

Saving a movie hero

Michael Powell had been the darling of British film in the Forties, but by the time he met young Hollywood hotshot Martin Scorsese, his name was mud. However, their unlikely friendship was to change all that, writes Steve O'Brien



DID YOU KNOW?

In the 2011 movie *Scream 4*, Peeping Tom is referenced by Ghostface as being the first film to "put the audience in the killer's POV".



For Martin Scorsese, the love affair with the movies of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger began in 1951 when, aged just nine years old, he watched *The Red Shoes* (1948) for the very first time. Even on a boxy black and white TV set and with the film punctured by commercials, the duo's luminous ballet melodrama had an intoxicating effect on the young Italian-American.

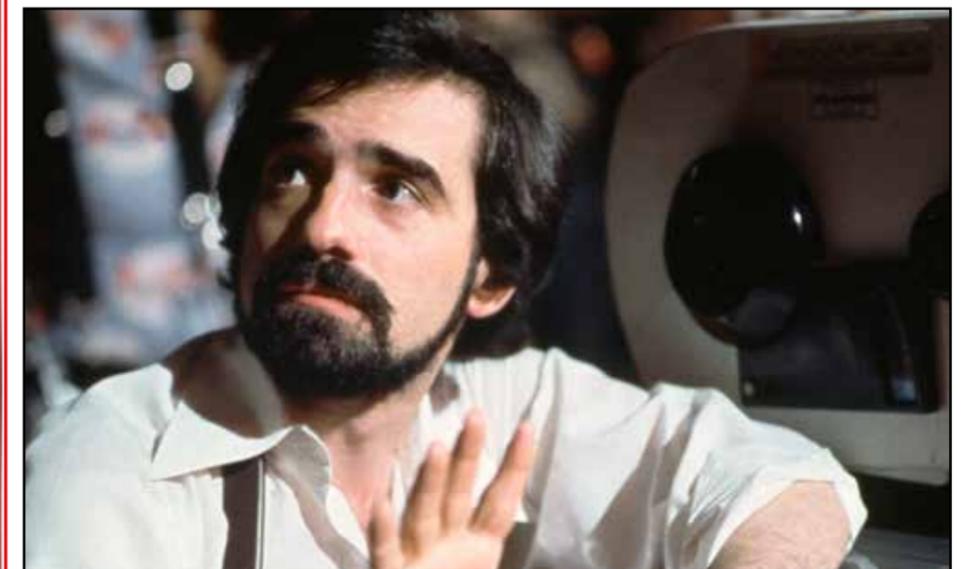
In British cinema in the Forties and Fifties, there were few names more titanic than Michael Powell and his Hungarian-born co-conspirator Emeric Pressburger. But then, in 1960, Powell, now writing alone (though billed as co-directors, it was only ever Powell behind the camera), premiered *Peeping Tom*, a wildly controversial, X-rated serial killer drama that obliterated his reputation and his career. Although now considered a masterpiece, *Peeping Tom* was excoriated on its release, with one reviewer writing that "the only really satisfactory way to dispose of *Peeping Tom* would be to shovel it up and flush it swiftly down the nearest sewer".

But if the mainstream press were repelled by *Peeping Tom*, there was a

generation of budding filmmakers who were seduced by its lurid style and dark, psychological underpinnings. "I have always felt *Peeping Tom*," said a starry-eyed Scorsese, "and [Federico Fellini's] *8½* (1963) say everything that can be said about film-making."

That Powell's final film in 1972 was a micro-budget short made for the Children's Film Foundation only highlights how far his star had fallen since those golden days in the Forties when the duo were the darlings of the UK film industry through such iron-clad classics as *Black Narcissus* (1947) and *A Matter Of Life And Death* (1946). Yet at the same time as Powell was lensing his farewell flick, across the Atlantic Martin Scorsese was readying what would become his first masterpiece and his Hollywood calling card, *Mean Streets* (1973).

When Scorsese first sat down with his lifelong hero in London in 1975, the septuagenarian director had little idea that a generation of filmmakers were devotees of his oeuvre – a body of work that they believed had the same mischievous, subversive spirit as anything from the great auteurs. "I had to explain to him that his



The *Red Shoes* had a major impact on Martin Scorsese... "the nature of the storytelling, the images, the editing, the camera movements, the use of music and colour", he said.

Powell's film partner Emeric Pressburger is the grandfather of British movie director Kevin Macdonald (*The Mauritanian*, 2021).

work was a great source of inspiration [for] myself, Spielberg, Paul Schrader, Coppola, De Palma," Scorsese told *The Guardian* in 2009. "We would talk about his films in Los Angeles often. They were a lifeblood to us, at a time when the films were not necessarily immediately available."

Scorsese recalls that Powell was mostly mute at that first meeting, not quite sure what to make of the garrulous young director and his tornado of praise. Afterwards Scorsese invited Powell to the US, to meet the admirers he had no idea existed. "The blood started to flow in my veins," Powell recalled later of his welcome in America.

With the patronage of the decade's hippest and hottest filmmakers, retrospectives were held of the director's rich back catalogue, and he was offered teaching posts across the States. It was a far cry from a few years before when he was so impoverished, he was living in a trailer.

Scorsese was so in thrall to Powell he eagerly screened him his own movies, desperate for his hero's validation. Powell was dazzled by *Mean Streets*, but told Scorsese he thought there was "too much red". "This from the man who had red all over his own films," Scorsese recalled, "which is where I'd got it from in the first place!"

It was around this time that Scorsese introduced Powell to the woman who would become his third wife. Thelma Schoonmaker had been Scorsese's editor since his first feature, *Who's That Knocking At My Door* (1967) and in 1979, she was busy cutting the director's boxing classic *Raging Bull* (1980). She'd already been given a crash course in Powell's movies courtesy of the ever-enthusiastic Scorsese, but nothing prepared the 39-year-old for her first meeting with



Michael Powell and Thelma Schoonmaker (above). Despite using lots of red himself, Powell told Martin Scorsese *Mean Streets* (right) was 'too red'.



the director, 35 years her senior. "He was the most remarkable person I had ever met," she later said. They married in 1984.

Until his death in 1990, Powell was Martin Scorsese's most trusted confidante. On *Raging Bull* he offered Marty valuable script advice and, it's said, guided him towards releasing the film in black and white. For his part, Scorsese was forever scrutinising Powell's movies while making his own. Schoonmaker recalls Marty screening her scenes from *The Tales Of Hoffman* (1951) while filming *Raging Bull*. "He would stop and say, 'Look at this, look at this great shot. Oh, look how they did this. Look at the camera angle, look at this'." Powell questioned the ending of 1985's *After Hours*, causing Scorsese to reshoot the final scenes.

Even in his final years and in ill health, Michael Powell was happy

to offer Marty his counsel. Schoonmaker says that Powell was instrumental in getting *Goodfellas* (1990) made. The studio was putting pressure on Scorsese to de-emphasise the drugs element of the story. Powell, she recalls, was "concerned about Marty's artistic purity" and asked to be read the script. After Schoonmaker had

finished narrating it to her nearly blind husband, he cried, "Get Marty on the phone! You have to make this, this is the best script I've read in 30 years!"

"So Marty went back in one more time and it got sold," she says.

Powell died in February 1990, and never got to see what many consider

Scorsese's master work. But he did live long enough to see his once-tattered reputation repaired and, more than 30 years after his death, Scorsese and Schoonmaker continue to spread the word, with Marty overseeing restorations of his cinematic hero's most famous films, including *The Life And Death Of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *The Red Shoes* and *The Tales Of Hoffman*.

And to this day, you can detect the influence of Michael Powell in Scorsese's movies, whether it's in the delicate whimsy of *Hugo* (2011) or the bold, surreal visuals of *Shutter Island* (2010). Proof that, even 80 years on from Michael Powell's glory days, his quietly subversive, quintessentially English spirit lives on.