

# Mise-en-scene in the red shoes (1948)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Red Shoes, directed by the marquee team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger is an important film of British Cinema. One of the early exponents of Technicolor brilliance, the film is an exposition on use of light and colour for cinematic effect. Cinematographically the film is quite brilliant and a rich source for studying the art of mise-en-scene. But as far as the plot is concerned, it is quite ordinary and offers nothing new or interesting. The plot is based on the time-worn and tired theme of conflict between passion for art and romantic love. Central to the plot is the clash between Miss Victoria Page's (played by Moira Shearer) artistic ambition and her love life. Tragedy looms large in this type of plot set up and inevitably Miss Page is ruined by this conflict. In this way the plot and the simple straightforward narrative do not match the creative and exuberant visual imagery. Despite the said flaws, the film is worth studying purely its picturization and visual aesthetics. This essay will be an endeavour to study the mise-en-scene of a handful of scenes from the film.

To be able to understand the principles being applied for constructing various shots, one has to keep in mind Michael Powell's philosophy in filmmaking. Powell believed in the notion of the 'composed film', in which, "music, emotion and acting made a complete whole, of which the music was the master". (Mayer, 2008, p. 48) This philosophy is writ large in The Red Shoes, as well as Powell's other notable films Black Narcissus (1947) and The Tales of Hoffmann (1951). As a matter of fact, in The Red Shoes, Lermontov says to Miss Page on more than one occasion that "music is everything". This is perhaps a reflection of Powell's own understanding of composing a film. (Grist, 2012) The importance given to the background score is evident

in the manner in which scenes are paced – it is as if the visual action corresponds to the beat and texture of the background music. This is best exemplified in *The Ballet of the Red Shoes* (which is the story within the larger story *The Red Shoes*), the ballet's lead dancer, Vicky Page “ is pulled by her magical shoes away from the steps of a church, and the embrace of a priest (danced by Ivan Boleslawsky/Robert Helpmann), to an infernal, red-lit space that is inhabited by the ballet's demonic shoemaker (danced by Ljubov/Leonid Massine).” (Grist, 2012, p. 28) These sequences of events are synchronized to the tempo and prompt of the instrumental music. Just as the musical composition by Brian Easdale carries symmetry and repetitive structures within it, the performance of *The Ballet of the Red Shoes* display a similar arrangement. There is a conscious attempt on part of the directors to unite the strands of various media of art into one dramatic output. It is this accentuation of dramatic effect thus produced which accounts for the continuing remembrance of this film and its ballet performances by generations of film audiences. (Mclean, 2008, p. 135)

As a treatise on cinematic art, the film reveals its exceptional ability to exploit the medium and alter accepted boundaries. In its own implicit way, *The Red Shoes* goes on to shatter the myths surrounding fairytales, the world of classical ballet and the myths surrounding cinema itself. The notion that fairytales all end on a happy note is refuted in the film. Instead, the comforting aspects of Christen Anderson's fairy tale (upon which the film is based) are disillusioned and the underlying horror is revealed. For example, the earlier part of the film has the audience believe that Vicky and Julian will live happily ever after. But as events unfold and take a dire turn, the

aspirations of the couple are frustrated. In Anderson's fairytale, a young girl, similar in age and disposition to Vicky Page, wishes to wear the red shoes. But upon wearing them, she cannot stop herself from dancing. This eventually leads to unbearable exhaustion she even resorts to ask the executioner to have mercy on her and chop off the shoes. Once this is done and she is released from the tyranny of the red shoes but not before acute suffering. Some of the metaphors employed by Anderson in her fairy tale are carried over to the film while the final tragic twist is the film's invention. Though fairy tales are primarily written for children, both the written work and the film are rich in sexual metaphor. To bring out this element in the visual experience is a challenge well answered by Powell and Pressburger. For example,

“ the colour red, so often used in fairytales to signify sexual awakening, is present: by willingly donning the red shoes the girl is compliant with her own sexual downfall, and suffers a horrific punishment. The appeal of The Red Shoes' fairytale therefore relies very much on the combination of beauty and horror: the girl is beautiful, especially when she is dancing in her red shoes. The act of severance, however, also holds a twisted appeal in that it leads to her redemption—but it is nevertheless suggested as a suitable punishment for being tempted to dance in the first place.” (Street, 1997, p. 162)

In the final scene of the film, when the unbearable mental anguish pushes Vicky toward committing suicide, the directors construct rich symbolisms. In the aftermath of the moment of tragedy, when Vicky lies dying on the railway track, she asks Julian to remove her red shoes, which he promptly does. Meanwhile in the theatre, the eagerly awaiting audience are informed

of the lead ballerina's absence – a message delivered in a tone of suppressed emotions by the deeply saddened Lermontov. But Lermontov assures the audience that the show will go on, and in the place of the deceased Vicky, a spotlight is thrown to acknowledge her spiritual presence on stage. This is an inspired directorial idea from Powell and Pressburger, for they based it on a similar real life incident involving Russian ballerina Pavlova. Pavlova's 'final performance' was conducted in 1931, 'after' her demise, by tracing her movements on stage using a spotlight. The skilful conception and construction of mise-en-scene in this final sequence lends emotional richness to the climax. The valorous maxim of 'the show must go on' captures the true spirit of art, where individuals are secondary to the larger cause. (Swynnoe, 2002, p. 56)

When one looks at the history of ballet films in three decades between 1920 and 1950, commercial failure is the norm. Added to this, British producers have previously failed in their attempts to use this genre. This makes the success of *The Red Shoes* an anomaly of sorts. Numerous interviews given by the directors and the lead actors in the film have helped compile an impressive archival documentation for this film. By tapping into this resource, we can learn the thought processes of the creative team, especially with regards to mise-en-scene. We learn that Michael Powell thought of ballet as

“ a contradictory representation and ambiguously gendered embodiment of morbidity and ecstasy, life and death, achievement and failure, fulfillment and despair. Moreover, the production context of *The Red Shoes* functions as a sort of metanarrative about the relationship of ballet to the film industry

and of the machinations and processes by which ballet's theatrical identity and the subjectivities of its practitioners were manipulated and objectified (not always successfully, and never without resistance) to fit the measure of a full-length commercial film." (Mclean, 2008, p. 137)