

ANDY SERKIS SELECTS THE RED SHOES

We are delighted to welcome **ANDY SERKIS** to discuss his work and admiration for *The Red Shoes* with **MARK KERMODE**.

Internationally recognised as one of the greatest films of all time, *The Red Shoes* (1948) was the triumphant realisation (in the sumptuous, spell-binding medium of Technicolor) of all the themes, concepts and artistic techniques the ‘Archers’ (as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger collectively referred to themselves) had striven to perfect in their previous collaborations.

With a cast and crew drawn from the elite of ballet and choreography, Powell and Pressburger were determined to secure great dancers who could act, rather than actors they would need to coach. Ludmilla Tchérina, the youngest prima ballerina in history, was recruited to play the mythical Ballet Lermontov’s celebrated ballerina Irina Boronskaya. Tchérina could not understand English and had to recite her lines! For the film’s star, the precocious debutante Vicky Page, the Archers were determined to cast the Royal Ballet’s twenty year old protégé Moira Shearer. Shearer at first resisted their advances, fiercely loyal to her art, she regarded film as a cheap medium and disliked the screenplay. Eventually she relented, literally throwing herself into the part when she refused a stunt double and insisted on doing the infamous finale in person.

For their cinematographer the Archers chose Jack Cardiff, who had just won the Oscar for his work on their *Black Narcissus* (1947). Cardiff initially advised the directors he could not deliver them a Technicolor movie, as the American technology would not work on the weak lighting induced by post-war rationing. But, as Cardiff later told a reporter:

“...to the surprise of everyone, Technicolor was improved by the reduced lighting, instead of blatant, glaring colours, the under-lit film produced soft, pleasing pastel tints... particularly in recording the gorgeous settings by Hein Heckroth... in *The Red Shoes*...”

An essential element of the Archers’ production was of course the film’s score. Powell and Pressburger re-engaged their stalwart composer, Royal College of Music alumni, Brian Easdale with rewarding results. For his original work on the *The Red Shoes*, including the ‘Ballet of the Red Shoes’ sequence, Easdale became the first British composer to win an Academy Award.

Powell and Pressburger’s stellar roster was completed with enigmatic Austrian actor Anton Walbrook taking the lead



role as the imperious obsessive Boris Lermontov; Russian choreographer Leonide Massine put in a movie-defining turn as the histrionic Grischka Ljubov, at once mentor, taskmaster, confidante and petrifying demon; and Australian ballet legend Robert Helpmann delighted as the Ballet Lermontov’s male lead, Ivan Boleslawsky.

The opening and closing titles of *The Red Shoes* are book-ended by shots of an ancient tome of Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tales, a guttering candle atop it. The whole of what we are about to witness is an adaptation of Anderson’s fairy tale. A rowdy mob of music students chant ‘down with parents!’ and hammer on the doors of the Covent Garden Opera House demanding to be let in. When the doors open the dam breaks, boisterous girls and boys surge through, invading the balcony, and securing the best seats in the ‘gods’ for the performance of a new production by Ballet Lermontov. We must remember this is a fairy tale, these enthusiastic ‘music students’ are the eager children, impatiently jostling before a cinematic ‘fire-place’ to listen to the real story-tellers, the Archers, begin their tale. One student, Julian Craster (Marius Goring), realises his beloved Professor Palmer (Austin Trevor) has stolen his undergraduate compositions and is passing them off as his own ballet score. He leaves the balcony in disgust, being magically summoned by the film’s directors into the fairy tale itself, as one of its central characters, we the audience follow him.

Craster forces his way into the hotel room of the aloof Svengali Lermontov to retrieve a letter he has written



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denouncing Palmer. Lermontov instead hires him to compose a new ballet score for his forthcoming production 'The Ballet of the Red Shoes'. A Mephistophelian Lermontov seduces Craster with his dark vision of a new ballet, based on the Anderson fairy tale of a cursed pair of ballet shoes that dance their wearer to her death, forcing her to abandon love and life at their command. This becomes the famed hallucinogenic centrepiece, but is it also the plot of the whole film? Is the dancer Ljubov the satanic 'Shoe-Maker' in this ballet, or is it Lermontov himself?

Powell dubbed the film's central sequence his 'Freudian Ballet'. Its spectacular sets were designed by Hein Heckroth. Recognising the phenomenal talent of this Bauhaus-trained set-designer, Powell and Pressburger gave him free rein to create an unparalleled atmosphere, one never achieved since in film. Heckroth hurls across his stage-canvas wild but exquisite surrealist, expressionist and gothic imagery, both haunting and frantic; excesses designed to visualise the mental breakdown of Vicky Page as she struggles between earthly love and pure art. Cellophane fairground artists cascade around Page like falling leaves, discarded newspapers swirl suddenly into life and embrace her, Count Orlok-like shadow-arms reach across stone floors to possess her. Heckroth received the Academy Award for Best Art Direction for this monumental achievement.

RELEASE YEAR: 1948

RUNTIME: 134 mins

DIRECTORS: Michael Powell,
Emeric Pressburger

SCREENPLAY: Emeric Pressburger (with
additional dialogue by Keith Winter)

PRODUCERS: Michael Powell,
Emeric Pressburger

ASSISTANT PRODUCER: George R. Busby

Our presentation of *The Red Shoes* tonight is a copy from the digital master lovingly restored by the UCLA Archive and the Martin Scorsese Film Foundation from the original negatives.

ANDY SERKIS

As an undergraduate Andy Serkis was so entranced by the world of set and lighting design at the University of Lancaster's Nuffield Studio Theatre that he dropped his visual arts course and switched to theatre studies, he has never looked back. An apprenticeship in repertory theatre taught him physical stamina and invention, but his hard slog on stage and in television walk-ons as a jobbing actor paid off. When his agent rang to offer him three weeks' work as the voice-over for an animated character in a forthcoming adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*, Serkis immediately recognised the need to delve deep beneath the psychology of the character of Gollum, trying to become that pitiable creature and imbue it with real life. This was to be the beginning of a fresh direction for Serkis, one that has taken him to international fame as both a 'cyber-theatrical' and a pioneer of advanced cinema technology.

The skill, balletic poise and dedication to realism Andy brought to Gollum quickly made him the go-to actor for directors wanting utterly believable CGI protagonists in their films. His triumphs as a performance-capture actor are a roll-call of the biggest block-busters of the century; not only as the troubled Gollum in the double trilogy, *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*; but as the lovelorn monster in *King Kong* (2005), the genetically-modified ape, Caesar, in the *Planet of the Apes* franchise; and the complex villain, Supreme Commander Snoke, in *Star Wars*.

The technical wizardry behind these portrayals might obscure the fact it is Andy's raw acting talent that breathes them into three dimensions. But his



stunning performances as real-life figures, such as Ian Brady in *Longford* (2006) and Ian Dury in *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* (2010), amply testify that Serkis' in-depth character-studies owe little of their power to computer software; both roles garnered him BAFTA nominations.

Not content with appearing in front of the camera, Serkis also directs and produces. He is also the founder of pioneering performance-capture studio, The Imaginarium, which has helped bring British digital expertise to the forefront of modern global film-production.

Andy's next directorial release is a new version of the *Jungle Book* (2018) in which Andy features as Baloo the bear.

MARK KERMODE

Mark Kermode is the UK's best known film journalist. He is the resident film reviewer for *The Observer*, for BBC Radio 5 Live's Sony award-winning *Kermode and Mayo's Film Review*; for the BBC News Channel's Review Show and for BBC2's *The Culture Show*. He is an author and regular broadcaster on television and radio.

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