



***Tales of Hoffmann* is a 1951 British color extravaganza co-directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Below is Kino Ken's review of that 1951 film, which will be a Spring 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library in Ligonier, Pennsylvania.**

13 of a possible 20 points = *1/2 = above-average film**

**Great Britain 1951 color 127 minutes live action feature musical drama
The Archers / British Lion Film Corporation / Vega Film Productions
Producers: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, and George Busby
a Criterion Collection dvd release**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 1 Direction: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger**
- 2 Editing: Reginald Mills and Noreen Ackland**
- 1 Cinematography: Christopher Challis and Eugene Hague***
- 2 Lighting: John Bridge (color consultant), Bill Wahl**
- 0 Screenplay: Dennis Arundell (English libretto from the French text of Jules Barbier and Michael Carre), Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger from stories by E.T.A. Hoffmann**
- Continuity: Pamela Davies**
- 1 Music: Jacques Offenbach (non-original)**

- Choreography: Frederick Ashton***
- 2 Production Design: Hein Heckroth***
- Art Direction: Arthur Lawson***
- Set Dressing: Bernard Sarron***
- Scenic Art: E. Lindegaard***
- Costumes: Josephine Boss*, Brenda Dabbs*, and Jane Kirby***
(puppet costumes)
- Makeup: Connie Reeve***
- 1 Sound**
- Recording Supervision: John Cox**
- Sound Recordist: Ted Drake**
- Dialogue Coach: Mollie Terraine**
- Marionettes: John Wright**
- 1 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**
- 13 total points**

**Cast: Moira Shearer (Stella / Kleinzach's Lady-Love / Olympia),
Ludmilla Tchérina (Giulietta), Ann Ayars (Antonia), Pamela Brown
(Niklaus / Pamela Brown),
Leonide Massine (Spalanzani / Schlemil / Franz),
Robert Helpmann (Councillor Lindorf / Coppelius / Dapertutto / Doctor Miracle),
Frederick Ashton (Kleinzach / Cochenille), Mogens Wieth (Crespel), Lionel Harris
(Pitichinaccio), Robert Rounseville (E.T.A. Hoffmann), Philip Leaver (Andreas),
Meinhart Maur (Luther), Edmond Audran* (Cancer, partner to Stella in the
Dragonfly Ballet), Dorothy Bond (Olympia's singing voice), Margherita Grandi
(singing voice of Giulietta), Monica Sinclair (singing voice of Nicklaus),
John Ford (Nathaniel), Alan Carter (bank clerk), Richard Golding (Hermann),
Bruce Dargavel (singing voice of Councillor Lindorf, Coppelius, Dapertutto, and
Dr. Miracle), Fisher Morgan (singing voice of Luther),
Rene Soames (singing voice of Nathaniel), Thomas Beecham (Thomas Beecham),
Grahame Clifford (singing voice of Spalanzani and Franz),
Murray Dickie (singing voice of Cochenille and Pitichinaccio),
Margherita Grandi (singing voice of Giulietta), Barry Lowe (student),
Joan Alexander (singing voice of Antonia's mother),**

Owen Brannigan (singing voice of Schlemil and Crespel),
Barry Grantham (clown dancer in blue jacket),
Elizabeth Christie and Lillemor Knudsen (dancers),
Arthur Skinner (man in background)

Reading a plot summary for the opera *The Tales of Hoffmann* is a recommended essential prior to viewing its film adaptation by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Especially since this early Essential Art House Janus dvd release comes without subtitles or captions. As always, it's exceedingly difficult to distinguish words being sung in upper soprano ranges or in overlapping multiple voices simultaneously.

After introductory credits backgrounded against a sinister panopticon of dark spires and towers supposed to represent Nuremberg, the camera closes in on a theater where a Dragonfly Ballet starring one Stella is in progress. A note from the featured dancer to her lover Hoffmann is entrusted to the latter's servant Niklaus, who is successfully bribed by Councillor Lindorf to relinquish custody of it to the aristocrat.

When Hoffmann retires to Luther's Tavern during an Intermission, he proceeds to regale fellow customers with three tales of personal romantic tragedies, getting himself ever more soused in the process. He consequently ignores a warning Intermission is ending, too immersed in storytelling to relocate.

Before launching into the trio of love's labours lost, Hoffmann points to a small sculpted ugly figurine whose ardent wooing of a lovely and vain upper class lady ends in predictable total rebuff. This Song of Kleinzach, sung in highly dramatic fashion, serves as auditory prelude to Offenbach's opera. It clearly foreshadows the fate of each courtship attempted by Hoffmann.

In the subsequent Act I proper, an aspiring writer becomes enamored of robotic dancing doll Olympia thanks to magic spectacles purchased from their inventor Coppélius. Partner to the eyeglass producer is treacherous Spalanzani, who has sold Councillor Lindorf rights to Olympia via a counterfeit I.O.U. which proves invalid at Elias's bank, the one it had been drawn on. Wearing Coppélius's eyeglasses, Hoffmann perceives Olympia as a mobile human, getting his money's worth, if only imaginatively. As the pair dance together in mounting ecstasy, the doll grows increasingly wild, throwing her partner to the floor

where his optical enhancement shatters. He's left with a sorry spectacle of Coppelius and Spalanzani tearing apart the mechanism neither is getting paid for as invited guests (life-size freakish marionettes) jeer. Councillor Lindorf has tricked not one but three foolish humans as Act I ends, buying an illusion with an illusion. Fiendishly cunning Art defeats limited material Science.

In Act II, an older – but no wiser – Hoffmann conceives a lustful desire for Venetian courtesan Giulietta. She's already paramour of nobleman Schlemil (a pun on Yiddish schlemiel, perhaps?), though that fazes the middle-aged writer not a jot. Giulietta has but one mission in life: to snare souls for her employer Dapertutto, a supernatural collector with strong resemblance to the Grim Reaper. Predictably, Hoffmann falls into her trap. He loses both his reflection and potential mistress while dispatching rival Schlemil with the assistance of Dapertutto's sword. Ultimately, it's the more stylish Italian who makes off with Giulietta for a gondola ride into swirling mists.

The final act of the opera deals with a third masochistic attempt at wooing by senior established poet Hoffmann. This time he's sailing off to a derelict Greek island where young soprano Antonia suffers from tuberculosis. He's unaware of her disease, ill-informed about his beloved as usual. Imagining himself as her impresario and singing partner, he encourages her to prolong a vocal career, despite the ban placed on it by concerned father Crespel. For once Hoffmann's leagued with the devil, who this time takes the form of soul-snatching Dr. Miracle, a euthanasia proponent who previously did in Antonia's mother under the guise of "curing" her. Unable to stop herself from chasing fame as a rising diva, Antonia literally concertizes herself to death in a fatal trio with the doctor and spirit of her deceased mother.

Which brings inebriated Hoffmann back to the present at Luther's Tavern. Stella enters and finds the storyteller totally wiped out. She consequently departs with dead sober Councillor Lindorf. It seems the creative muse, represented by Niklaus, is powerless in the face of Death. Art may be longer-lived than Science. It's considerably shorter than Obscurity.

This reviewer is obliged to Carolyn Kobbé's *The Portable Kobbé's Opera Guide*, edited by The Earl of Harewood, 1994 edition published as a Perigee Book by The Berkley Publishing Group, New York City, New York, United States and copyright 1919 by C. W. Kobbé and renewed by Carolyn Kobbé in 1946, for details of the plot devised by Offenbach's librettists. However, in the 1951 film

version presented here, the order of Acts II and III are reversed. So Antonia's tale concludes the action rather than Giulietta's.

It seems the opening Enchanted Dragonfly ballet music was composed by Thomas Beecham, who also conducted the opera for a recording made prior to filming. All later music derives from Jacques Offenbach. The only truly memorable melody here is the justly famed "Barcarolle," originally devised for Giulietta. In this film it appears also in several other contexts.

Thanks to The Tales of Hoffmann – Alchetron February 13, 2026 Update for enlightenment about the film's color scheme.

Color focus changes each time a new story appears. Act I is in summer pastels: yellow and orange. Act II is darker: blacks, grays and reds are most prominent. Remember, the film's Act II is the opera's third and final one. It represents gathering gloom of full maturity and death in the opera. Here it's more symbolic of storm and stress caused by middle-aged obsession with fleeting sensuality. Act III is filled with pallid blues of sky and ocean, suggesting one last fling at happiness amid a ruined life. Hoffmann's romance is doomed from the start. Not least because it's a one-sided affair. He's in love with Antonia. But she's in love with fame and glory. Not with him. There's no electric charge of mutual ardor, thus the muted color scheme.

Kudos to Hein Heckroth, Arthur Lawson, and Bernard Sarron for designing opulently gorgeous sets which fascinate the eyes throughout this film.

Costumes by Josephine Boss, Brenda Dabbs and June Kirby are decidedly outlandish, calling far too much attention to themselves at the expense of the characters they decorate. Though they're the last word in artificial showiness.

Cinematography by Christopher Challis is technically adept. Yet real expertise and magic comes from composite photographic effects created by E. Hague, whose mystical dissolves and superimpositions underline supernatural, dreamlike elements of the film.

Editing by Reginald Mills and Noreen Ackland assure continuous matching of scenes to music. This is best exemplified in dance sequences where meticulous care had to be taken to suggest movements only hinted at by actual camera footage.

Frederick Ashton's choreography is quite inspired, highlighting in particular the sinuous, ethereal grace and pliability of Moira Shearer, while mostly disguising unattractively earthbound terpsichorean efforts of Ludmilla Tchérina,

certainly past her prime in this outing. Handling a mix of life-size marionettes and actual human dancers harmoniously within scenes required awesome command of preplanning expertise on the part of Mr. Ashton.

The screenplay offers little variation from Dennis Arundell's English translation of the original French opera libretto, complete with tiresomely repetitive passages simply marking time. Characters are unmistakably various shadings of villain, dupe, victim, or cynic. No hero or heroine is in sight. Only occasional shards of comedy lighten what is essentially a sort of Rake's Progress into Lethe.

Of the singers, most commanding are Bruce Dargavel in his quartet of malevolent roles and soprano Ann Ayars as a remarkably robust Antonia.

Robert Helpmann provides the only really solid acting as four demonic characters: Councillor Lindorf, Coppelius, Dapertutto and Doctor Miracle. A combination of macabre makeup, courtesy of Connie Reeve, and intensity of gaze make him a truly formidable opponent for wretchedly unsympathetic Hoffmann.

Pamela Brown offers a listless, uninvolved Niklaus, who in her interpretation becomes merely supercargo here, doing more to retard than advance the plot.

Of course, the dancing of Leonide Massine as Spalanzani, Schlemil, and Franz and equally masterful footwork of Edmond Audran as Moira Shearer's partner in the Dragonfly Ballet are entertaining and impeccably crafted.

Due to pessimistic tone and adult thematic content, this film is suited only for adult audiences. It's worth a viewing by connoisseurs of cinematic oddities. However, absence of genuine conflict or relatable central character insure it a frosty reception by mainstream audiences.

Thanks also to Gregory Nagy's "Commentary on the Tales of Hoffmann – Classical Inquiries" of November 2, 2017 for specific details of song lyrics in the opera and how they interact with film lighting, camera movement, character expressions, and classical themes concerning Art, Mortality, Love, and Science.