontov is in love with Vicky Page, the dancer?

Oh yes, but in a different kind of way: he wanted to possess her, not to have any physical relation to her. And of course, this was a throw back to Nijinsky. Diaghilev wanted to possess Nijinsky completely, and when Nijinsky got married, he got mad, and never spoke to him again. It was the same idea in *The Red shoes*. About Roger Livesey; when I was a kid actor, I did a bit of work on stage sometimes... I worked on a show called "The Octoroon"; the man who played the lead was Roger Livesey's father. I worked with Livesey on *A Matter of Life and Death*. He is a very good actor, very solid. He's got a very good voice. He unfortunately died early.

Michael Powell was known for loving red-haired women: it is very relevant to Technicolor, isn't it?

Yes, he had this feeling about red hair. That's why he liked Moira Shearer I think. She was extraordinary. Most of the ballet people are dedicated, like being a nun, they give their lives to ballet. And Moira was also dedicated. I wasn't present during her discussions with Michael Powell, but I know she wasn't much interested in films – most people would go crazy to have the opportunity to play leading parts in films. But ballet was the most important thing for her. They had to try very hard to persuade her. She was such a purist at heart. And Madame de Valois, who was the head of the company is still alive, and I was told she didn't like the film; she didn't like films at all. Ballet people think films are very vulgar. In fact, during the making of *The Red Shoes*, there had been a ballet I was very fond of – Massine was a great artist – and we had two weeks' vacation. No one knew where to go – they couldn't make any reservations, not knowing exactly when they would be

free; and I suggested and the company agreed that everyone get vacations. I had fallen in love with the ballet *La Boutique Fantasque*; Moira was absolutely wonderful in it. I thought that in that two weeks I could photograph the ballet on the stage, to record it in Technicolor. Massine was very enthusiastic, he went to work with me and we got the musical rights, and shot it in just one or two days, but we needed a *corps de ballet*. But de Valois said, "No way, I hate films". It was very sad because we couldn't make it. It would have been a very good record. Now, Massine is dead, and the whole thing's changed.

What about Emeric Pressburger? Was he present on the shooting of the films?

Yes, quite often he'd come on the set. But he never seemed to argue about anything; sometimes he'd speak to Powell to make suggestions. He was a very wise, intelligent man. A charming man. He'd never argue. And Michael Powell had a big half-circular table which was his office on the set where he dictated letters while I was lighting. He'd get up for directing and go back to the office afterwards, it was very interesting. He used to have an open Bentley car... and drove it right through the winter with no hat. He had a bald head, too... like mine!

In *Colonel Blimp* I very much like the moment when the two men, Theo-Walbrook and Clive-Livesey, are preparing to fight and the camera goes up and up through the ceiling and travels down again outside towards Deborah Kerr waiting. Powell said somewhere it was Pressburger's idea, and he immediately agreed, wishing he'd had the idea before him.

Yes. Before Pressburger and Powell became partners, Emeric was a successful writer, and was under contract to Alexander Korda. Korda was very keen on the idea of doing a film called *The Red Shoes*, with Merle Oberon. He was going to marry her. But she had never been in ballet, she couldn't dance. Pressburger wrote a script, which was put on the shelf for a couple of years and formed the basis of the later film. And when Pressburger left the company and started working with Powell, they thought it was a good idea to go ahead.

Did you train Christopher Challis?

I was one of the first to be employed by Technicolor as a staff cameraman. Christopher Challis was engaged, and also Ian Craig, Geoff Hunsworth; they all became cameramen. But at the start, Chris Challis was about 18 or 19, training to be a technician on the camera, which is a very important job.

Not only had he to load the camera, but he also had to set the prism inside the camera, which was a very delicate operation. The camera had three films running at the same time, and behind the lens was a prism. It had to be set to a very fine degree; the tolerance was 8/10 000 of an inch. At the beginning, I had another assistant, Andy Quail, and it was such a delicate job, that he used to practice on a dummy made of wood. It sounds ridiculous, but it was all part of the training.

Chris and I went on travelogues together. And eventually, he became a fine cameraman. Jeff Hansworth was also my operator on *The Red Shoes* and he also became an Oscar winning cameraman.

On *Black Narcissus*, you also worked with Ted Scaife?

Yes, Ted Scaife was another operator. He wasn't trained as an assistant, he was already an operator. It was mostly second unit work. Later, he did very fine work - on *African Queen* [John Huston, 1952]. He went down the rapids with the camera in order to get the background material. After, he worked on films that I directed, *Young Cassidy* [1965]. And I directed a film with Chris Challis as my cameraman, so it was all family, if you like.

As a cameraman, what are the films you like most? And as a mere spectator?

When I was still an assistant, at the time of Denham and Korda, I could have become a cameraman earlier, but Korda was having top American cameramen coming over, and I was assisting these great cameramen. I felt that I would learn more with these top American cameramen, instead of getting an earlier promotion. I had to find out for myself. When I went to Hollywood, I met Greg Tolon – possibly the greatest -, and he took me around. He had his own camera department, offices, and his own laboratory technicians. If you have your own crew, they know the lighting. I thought that *Citizen Kane* [Orson Welles, 1941] was a wonderful film.

I was always watching the lighting, plus the painting. At an early age, I developed a curiosity for light; even today, I always look where a light or a shadow comes from, reflections.

According to you, what was the difference between Hitchcock way of working and Powell's?

Michael Powell's way of working radiated with exuberant enthusiasm and it was infectious. The crew became convinced they were all working on a masterpiece.

Hitchcock was not at all outwardly enthusiastic. He was more quietly sure of his requirements and all his passion and creative ideas had gone into the

script. He knew exactly how each scene should be played, what camera angles should be used. It was really a superb *fait accompli*.

What made you understand that Powell was making films for himself and the pleasure he derived from it – and then, of course, hoping that the audience would echo that feeling?

Hitchcock would often consider the advance reactions, and worked hard not to confuse them. For instance he made sure both sexes of his cast looked quite different in appearance on the screen.

But Powell concentrated on taking the audience by the scruff of their necks and being outrageously unexpected – like Churchill's dictum about painting, "audacity is the ticket".

Could you tell me about your next project - for which you told me the two directors intended to work in the same way than Powell did?

Yes. My next film as a cameraman will be on Freud and Jung. The director David Ness and the producer, Barry Taylor, are both firm fans of Michael Powell – as I am – and we all see them as being creative in the same way, with the same passion and attitudes. We are going to make a most exciting film.

Jack Cardiff, thank you very much.

My pleasure.



The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, Deborah Kerr, Roger Livesey / Roger Livesey, Anton Walbrook.

Photos tirées du catalogue de la rétrospective Powell & Pressburger (Locarno, 1982) / D.R



A Matter of Life and Death, 1946, Kim Hunter, David Niven / David Niven, Roger Livesey.
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