



THE RED SHOES is a belated LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that musical.

15 of a possible 20 points

**** of a possible *****

Great Britain / Monaco / France 1948 color 134 minutes live action feature musical drama

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Michael Powell
- 2 Editing: Reginald Mills
- 2 Cinematography: Jack Cardiff*
- 2 Lighting*
- 0 Screenplay: Emeric Pressburger

- Music Recording: Ted Drake
- 2 Music: Brian Easdale*
- Choreography: Robert Helpmann* and Leonide Massine*
- 2 Production Design: Hein Heckroth* Art Direction: Arthur Lawson
- Scenic Artist: Alfred Roberts*
- Painters: Ivor Beddoes* and Józef Natanson*
- Costume Design: Hein Heckroth,* Jacques Fath,* and Malli of London*
- Makeup: George Blackler, Eric Carter, Ernest Gasser
- 0 Sound: Charles Poulton, Gordon McCallum, Leonard Trumm,
Desmond Dew
- 1 Acting
- 2 Creativity
- 13 total points

Cast: Moira Shearer* (Vicki Page) (* is for her dancing), Anton Walbrook* (Boris Lermontov, impresario), Marius Goring (Julian Craster, ballet composer), Léonide Massine* (Grischa Ljubov, company choreographer), Robert Helpmann (Ivan Boleslawsky, ballet dancer), Ludmilla Tcherina (Irina Boronskaja, ballerina), Jean Short (Terry), Gordon Littmann (Ike), Julia Lang (a balletomane), Bill Shine (balletomane's mate), Austin Trevor (Professor Palmer), Esmond Knight* (Livy), Albert Basserman* (Ratov), Eric Berry (Dmitri, decorator), Irene Browne (Lady Neston, Vicki's aunt), Derek Elphinstone (Lord Oldham), Jerry Verno (Stage Door Keeper), Marie Rambert (Madame Rambert), Joy Rawlins (Gladys, Vicki's friend), Hay Petrie (Boisson), Marcel Poncin (M. Boudin), Michel Bazalgette (M. Rideaut), Yvonne Andre (Vicki's dresser), Alan Carter and Joan Harris (Solo Dancers in Red Shoes ballet), Hilda Gaunt (Accompanist), Peter Bayless (Evans, chauffeur of Lord Oldham), others

***The Red Shoes* was a thrilling attempt by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger to promote ballet appreciation among viewing masses. Rather than film an established classic in that category, The Archers instead decided they needed to work from a novelty especially created for their motion picture. So Brian Easdale was commissioned to write a short, but full, dance score, one which eventually would clock in at somewhat over fifteen minutes.**

There would be no dialogue during that quarter hour interval. Dancers would simply pantomime a modern update of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Red Shoes."

But who could play the part of a contemporary Karin? While other roles were filled fairly quickly, that problem lingered. It would require someone able to both dance well and act convincingly, a ballerina still young enough to accept an outsider challenge and sufficiently beautiful to fascinate both male and female audiences. After lengthy unsuccessful wooing, Moira Shearer – the potential lead prize – finally capitulated under pressure from her dance company's director. However, she remained dubious about a story line which, in her opinion, was quite absurd. Nonetheless, upon realizing fellow dancer Robert Helpmann and legendary choreographer Léonide Massine would play two of the chief supporting roles, Miss Shearer accepted the starring position.

The plot begins with a demonically inclined shoemaker, played by Massine, creating an irresistibly flashy pair of captivating red shoes. In the original Andersen tale, these were provided impoverished orphan Karin gratis by a mysterious soldier encountered in a churchyard. But in this British adaptation, an aristocratic English trained danseuse wins herself the leading lady's part in a ballet revolving around rival lovers and two addictive ballet slippers. Contending for her devotion are young composer Julian Craster, enacted by a somewhat long in the tooth Marius Goring, and impresario Boris Lermontov, played by Anton Walbrook as a Mephistopheles dominating the twentieth-century dance world.

Though the latter chooses key castings and has power to hire and fire ballerinas, Craster supplies the essential music for their pirouettes and solo leaps. He is fire to Lermontov's ice. Victoria Page must pick between them. Is her greater commitment to career or romance? Does she live to love or to dance?

The dilemma is visible on two levels: the realistic one of negotiations, barre practices, straitened diets, and bouquets of appreciation and the mythic one wordlessly performed on a wooden stage in front of mesmerized onlookers. Here, at the film's climax, those two parallel realities collide, resulting in a novel tragedy devoid of the heavenly salvation accorded Karin by Andersen. Pressburger, a modern untouched by Romantic sensibility, ends his screenplay with a Classical disaster resolutely more Greek than Danish. Or English.

Cinemagoers reacted negatively to such blatant violation of traditional upbeat conclusions. Box office receipts, further depressed by producer Alexander Korda's minimal advertising campaign, accumulated in a trickle rather than a flood.

Foreign audiences, though, possibly drawn in by curiosity about what a British art film might look like, began flocking to see such a novelty. They left theaters charmed by a combination of passionate music and extraordinarily accomplished dancing. Slowly *The Red Shoes* started earning back its production cost. Helping boost it along was two Oscar® wins, one for Best Art Direction – Set Decoration, color, and the other for Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture. Actual awardees were Hein Heckroth and Arthur Lawson from the Art Department and composer Easdale. Reginald Mills was most deservedly nominated for Best Editing, Emeric Pressburger less so for Best Writing, Motion Picture Story, and the film itself for Best Picture, a not unmerited honor.

Among a host of memorable scenes, particularly astonishing are, in addition to the climax in Monte Carlo, surreal dream sequences within the actual full *Red Shoes* ballet performance, Lermontov's solo mirror-smashing episode, the subdued, yet menacing opening passages of the *Heart of Fire* ballet, the students rushing into "The Gods" balcony seats, a dizzying pan around Lermontov's assembled company at Grischa Lyubov's birthday party, and the warning glare of Ivan Boleslawsky cautioning Lyubov not to in any way adjust his pose at the practice barre.

Notable backstage scenes highlight sweat and tension behind creating a "perfect" work of art, as well as artificiality of painted backdrops, flimsy lightweight set panels, and too easily smudged thick layers of makeup. They also point up the necessity for a final arbiter to settle disputes among creative team members. Conflict between dreamy rhythmic demands and physically strained and aching muscles is quite graphic. Sometimes composers forget to install essential pauses for performers, and even audiences, to catch a quick breath or two between crescendos.

Rivalries between veteran leads receive attention also when Lermontov pits older veteran Boronskaja against young newcomer Page to foster envy and competition. Theoretically, his manipulations should keep both women striving to attain the highest possible standard of terpsichorean skill, as well as develop

a substitute should an emergency disable or remove one of the pair from immediate service.

Special mention must be made of the choreographic designs by Robert Helpmann for Shearer's dances and Léonide Massine's for his own Shoemaker character. Thomas Beecham's actual conducting of Easdale's score and costumes created by Hein Heckroth, Jacques Fath and Malli of London further enhanced the dynamic energy radiated by this classic.

In addition there are ideal performances by Anton Walbrook as perpetually scheming dictator Boris Lermontov, Massine as a satanic shoemaker alternating with effusively sociable dance master Grischa Ljubov in a sort of Jekyll / Hyde duality, Esmond Knight as sternly professional conductor Livy, and Albert Wasserman as sagaciously moderating senior artist Ratov.

Robert Helpmann's casting is more problematic. He looks far too much like Frankenstein's monster in the original sound filming of Mary Shelley's novel by James Whale. At times, particularly in the church steps chorale, he even moves with the same mechanical stiffness.

Jack Cardiff's cinematography and lighting make the utmost of Technicolor's penchant for garishness, here put to exceptionally fine use. Why it was not nominated for any Academy Award is surpassingly mysterious.

The Criterion Collection's dvd release bonus features are comprised of a twenty-six page booklet which includes an eight-page plus essay by David Ehrenstein about the film and the team that made it ("Dancing For Your Life"); a two-page summary of *The Red Shoes* digital restoration process written by Robert Gitt; a theatrical trailer for the film with a runtime of two and one-half minutes; the "Profile of *The Red Shoes*" short making-of documentary running twenty-five and one-half minutes; a collection of rare publicity stills and behind-the-scenes photos including deleted scenes; a full-length audio commentary with input from film historian Ian Christie, actor Marius Goring (a.k.a. Julius Kraster), Moira Shearer (dancer "Victoria Page"), cinematographer Jack Cardiff, composer Brian Easdale, and Martin Scorsese; an audio recording of Jeremy Irons reading an English translation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" fairy tale which lasts almost sixteen minutes; a 2009 video interview with Thelma Schoonmaker Powell running fourteen and three-quarters minutes; a Restoration Demonstration hosted by Martin Scorsese just

over four and one-quarter minutes in duration; thirty-eight Behind the Scenes still photographs; Hein Heckroth's sketches for *The Red Shoes* / *The Red Shoes* ballet itself as filmed (just under sixteen minutes); a full-length audio recording of Jeremy Irons reading excerpts from the Powell-Pressburger novelization of the film (one hundred thirty-four minutes); and a gallery of Martin Scorsese's *Red Shoes* Memorabilia. In short, a veritable cornucopia of exceptionally illuminating extras.

The film is suitable viewing for older teens and adults, but not recommended for youngsters under the age of sixteen due to some explicit gore and a lot of sexual undertones lurking throughout.

One of only two British musical film classics (*Oliver!* is the other), *The Red Shoes* maintains its pre-eminent position among the very finest dance films ever shot. Don't miss an opportunity to see the Powell-Pressburger color extravaganza machine operating in peak form here.