



TCM BREAKFAST CLUB SCREENING

A Matter of Life and Death | 1946

Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

Sixty years after it opened before a glittering audience at the 1946 Royal Command Film Performance, *A Matter of Life and Death* has lost none of its potency, with many critics regarding it as the most outstanding British film of the early post-war period. Even by their own lavish standards, the legendary film-making partnership of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger conjure up a work that remains visually overwhelming, hugely imaginative and technically ahead of its time. TCM writer David Humphrey pays tribute to a movie that manages to both enchant and disturb, with scenes of such brilliant ingenuity that they stay in the memory for years afterwards.

David Niven plays dashing RAF pilot Peter Carter, flying his crippled bomber home to England after a raid at the very end of World War Two. He's the only man on board after ordering his crew to bail out of the doomed aircraft, now entering its death throes. Philosophically resigned to his fate, Peter finds himself increasingly drawn to June (Kim Hunter), an American radio

controller working for the RAF who has picked up his SOS. Then a grim fact emerges, as this piece of dialogue makes clear:

June: Received your message. We can hear you. Are you wounded? Repeat. Are you wounded? Are you bailing out?

Peter: What's your name?

June: June.

Peter: Yes June, I'm bailing out. I'm bailing out but there's a catch, I've got no parachute...

With a last hurrah to his newfound soulmate - "I love you, June. You're life, and I'm leaving it" - Peter leaps from the burning bomber to what he's convinced is certain death. But against all the odds he wakes up in the surf, seemingly unscathed and totally flummoxed at this miraculous turn of events. It transpires that the young squadron leader should have died, but remains on earth because of a mistake by Conductor 71 (Marius Goring), the guide sent from the other world to collect him. Incredulous at

still being alive, Peter meets June who is cycling back from her night shift at the air base nearby where she conducted her radio conversation with him a short time earlier. As they find themselves falling in love, Conductor 71 appears to Peter, stopping time to explain the situation and to convince him to accept his fate. A celestial court of the whole population of the afterlife is duly assembled to decide Peter's fate, with the "prosecution's" case energetically put forward by American Abraham Farlan (Raymond Massey), who hates the British for causing his death in the American Revolutionary War. June takes the stand after being made to fall asleep in the real world by Conductor 71 and proves she genuinely loves him by offering to take his place on the stairway to the other world...

Powell and Pressburger spared no effort in the making of this film. For example, the background of the High Court scene, suggesting tiers of seats stretching into infinity, measured 350 feet long and 40 feet high. A total of 29 elaborate sets were built, and the crowd scenes employed 5,375 extras including real-life RAF personnel, Red Cross nurses and members of the US Women's Army Air Corps. Elsewhere, a team of engineers supervised by the London Passenger Transport Board took three months to make the celestial escalator Ethel, as the mighty contraption was nicknamed. Powell and Pressburger were careful not to make any explicit reference to "the other world" as Heaven, so they were cross when the US distributor renamed the film *Stairway to Heaven*. Hollywood was adamant that American audiences would be put off by a movie with the "death" in its

title, so soon after World War II, and they would not be swayed. Meanwhile *A Matter of Life and Death* coincided with a tragedy in David Niven's own life which would have left him pondering issues of mortality. His beautiful young wife Primmie, to whom he was devoted, died the same year at the age of 28 after an accident during a party at Tyrone Power's house in Beverly Hills. Niven was devastated, and told friends later he had nearly gone out of his mind with grief.

Further reading: Powell and Pressburger: *A Cinema of Magic Spaces* (Cinema & Society) by Andrew Moor (I B Tauris); *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger* by Martin Scorsese and Ian Christie (Faber and Faber).

ESCAPE TO A WORLD OF FILM THIS SEPTEMBER WITH TCM

TCM sets September aside for a landmark celebration of the crime movie to coincide with the inaugural **TCM Crime Scene film and literary festival in London** from 6th to 9th September. Twenty-one top titles will be screened from 10th to 16th September ranging from 1938's simple yet enthralling morality tale **Angels With Dirty Faces** to 1992's blood-soaked **El Mariachi**, where a mix-up leads to mass murder in Mexico. Featuring three films daily at 15:00, 21:00 and 23:00 through the week. This month also heralds London Fashion Week and in honour of this glittering occasion TCM presents a week of films starring the world's most alluring actors and actresses, some of whom doubled as model themselves. The mini-season from 17th-23rd September features films at 15:00 and 19:00 each day including Ken Russell's **The Boyfriend** (1971) – a TCM Premiere – starring 60s catwalk sensation Twiggy. Meanwhile from 1st September, TCM's entire output from 13:00 to 19:00 daily can be seen on TCM 2 from 19:00 onwards, giving viewers the opportunity to catch the day time films they may have missed.