Directed by Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Written by Hans Christian Andersen (fairy tale), Emeric Pressburger, Michael Powell, Keith Winter
Produced by Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Original Music by Brian Easdale
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Written by Hans Christian Andersen (fairy tale), Emeric Pressburger, Michael Powell, Keith Winter
Produced by Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Original Music by Brian Easdale
Conducting by Thomas Beecham
Choreography by Robert Helpmann
Cinematography by Jack Cardiff
Edited by Reginald Mills
Production Design by Hein Heckroth
Art Direction by Arthur Lawson
Costume Design by Hein Heckroth (uncredited)
Visual Effects by F. George Gunn, E. Hague, Les Bowie
Dresses and Wardrobe by Carven of Paris, Jacques Fath of Paris, Mattli of London, Dorothy Edwards, Miss Tcherina (uncredited)

Marius Goring...Julian Craster
Jean Short...Terry
Gordon Littmann...Ike
Julia Lang...A Balletomane
Bill Shine...Her Mate
Leonide Massine...Ljubov / Shoemaker
Anton Walbrook...Boris Lermontov
Austin Trevor...Professor Palmer
Esmond Knight...Livy
Eric Berry...Dimitri
Irene Browne...Lady Neston
Moira Shearer...Victoria Page
Ludmilla Tcherina...Boronskaja

Academy Awards
1949 – Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Color – Hein Heckroth, Arthur Lawson
– Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture – Brian Easdale


Jack Cardiff (September 18, 1914 in Yarmouth, Norfolk, England– April 22, 2009, Ely, Cambridgeshire, England) won a best cinematography Oscar for Black Narcissus and an honorary Oscar in 2001 because he was a “master of light and color.” He is credited as cinematographer on 73 films, some of which are 2005 Lights2, 1991 Vivaldi's Four Seasons, 1986 Tai-Pan, 1985

Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, THE RED SHOES (1948, 113 min)


From The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia ed. Andrew Sarris, Visible Ink Press, NY 1998, Powell & Pressburger [combined entry signed by Stephen L. Hanson]

Between the years 1942 and 1957, English director Michael Powell and his Hungarian partner, Emeric Pressburger, formed one of the most remarkable partnerships in cinema. Under the collaborative pseudonym “The Archers,” the two created a series of highly visual and imaginative treatments of romantic and supernatural themes that have defied easy categorization by film historians. Although both were listed jointly as director, screenwriter, and frequently as producer, and the extent of each one’s participation on any given film is difficult to measure, it is probably most accurate to credit Powell with the actual visualization of the films while Pressburger functioned primarily as a writer.

Thematically, Powell and Pressburger operate in a limbo somewhere between romance and realism. The former, characterized by technical effects, camera angles and movements, and the innovative use of color, often intrudes in the merest of details in fundamentally naturalistic films. In the eyes of some, this weakens the artistic commitment to realism. On the other hand, the psychological insights embodied in serious fantasies like A Matter of Life and Death are too often dismissed as simply entertainment. Most of the Powell-Pressburger efforts are, in fact, attempts at fundamental reconciliations between modern ideas and the irrational, between science and savagery, or between religion and eroticism.

Although such mergings of reality and fantasy met with approval by the moviegoing public, Powell and Pressburger were less successful with the British film establishment. In a sense they were alienated from it through their exercise of a decidedly non-British flamboyance.

From World Film Directors V.I ed. John Wakeman, H.H. Wilson Co., NY 1987, MICHAEL POWELL entry:

In 1925, on his way to visit his father, who had acquired a hotel on the Riviera, he stopped off in Paris to catch up with the work of Buñuel and Dali and “that lot, involved in surrealism,” as he put it to an interviewer, adding that “of course, all films are surrealist . . . because they are making something that looks like a real world but isn’t.” He entered the film industry the same year when his father introduced him at a party to Harry Lachman, an artist and filmmaker then working with Rex Ingram on Mare Nostrum at the Nice studio. Powell joined the unit and “worked all through” Mare Nostrum, an extravagant spy story. He says “it was a great film to come in on because, being a spectacular film, full of enormous tricks with a great theme and an international cast, it gave you ideas which stayed with you all through your life . . . My first job was rally to stick around—that was how Harry Lachman put it. Then I was a grip, but I was unofficially attached to Lachman as the strange, cultured young Englishman who had a remarkable gift for falling over things.”

Some of these qualities were put to work in Ingram’s next two films, The Magician (1926) and The Garden of Allah (1927), in both of which Powell had small roles providing “comic relief.” These were great days in the film industry in France: “everyone was mad about the cinema,” and in Nice Powell met celebrated painters, sculptors, and writers all eager to contribute to the medium. Then Ingram decided to take a break from films. Lachman launched a series of comedy travelogues featuring Powell, but this project was ended after a few months by the arrival of the talkies and, Powell says, “we closed up the studio, said goodbye to the sun, and headed for the fog belt.” Lachman joined British International at the Elstree studios, where he found work for Powell also, first as stills photographer on Hitchcock’s Champagne and then as a cutter on Lupu Pick’s A Knight in London. Powell’s last assignment at Elstree was as an uncredited contributor to the script of Hitchcock’s Blackmail—he says it was he that suggested the...
final chase over the roof of the British Museum: “Being an East End boy, Hitch had never been there.”

In 1930 Powell joined a young American producer named Jerome Jackson, then entering the British “quota quickie” market. Alarmed by the fact that only about five per cent of movies shown in Britain were made there, the government had instituted a quota system that was supposed to improve the situation. The result was a flood of generally rubbishy cut-rate pictures, most of them less than an hour in length, that were shown as second features with Hollywood movies. …One of the last of Powell’s “Quickies” was The Man Behind the Mask (1936), made for an American producer named Joe Rock….Powell had been trying to find backing for a film [on the depopulation of the Scottish islands]. Rock encouraged him to write a script, and then sent him off to the remote Shetland island of Foula to make what became The Edge of the World, his first personal film….In 1937 it was chosen by the New York Film Critics as the best foreign movie of the year, and in 1938 Powell published an account of the making of the picture, 200,000 Feet on Foula.

At that point Powell was considering going to Hollywood, but Alexander Korda, impressed by The Edge of the World, offered him a contract. His first film for Korda was The Spy in Black (1939), a fast-moving and often amusing spy thriller set during World War I….The Spy in Black began Powell’s collaboration with the Hungarian-born scenarist, Emeric Pressburger….Powell himself produced 49th Parallel (1941), financed by the Ministry of Information. A story about the crew of a wrecked German submarine on the run in Canada, it was intended to counter isolationism in North America. The film was shot mostly on location in Canada with a starry cast that included Laurence Olivier, Leslie Howard, Anton Walbrook, and Glynis Johns as representatives of various aspects of Canadian life, and Eric Portman as the ruthless Nazi commander. Vaughan Williams provided the score. Pressburger’s script won him an Oscar, and the movie was a great financial success.….The plot of 49th Parallel is virtually reversed in One of Our Aircraft is Missing (1942), co-scripted and co-produced by Powell and Pressburger, in which the crew of a British bomber are forced to bail out over Holland and are smuggled to safety under the noses of the Germans by the Dutch Resistance. Made in the documentary style typical of the period, it opens with an extraordinary shot of an empty bomber sailing eerily across the Channel.

The same year, 1942, Powell and Pressburger established their own production company, The Archers, under the financial umbrella provided by J. Arthur Rank’s Independent Producers. Most of the films they made for the Archers credited Powell and Pressburger as joint directors, producers, and scenarists, though it seems fairly clear that Pressburger dominated the writing, Powell the directing….After The Silver Fleet (1943), a story of the Dutch Resistance that they produced but neither wrote nor directed, came their first collaboration, The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (1943). The hero’s real name is Clive Candy (Roger Livesey)—the title refers to a character, created by cartoonist David Low, depicted as an ultra-conservative old officer senior enough to impose his antiquated ideas on the modern army….Deborah Kerr plays Candy’s “Ideal woman” (three redheaded generations of her) and Anton Walbrook is a “good German”—the enemy who becomes Candy’s lifelong friend. Apart from The Thief of Bagdad, this was Powell’s first film in color. It was gorgeously designed by Alfred Junge and beautifully filmed by an illustrious team of photographers Jack Cardiff and Geoffrey Unsworth, under the direction of Georges Périnal.

Colonel Blimp is an ambivalent film—apparently intended as a warning against the dangers of leaving too much power in the hands of bumbling old diehards like Clive Candy, it is in fact full of nostalgia for a more heroic and gallant notion of warfare than seemed viable in 1943. The Ministry of Information thought it defeatist, and encouraged by Winston Churchill himself, did everything it could to prevent its production. Army help was denied and Laurence Olivier, who was to have played the lead, was refused leave from military service. In fact Roger Livesey gave the performance of his life, making Candy an irresistibly likable old warhorse, while the government’s attempts to suppress the movie only increased its immense box office appeal.

The Volunteer (1943), a medium-length recruiting film in which Ralph Richardson plays himself (and Othello), was followed by A Canterbury Tale (1944)….The Archers had more success with I Know Where I’m Going! (1945), in which Wendy Hiller goes to the Western Isles of Scotland to marry a millionaire but falls under the spell of Celtic mysticism and winds up in the arms of the haunted young laird (Roger Livesey). Pamela Brown gives an extraordinary performance as an aristocratic sorceress. It was clear to Raymond Durgnat that “Powell’s film reveals a serious belief in the wayward natural forces. Their fierce power is asserted in constant hints and jabs (a close-up of the eagle’s beak ripping off a rabbit’s ear) which sees nature as a Nietzschean whirl of blood and death. . . .But the hero, sailing . . . [the heroine’s] boat through the treacherous whirlpool, overcomes these forces with that protective manliness which. . . is itself a force of nature.” This is one of the most personal and original of Powell’s films, and one of the best loved—Nora Sayre has recalled that she was almost deprived of her allowance when she was twelve because she went to see it week after week.

Asked by the Ministry of Information for a film that might help to reverse the post-war decline in Anglo-American relations, Powell and Pressburger came up with A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven in the United States)….The script is full of the kind of erudite and witty paradoxes that Powell regards as characteristic of the Hungarian Pressburger—“They always see he world inside out. All their jokes are reverse jokes.” For the director, this was “the most perfect film….a
wonderful conjuring trick to get handed.”…Black Narcissus (in which Anglican nuns set up a new mission in the Himalayas, was also shot in the studio….

Moira Shearer, one of the most striking of Powell’s red-haired heroines, is a ballet dancer fatally torn between love and art in The Red Shoes (originally written by Pressburger for Alexander Korda but bought back by the Archers.) Anton Walbrook is magnificent as the diabolical impresario Lermontov, the choreographer is played by Leonid Massine, and the heroine’s co-dancers are Ludmilla Tcherina and Robert Helpmann (the film’s actual choreographer). Music was again in the hands of Brian Easdale, and Hein Heckroth’s spectacular sets were lyrically photographed by Jack Cardiff. The film went nearly L200,000 over budget and Powell says that “when the Rank Organisation saw it they thought they were sunk….It’s probably grossed $20 to $30 million.”

The Red Shoes seems to Roy Armes “Powell and Pressburger’s most explicit statement of the relationship of art and life,” and “the high point of their career in both commercial and artistic terms….All [their] central themes and stylistic concerns find expression in The Red Shoes: the Romantic opposition of art and life, the concern with a choreography of film whereby overwhelming passions are acted out rather than expressed through words, and the creation of a dynamic inner-relationship of vivid visual imagery and an immensely rhythmic soundtrack. In a memorable climax the ballerina dies but the ballet goes on without her, the audience being made to imagine her presence by the conviction of music and production.”

The Tales of Hoffmann (1951), from Denis Arundell’s adaptation of Offenbach’s operetta, was The Archers’ last film for Korda…using much the same team as The Red Shoes. Its romantic excesses embarrassed some reviewers but it took the Special Jury Prize at Cannes and delighted Raymond Durgnat, who wrote: “this gallimaufry of Gothicisms, this pantechinicon of paletetical paroxysms…this massive accumulation of Mighty Wurlitzerisms, follows Offenbach’s operetta relatively faithfully and fills in filmically by ballet, décor and by-play, seeking, moreover, an operatic visual style with a splendid disdain of plausibility….If often overblown, the film is intermittently breathtaking, an effect which survives repeated viewings.”

In 1944 Powell had directed a stage production of Himingway’s The Fifth Column, and in 1951 he returned to the theatre with Raymond Massey’s play Hanging Judge. At about the same time he also tried without success to set up two ambitious screen projects—a short film of a scene from The Odyssey that was to have had words by Dylan Thomas and music by Stravinsky, and a version of Shakespeare’s The Tempest with Moira Shearer and John Gielgud. In fact his next picture was a short ballet film, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice (1955), distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox The Archers went back into production with Oh Rosalinda! (1955), based on Strauss’ opera Die Fledermaus. This “had some lovely things in it,” Powell thought, but “is one of our failures.”

The Archers’ last two productions, both unexceptional war films, The Battle of the River Plate (Pursuit of the Graf Spee, 1956) and Ill Met by Moonlight (Night Ambush,1957). Working separately, neither Powell nor Pressburger ever really established a consistent pattern of production again. Powell’s next picture, another ballet film called Luna de Miel (Honeymoon), was made in 1961 in Spain. Then he met a writer and former cypher expert named Leo Marks, who proposed a picture in the sadistic horror-movie genre then being exploited by Anglo-Amalgamated. The result was Peeping Tom (1960).

The film centers on Mark Lewis (Carl Boehm), who works in a film studio by day as a focus-puller, and in the evenings sometimes makes pornographic films of an appallingly specialized nature. It is his pleasure to stab beautiful girls through the throat with a blade concealed in his tripod and to film their dying agonies in close-up, a mirror on the tripod allowing them to share this experience. This voyeur psychosis is traced back to Mark’s childhood, during which his father, an authority on the psychology of fear, had used him as a guinea pig, filming his reactions to terrifying situations, natural or contrived.

And all these horrors were, of course, set up and filmed by Michael Powell and his cameraman (Otto Heller), so that the movie becomes an extremely complex essay on the voyeurism involved in making and watching films, as Powell clearly recognized. He himself plays Mark’s father in Peeping Tom, and he has said that he “felt very close to the hero, who is an ‘absolute’ director, someone who approaches life like a director, who is conscious of and suffers from it. And I am someone who is thrilled by technique, always mentally editing the scene in front of me in the street, so I was able to share his anguish.”

Except in the trade press, where the film was praised for its commercial potential, the critical response was almost totally negative—a passionate chorus of disgust and loathing that is examined at some length in Ian Christie’s Powell, Pressburger and Others…..It virtually ended his career [in Britain] while the shorter version seen in the United States was largely ignored. Its immediate successor was The Queen’s Guards (1961), a “High Tory” tribute to the Brigade of Guards starring both Raymond and Daniel Massey, of no special interest. After that, shunned by backers and distributors, Powell was reduced to directing episodes of Espionage, The Defenders, and other television series, or to filming abroad. Bluebeard’s Castle (1964) is a straightforward record of a Zagreb production of Bartók’s opera, and this was followed by two “romps” made in Australia, They’re a Weird Mob (1966) and Age of Consent (1969), co-produced with James Mason, who also stars as a painter entangled with a youthful Helen Mirren. Back in Britain, and reunited with Pressburger, Powell made a prize-winning children’s film, The Boy Who Turned Yellow.

But meanwhile, a reassessment of Powell’s work had begun in such British journals as Motion and Movie, and in such foreign ones as Image et Son and Midi-Minuit Fantastique. Since 1970, there has been an apparently endless series of Powell retrospectives all over the world….In 1981 he was “senior
director in residence” at Francis Ford Coppola’s Zoetrope Studios in Los Angeles, working on a long-planned film about the Russian dancer Anna Pavlova…. Raymond Durgnat has compared Powell to Abel Gance in his “weakness for patriotic sentiment” and for “optical shocks,”… Durgnat suggests that Powell “remains an upholder, through its lean years, of the Méliès tradition… a school of ‘Cinema’ which is always exquisitely conscious of not only its cinematic effects but its cinematic nature.”

Powell regards not Gance but Walt Disney as “the greatest genius of us all.” After the death of his wife Frances Reidy he married the film editor Thelma Schoonmaker in 1984.

David Eherenstein, “The Red Shoes: Dancing for your Life” (Criterion notes):

“Why do you want to dance?” “Why do you want to live?”

A question followed by another question stands at the beating heart of The Red Shoes. It’s an entirely rhetorical exchange, but it underscores the power and the mystery of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s 1948 masterpiece. For the respective speakers, a domineering impresario and a strong-willed ballerina, are talking about much more than dance. The real subject of their conversation, and of the film that contains it, is artistic dedication, even unto death.

Sounds rather grim for a work so beloved (countless all-time ten best lists), so inspirational (numerous references in A Chorus Line), and so influential (Gene Kelly screened it for his collaborators fifteen times before embarking on An American in Paris). But the film’s ebullient yet oddly sinister tone struck a chord with audiences the world over. This wide appeal can be understood in part in terms of genre. It is a kind of musical, a mainstream favorite, as well as a Technicolor spectacular. But musical generally comes as a hyphenate with comedy attached to it. The Red Shoes is drama. Perhaps the key to its power lies in the fact that it was created at a crucial juncture in history, and embodies that moment. As Powell says in his memoir A Life in Movies: “We had all been told for ten years to go out and die for freedom and democracy… and now the war was over, The Red Shoes told us to go out and die for art.” In taking artistic expression through dance so seriously, The Red Shoes goes well beyond the confines of a “backstage musical” into areas richer, deeper, and darker than any such film had ventured toward before—or would after.

That this film would prove so potent wasn’t at all obvious when the idea first took shape back in 1934. Film titan Alexander Korda, whose productions The Private Life of Henry VIII and The Scarlet Pimpernel had made Great Britain a serious rival to Hollywood, decided that he wanted to put together centering on the tumultuous life of the brilliant, troubled dancer Nijinsky—but with ample room to showcase his off- and on-screen leading lady Merle Oberon. In other words, a very tricky scenario. Screen tests of sundry ballerinas were shot by Ludwig Berger, then Korda’s choice to direct, and Pressburger was hired to write the script. Using Hans Christian Andersen’s dark fairy tale “The Red Shoes” as a plot pretext was also Korda’s idea at this early stage, though precisely how hadn’t been decided. So Pressburger, a Hungarian Jew who got his start as a scriptwriter in Germany—before Hitler’s rise necessitated a hasty exit for England—immersed himself in the world of the Ballets Russes. That dance company was still world famous at the time, despite the passing of its great impresario, Sergei Diaghilev, in 1929: the dances it created, and its conception of dance as a total theatrical experience, had set the standard for terpsichorean excellence everywhere. The prospect of putting this on-screen was clearly tantalizing to Korda, who always had his eyes peeled for the big, colorful, and splashes. With the coming of World War II, however, the as yet untitled project was put off—definitively so when Korda and Oberon called it a day. But Pressburger was still excited by the idea, so he bought from Korda everything that had been developed for the project thus far, and in 1946 began in earnest to mount The Red Shoes, as it was then called.

By this time, Pressburger had formed an alliance with Michael Powell, a British director who’d cut his teeth on “quota quickies,” low-budget films decreed by the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 to promote British production in the face of a Hollywood-dominated industry. They first worked together in 1939, on The Spy in Black, starring Conrad Veidt, and following the success of their 1942 One of Our Aircraft Is Missing, established their soon-to-be legendary production company, the Archers. With an arrow hitting a bull’s-eye as its avatar, the Archers went on to create such original and ambitious works as The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, A Canterbury Tale, I Know Where I’m Going!, A Matter of Life and Death, and Black Narcissus, all dealing in one way or another with aspects of the British national character—in a manner that was celebratory but never without an insightful, critical edge—and always with a visually extravagant style. The Red Shoes raised the bar Powell and Pressburger had set for imaginative moviemaking even higher, including taking Technicolor, which they’d used so expressively in Colonel Blimp, Black Narcissus, and especially A Matter of Life and Death, into new realms: this time, they peered into the afterlife, as that last film had done, but into the souls of human beings. Additionally, in contrast to their previous Anglocentric efforts, The Red Shoes found them looking toward the Continent.

While there was a recognizable division of labor between Powell and Pressburger, with the latter in charge of the screenplay and the former the directing, the Archers cosigned their films, the better to underscore the fact that not only did their roles frequently overlap but they stood at the helm of a group of craftsmen—cinematographer Jack Cardiff, production designer
Hein Heckroth, composer Brian Easdale, and actor Marius Goring, to name a few—whose contributions to the whole should never be taken for granted. The Red Shoes reflects this in the story itself. For while it centers on a near megalomaniacal impresario, the brilliant young dancer he makes a star, and the youthful firebrand of a composer whose love for the dancer threatens the impresario’s authority, the film concerns an entire ballet company and the many different and talented people involved in making it run.

Powell and Pressburger decided to bypass Nijinsky and zero in on his lover-mentor Diaghilev. And while antithetical Boris Lermontov isn’t depicted as sexually or romantically involved with anyone in an ordinary way, his obsession with dancer Victoria Page goes right to the heart of the Diaghilev-Nijinsky story. For like Diaghilev, Lermontov doesn’t wish simply to make his dancer a star—he wants to control her life in every possible way. But how can you dramatize that without totally alienating movie audiences? Powell found the answer in Anton Walbrook: “When it came to The Red Shoes and that devil Boris Lermontov, there was no question in our minds as to who should play him, and give a performance filled with passion, integrity, and, yes, with homosexuality.”

Born Adolf Wohlbrück, Walbrook came from a family of circus clowns but turned to acting from the start, studying with the great Max Reinhardt. Making a name for himself on-screen, he appeared in such hits as Viktor und Victoria (the 1933 precursor to Blake Edwards’ 1982 romp Victor/Victoria) and a 1936 sound version of the silent expressionist classic The Student of Prague. But Hitler’s rise to power made it impossible for an artist who was both gay and Jewish to do anything other than get out of Germany as soon as possible. Walbrook found a home in England, making a particularly triumphant appearance as a German émigré in the Archers’ wartime rouser The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, where he delivers the central patriotic speech with a resonance and sincerity that have never failed to move anyone who has seen it—even if they aren’t British. The Red Shoes required that Walbrook make a seemingly unsympathetic man sympathetic. And that he does, not by softening the character but by accentuating his mystery. While Powell and Pressburger saw Lermontov as one part Diaghilev and one part Alexander Korda (in his grandiose plans for his ballet), Walbrook’s own personality added something extra. The dark glasses that Lermontov wears—even on occasions when there isn’t any sunlight—were an affectation of Walbrook’s. It set a fashion that was taken up in earnest a decade later by sundry celebrities in Italy, during the dolce vita era known as Il Boom. His sartorial fastidiousness, coupled with a veneer of emotional reserve barely hiding a passionate sexual drive, is clearly what Powell meant when he spoke of the part played by Walbrook’s own gaiyness in the Lermontov role.

As for the object of Lermontov’s all-consuming attention, the Archers chose an actual dancer, Moira Shearer. A featured performer, but not yet a star, with the Sadler’s Wells ballet, Shearer proved, to Powell’s complete delight, to be that rarest of all cinematic supernovas: a natural. And she amply demonstrates that the filmmakers were right in seeking out a dancer for the female lead, rather than an actress whose performance would be supplemented by a ballet double. For when you look at Shearer, you see a dancer—even when she’s standing still. Adding to that is the way she so easily conveys the spirit of a young woman who knows what she wants for a career, and is willing to take on the powerful man who wants to give it to her.

Powell and Pressburger’s sensitivity to physical dramatic nuance is made plain in an early scene featuring another dancer-actress, Ludmilla Tchérina. While we get only a few shots of Tchérina rehearsing or performing in the course of the film, in this moment, when her prima ballerina, Boronskaja, guides the young composer Julian Craster (Goring) to the backstage area of the theater—briskly gliding through, head held high, in a manner that an ordinary actress would have found hard to execute—she makes her greatest mark. What she does in this scene is convey not only a dancer’s instinctive physicality but the soigné glamour of the ballet as a whole. This is carried a step further by Robert Helpmann, who plays a principal dancer and also choreographed the climactic ballet, called The Red Shoes. A fortiore Léonide Massine, who was a Ballets Russes dancer and choreographer and also Diaghilev’s protégé in the wake of Nijinsky’s departure. Like Shearer, Massine had never acted before, but one would never guess it from his exceptionally skillful performance as the antic Grischa Ljubov, who is as warm as Lermontov is cold. In the Red Shoes ballet, he plays the shoemaker (a role the film credits him with creating), the weird, long-haired figure who lures the girl into his shop to take the footwear that will both fulfill her dreams and end her life. That Lermontov casts the cheery Grischa in this role is downright diabolical.

Powell and Pressburger designed their film to climax with this ballet, running some twenty minutes in length. It was a concept quite without precedent. While the action that precedes the sequence charts the process of creation, this isn’t done by teaching the audience anything about dance steps or musical composition. Rather it’s the spirit behind the ballet that comes to the fore, as in the scene where Vicky, dressed in an elaborate ball gown, a tiny crown on her head, goes to see Lermontov at the château he’s rented just outside town. Climbing an enormous staircase overgrown with weeds, she suggests the sort of fairy-tale heroine Cocteau would have created had he made Beauty and the Beast in color. Powell and Pressburger’s Beast, Lermontov, has to deal with more than Shearer’s Beauty, however. For right after informing her that she will star in his next—and greatest—creation, he calls in Craster.

Earlier, Lermontov explained to the composer: “The ballet of The Red Shoes is from a fairy tale by Hans Andersen. It is the story of a girl who’s devoured by an ambition to attend a dance in a pair of red shoes. She gets the shoes, goes to the dance. At first, all goes well and she’s very happy. At the end of the evening, she gets tired and wants to go home. But the red shoes are not tired. In fact, the red shoes are never tired. They
and we, the film audience, see more than anyone in a theater ever what’s going on on any imaginable stage but what’s roiling darkness. 

declaration but he hides it. We can see that in the shot that said with pointed poignancy. The truth, of course, is that he does, who had suddenly left the room. “He has no heart, that man,” she

—
dance her out into the streets. They dance her over the mountains and valleys, through fields and forests, through night and day. Time rushes by. Love rushes by. Life rushes by. But the red shoes dance on.”

“What happens in the end?” Craster inquires.

“Oh, in the end, she dies,” says Lermontov, with brisk matter-of-factness.

There are two elements that make this pivotal moment indelible. One is, of course, Walbrook—the dramatic stress he places when intoning “the red shoes” and “never tired,” the masterly cool with which he dominates the scene. The other is the sudden appearance on the soundtrack of the first notes of music for the ballet that Craster has yet to write. It’s already a part of him, Powell and Pressburger seem to be saying. It’s an assignment that’s ordained by fate. And so is its outcome. Julian and Vicky will not only work together as artists but fall in love. And this love will prove their undoing.

“You cannot have it both ways,” Lermontov tells Grischa, in a moment designed for Vicky to overhear. “The dancer who relies on the doubtful comforts of human love will never be a great dancer. Never.” He is speaking of Boronskaja, who in a scene just before—when she announced to the company that she was leaving to get married—looked beyond the circle of dancers happily congratulating her for a glimpse of Lermontov, who had suddenly left the room. “He has no heart, that man,” she said with pointed poignancy. The truth, of course, is that he does, but he hides it. We can see that in the shot that follows her declaration—Lermontov sitting in his office in complete darkness.

Or is he, perchance, the Prince of Darkness? The ballet certainly suggests that—for what we’re shown is not so much what’s going on on any imaginable stage but what’s roiling through Vicky’s mind as she dances. The audience is never seen, and we, the film audience, see more than anyone in a theater ever would. Not just in terms of an unobstructed, up-close view of the dance, but inside Vicky’s mind as Lermontov and Julian take turns partnering her while she dances through make-believe carnivals, ballrooms, deserts, and cloudy skies with pieces of cellophane falling, along with humans, as she drives ever onward toward obliteration.

The ballet is a kind of magic, psychodramatic tableau vivant. The Andersen story is enacted in it, but also the conflict among Vicky, Lermontov, and Craster. Fantasy and reality intermingle right from the start, when the shoemaker puts the ballet slippers on the ground and they stand by themselves, until Vicky suddenly, and quite magically, leaps into them. As the ballet progresses, color and atmosphere become as important as dance steps—especially when the gaiety of the initial moments gives way to despair and horror. Cardiff’s lush, textured cinematography works hand in hand with Heckroth’s production designs, as a public square becomes a carnival, a nightscape of monkey-headed streetwalkers, an empty ballroom, and an even emptier desert. Strangest of all is one long shot where we see the girl pirouetting in the foreground while in the background dancers appear to be worshipping a grotesque, seemingly living mask that hangs on a stone wall. Offstage, things are worse, as the action builds to the wrenching scene where Craster and Lermontov demand she choose between them—which she clearly cannot.

“Take off the red shoes,” Vicky pleads to Julian at the last. But the red shoes can never really come off—just as The Red Shoes once seen can never be forgotten. Particularly not in this stunning new restoration, for which restorers went so far as to meticulously repair (using the latest digital technology) the original negatives, the better to give the film new, vivid life. But The Red Shoes is clearly more than a film. It’s a complete and indelible expression of life and art themselves.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIII:
September 27 Diary of a Country Priest/Journal d’un curé de campagne, Robert Bresson (1951) 
October 4 Black Orpheus/Orfeu Negro, Marcel Camus (1959) 
October 11 Bonnie and Clyde, Arthur Penn (1967) 
October 18 Marketa Lazarová, František Vláčil (1967) 
October 25 The Last Wave, Peter Weir (1977) 
November 1 True Confessions, Ulu Grosbard (1981) 
November 8 Chunking Express/Chung Hing sam lam, Wong Kar-Wei (1994) 
November 22 Frida, Julie Taymor (2002) 
November 29 Revanche, Götz Spielmann (2008) 
December 6 My Fair Lady, George Cukor (1964)

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