

I Know Where I'm Going! review – Powell and Pressburger classic is a pure joy

The story of a headstrong heroine who knows what she wants, but is waylaid by the elements and an unexpected romance is one of the most lovable films in British cinema history



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Thu 19 Oct 2023 07.00 BST

Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1945 classic, rereleased

now as part of the BFI's nationally touring Powell/Pressburger season, has to be one of the most purely lovable films in British cinema history. There is outright joy in that inspired, forthright title. Surely I'm not the only Powell/Pressburger superfan to have screamed halfway through this statement from Emeric Pressburger about his writing practice, in Kevin Macdonald's biography: "But if I can help it, I never sit down to write the real script until I know where I'm going and I've worked out the rhythm and so on beforehand." Was that deliberate? I can't tell.

I Know Where I'm Going! is a movie of romance and myth, comedy and whimsy, but fiercely rooted in reality – and geography. And it is very unusual, maybe entirely unique, in that it is set during wartime but the war is entirely absent and irrelevant, even if the hero is often to be seen wearing his Royal Navy uniform.

Our heroine is a headstrong young Englishwoman who knows where she's going and what she wants – until events conspire to stop her getting it, and then after a tense few days she realises what she wants something and someone else entirely. Wendy Hiller plays Joan Webster: fiercely intelligent, fearless if conceited, indulged by her bank manager father (George Carney)

whom she – oddly – calls “darling”. There is the purest sort of inspiration in the credit sequence in which we are introduced in a series of vignettes to Joan as a baby, then toddler, then schoolgirl, at every stage utterly confident of her direction.



Meet kilt ... Wendy Hiller and Roger Livesey. Photograph: TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy
Joan astonishes her father with an announcement over drinks with him one evening at a rather racy nightclub or hotel bar; this takes place in their Manchester home town although there are no northern accents. She is engaged to be married to the wealthy industrialist Sir Robert Bellinger and is going to take the night train up to the Western Isles of Scotland so that she and Sir Robert can be married on the distant and lovely (fictional) island of Kiloran. There appears to be no question of her father coming to give her away or even be a guest. She is just whisking herself away from his life.

But there is a snag. Once Joan has arrived on Mull, bad weather stops her making the final stage of her intricately planned journey, crossing over to Kiloran; the first time in her life she hasn't got what she wants. So she must stay on Mull with as much patience and good humour as she can muster and make the acquaintance of Torquil MacNeil, a handsome, self-effacing young naval officer on leave, played incomparably by the husky-voiced Roger Livesey. He also happens to be the Laird of Kiloran, whose property on the island Sir Robert is renting. They meet cute, squabbling mildly about her fancy city ways and the contrasting glories of Mull and Kiloran. Soon, Joan is testily impatient to get away to Kiloran and start her married life; the locals think she is just high-handed and arrogant. But we can see the truth: she has fallen deeply in love with Torquil and is afraid of what this means.

As for Torquil, he has good friends on the island, including beautiful, worldly, down-to-earth Catriona Potts, marvellously played by Pamela Brown – who may have had feelings for Torquil in the past – and the eccentric, foghorn-voiced eagle trainer Colonel Barnstaple, played by real-life falconer CWR Knight.

There is a great scene when Joan has to make contact with Sir Robert using the two-way radio (the telephone lines being unworkable) and we hear for the first time his braying and haughty voice. Unaware that Torquil can hear, Sir Robert contrives to insult him by implying that he is not interesting. Joan asks sharply if he has a cold and Sir Robert, baffled, says that he hasn't. What has happened of course is that Joan has for the first time properly heard the jarring pomposity in his voice (so different from everyone else's hospitality and charm) and is unhappily grasping at an idea that might explain it away.

Then there is the wonderful ceilidh scene with the young John Laurie playing John Campbell, bouncing around paying tribute to his parents' 60th wedding anniversary, with Herbert Lomas as his elderly father, sweetly overcome by nerves when asked to make a speech and unable to say a word. The three pipers that Sir Robert engaged for his wedding are, like Joan, stranded on Mull, so come to play here instead. Another potent omen.

As for the laird himself, he is wary, to Joan's amusement, of entering Moy castle because of a curse on any of his family that does so. But he is also wary of a much more clear and present danger: the Corryvreckan whirlpool which might kill Joan if she impetuously decides she can't wait a moment longer and pays some naive young boatsman to take her across. The happiness and innocence in this film are beyond compare.

I Know Where I'm Going! is released on 20 October in UK and Irish cinemas.