



SCREEN EPIPHANY

Red Shoes

Actor and singer Keala Settle (*The Greatest Showman*) introduces a film that has inspired her. Powell and Pressburger's classic, loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, is hailed by directors including Scorsese, Spielberg and Coppola as one of the all-time greatest films. Filmed in glorious Technicolor, Shearer stars as a ballet dancer who joins a prestigious company and must decide between her career and her relationship with a young composer.

Keala Settle appears in *& Juliet* at the Shaftesbury Theatre until Saturday 18 June.

5 things to know about 'The Red Shoes'

1. It's a spectacular rejection of realism

The Red Shoes, which premiered on 6 September 1948, followed a tremendous run of films by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Between 1943 and 1947, they made *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*. For their next trick, they took a decisive step away from the tendency towards realism in postwar cinema, pushing the emotional expressiveness of Technicolor photography yet further, in collaboration with genius cinematographer Jack Cardiff.

Pressburger had originally worked on the idea for the film before the war. Producer Alexander Korda had hired him to write a script that combined the story of the dancer Nijinsky, and his time at Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, with the Hans Christian Anderson fairytale about enchanted shoes that force the wearer to dance on and on until death. He'd also instructed Pressburger to write a role for Merle Oberon, but as that passion cooled, so did the producer's interest in the film.

Powell and Pressburger returned to the idea in 1946, convinced its time had come: 'We had all been told for 10 years to go out and die for freedom and democracy,' Powell recalled. 'Now the war was over, *The Red Shoes* told us to go out and die for art.'

The gamble paid off eventually. While the initial release in Britain was very small, as the Rank Organisation resented the fact that it had gone wildly over budget, *The Red Shoes* played for two years in New York – and was soon acclaimed a triumph.

2. It's a dance film made by dancers

While some ballet films use stand-ins and cutaways to make it appear that their actors have the right moves, Powell and Pressburger cast dancers instead. Moira Shearer, who plays the heroine, rising star Vicky Page, was a featured dancer at Sadler's Wells. French prima ballerina Ludmilla Tchérina played one here too – the glamorous Boronskaya. Léonid Massine, former choreographer for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, played Grischa Ljubow, who so brutally coaches Page; while Robert Helpmann played the lead male dancer in the company, Ivan Boleslawsky, and also choreographed the astonishing extended ballet sequence.

Shearer proved an elegant and natural actress on camera – easily able to hold her own with co-stars Anton Walbrook as impresario Lermontov and Marius Goring as young composer Julian Craster. As for the other dancers, if their performances at times veer toward the high-key gestural style of ballet mime, then that all adds to the film's heady, hyper-real excitement.

3. It's inspired by one star... and created another

The film's scenario is said to have been inspired by the moment when Diaghilev saw 14-year-old Diana Gould in the premiere of Frederick Ashton's ballet *Leda and the Swan*. He intended to hire her for his own company but died before that could happen. Anna Pavlova was similarly impressed by Gould, saying she was the only English dancer 'who had a soul', but she too died before they could work together.

One of Lermontov and Vicky's early exchanges sets up both the film's morbid obsession and its central question: what is life without art? Lermontov asks Vicky: 'Why do you want to dance?' Her ingenuous reply is: 'Why do you want to live?'

In truth, there was probably more than a little of the Lermontov about director Michael Powell. His film made a star out of Shearer, as much as Lermontov's ballet launches Vicky to fame. Shearer retired from ballet in 1953, but continued to act, becoming such a popular household name that her wedding to Ludovic Kennedy in 1950 was thronged by well-wishers – and she danced twice more for Powell, in 1951's *The Tales of Hoffman* and in 1960's *Peeping Tom*.

4. It's about the agony of artistic expression

Lermontov chides Vicky: 'Don't forget, a great impression of simplicity can only be achieved by great agony of body and spirit.' Few films reveal, either as cruelly or as eloquently as this one, the sacrifices that artists make. We see more bruising rehearsals than standing ovations, and yet, the Ballet Lermontov dances on.

Page's final, anguished choice between love and art only makes tangible the decision that Lermontov clearly made long ago. Walbrook, who plays him so brilliantly, was gay, as was Diaghilev. Lermontov knows nothing of Page's 'charms' and cares less, he says; his 'family' is his company, and he asserts that: 'The dancer who relies on the comforts of human love will never be a great dancer. Never!'

As certain critics have noted, there is a striking gay subtext to *The Red Shoes*, but it is a tragic one – Lermontov is a lonely figure whose obsessive nature demonstrates the danger of living for art rather than love.

5. From Scorsese to *La La Land*, its influence lives on

The Red Shoes is one of the most widely influential movies of all time. Regularly hailed as a favourite in critics' polls and by directors including Martin Scorsese ('It's one of the true miracles of film history'), Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg and Brian De Palma, it has also been reworked by artists outside the cinema. Kate Bush's 1993 album *The Red Shoes* was inspired by the film, for example. Coming full circle, Matthew Bourne choreographed the film as a ballet at Sadler's Wells in 2017.

The film also has an afterlife in the classic Hollywood musical. Gene Kelly screened the film multiple times for the producers of *An American in Paris* (1951), as he persuaded them to let him include a ballet sequence in the film.

He did, and in the following year’s *Singin’ in the Rain* too. The popularity of the ballet sequence as a genre trope was underlined when Damien Chazelle included one in his pastiche *La La Land* (2016).

There are several, pointed, references to the film in a very different musical, the 1985 Broadway adaptation *A Chorus Line*. That’s not a direct cinematic influence but rather a testament to the film’s impact on generations of girls. The book for that musical was based on interviews with New York dancers, several of whom confided that *The Red Shoes* inspired their choice of career.

In a 1970 interview with *The New York Times*, Shearer expressed a little self-deprecating regret on this score: ‘I’m a bit embarrassed whenever I hear how many girls were influenced by it. The dancing in it wasn’t terribly good.’

Pamela Hutchinson, bfi.org.uk, 6 September 2018

THE RED SHOES

The Entire Production Directed, Produced and Written by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
©: Independent Producers
A production of The Archers *presented by* J. Arthur Rank *released through* General Film Distributors
Assistant Producer: George R. Busby
Assistant Director: Sydney S. Streeter
Continuity: Doreen North
Additional Dialogue by: Keith Winter
From an Original Screenplay by: Emeric Pressburger
Based on the story by: Hans Christian Andersen
Director of Photography: Jack Cardiff
Colour Control: Natalie Kalmus
Associate: Joan Bridge
Camera Operator: Christopher Challis
Technicolor Composite Photography: F. George Gunn, E. Hague
Editor: Reginald Mills
Liaison Editor: John Seabourne Jr
Production Designed by: Hein Heckroth
Art Director: Arthur Lawson
Special Paintings: Ivor Beddoes, Józef Natanson
Scenic Artist: Alfred Roberts
Miss Shearer’s Dresses by: Jacques Fath of Paris, Mattli of London
Mlle Tchérina’s Dresses by: Carven of Paris
Wardrobe: Dorothy Edwards
Music Composed Arranged and Conducted by: Brian Easdale
Music [Played by]: The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Music [Aria Sung by]: Margherita Grandi
Music [of Café de Paris Sequence]:
Ted Heath’s Kenny Baker Swing Group
The Ballet of the Red Shoes Orchestra Conducted by:
Sir Thomas Beecham Bart
Music Recorder: Ted Drake
The Ballet of the Red Shoes Choreography by: Robert Helpmann
Part of the Shoemaker Created/Danced by: Leonide Massine
Assistant Maître de Ballet: Alan Carter
Assistant Maîtresse de Ballet: Joan Harris
Sound: Charles Poulton
Sound System: Western Electric
Dubbing: Gordon MacCullum
Made at: D&P Studios, Pinewood Studios

uncredited
Production Assistant: Gwladys Jenks
Production Secretary: Marjorie Mein
2nd Assistant Director: Kenneth Rick
3rd Assistant Directors: J.M. Gibson, Lawrence G. Knight
Assistant Continuity: Joanna Busby
Focus Puller: George Minassian
Clapper Loaders: Bob Kindred, John Morgan
Stills: George Cannon

Assistant Stills: Alistair Phillips
Special Stills: Cornel Lucas
Assistant Editor: Noreen Ackland
2nd Assistant Editors: Tony Haynes, Lawrence G. Knight
Assistant Art Director: Elven Webb
Draughtsmen: Don Picton, Vic Wilkins, V. Shaw, Alan Withy, G. Heavens, Bernard Goodwin
Wardrobe: Elsie Withers
Masks: Terence Morgan II
Make-up Supervisor: Ernie Gasser
Make-up: Eric Carter
Boom Operator: Al Burton
Dubbing Editor: Leonard Trumm

Cast

Anton Walbrook (*Boris Lermontov*)
Marius Goring (*Julian Craster*)
Moira Shearer (*Victoria Page*)
Robert Helpmann (*Ivan Boleslawsky*)
Leonide Massine (*Grischa Ljubov*)
Albert Basserman (*Ratov*)
Ludmilla Tcherina (*Irina Boronskaja*)
Esmond Knight (*Livingstone ‘Livy’ Montague*)
Jean Short (*Terry*)
Gordon Littmann (*Ike*)
Julia Lang (*a balletomane*)
Bill Shine (*a balletomane’s mate*)
Austin Trevor (*Professor Palmer*)
Eric Berry (*Dimitri*)
Irene Browne (*Lady Neston*)
Jerry Verno (*George, stage-door keeper*)
Derek Elphinstone (*Lord Oldham*)
Madame Rambert (*herself*)
Joy Rawlins (*Gwladys, Vicky’s friend*)
Marcel Poncin (*M. Boudin*)
Michel Bazalgette (*M. Rideaut*)
Yvonne Andre (*Vicky’s dresser*)
Hay Petrie (*Boisson*)
Alan Carter, Joan Harris (*solo dancers*)
Joan Sheldon, Paula Dunning, Brian Ashbridge, Denis Carey, Lynne Dorval, Helen Ffrance, Robert Dorning, Eddie Gaillard, Paul Hammond, Tommy Linden, Trisha Linova, Anna Marinova, Guy Massey, John Regan, Peggy Sager, Ruth Sandler (*dancers in ‘The Ballet of The Red Shoes’*)
Hilda Gaunt (*accompanist*)

uncredited
Richard George (*doorman*)
Peggy Sager, Audrey Harman

UK 1948©
133 mins

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**