

The Red Shoes (1948)

Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

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The Red Shoes is one of the most famous collaborations from the producing-directing-writing team of British filmmakers Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Loosely based on a Hans Christian Andersen story, the picture is now considered the greatest ballet film ever made. Yet, when it debuted in 1948, this lavish and ambitious production flopped at the British box office. Ironically, *The Red Shoes* turned a profit on U.S. screens, confounding studio execs who assumed that a ballet movie would be of no interest to American audiences.

The Red Shoes centers on the Ballet Lermontov, an internationally celebrated dance company run by dictatorial Boris Lermontov (Anton Walbrook). Possessing a keen eye for talent, Lermontov impulsively hires young, talented and beautiful ballerina Vicky Page (Moirá Shearer) and the talented, young composer Julian Craster (Marius Goring) to join the company. Vicky shines under Lermontov's tutelage, and in no time he taps her for the principal role in a ballet written by Julian.

With Julian's ballet a smashing success, Vicky stands at the crossroads of realizing her life's dream. Lermontov plans to mold his new star into a prima ballerina, thereby assuring himself a dominant role in the ballet world for decades to come.

But as fate—and the movies—would have it, Vicky and Julian fall in love. This romantic development puts a serious crimp in Lermontov's objectives, setting Julian and Lermontov on an inescapable path to clash. As a result, Julian leaves the dance troupe leaving Vicky in the precarious position of having to reconcile her passion for dance with her love for Julian.

Rather than cast actors to play dancers—as many filmmakers did at the time and still do to this day—professional dancers were cast in acting roles to ensure a high level of authenticity in the dance sequences. This casting decision led to the hiring of Moira Shearer in the female lead, as well as other cast members including Ludmilla Tcherina (as a nutty prima donna), Leonide Massine, and Robert Helpmann (who also served as the production's choreographer).

Of particular note, it was a young Frederick Freed, founder of a new ballet shoe manufacturing company called Freed of London, that was called upon to create the ruby red slippers used in the film's main production number, a 15 minute surrealist piece replete with special effects of the period and a magic all its own. With the tremendous international success of the film, the legend of Freed of London was born.

Filmed in the original Technicolor process, the photography by master cinematographer Jack Cardiff set this film apart from all others; the look, lighting and richness of colors is without peer. Not only is *The Red Shoes* the greatest ballet film ever made, it also stands among the greatest achievements in color cinematography.

The red Shoes is available on DVD from The Criterion Collection, a distributor known for their painstaking work in restoring dilapidated film negatives to their former theatrical glory. *The Red Shoes* is one such film that has been masterfully restored to its pristine perfection. Among the DVD's many special features are interviews with stars Moira Shearer and Marius Goring, Director of Photography Jack Cardiff, and composer Brian Easdale. Famed contemporary director Martin Scorsese provides occasional commentary, as well. Scorsese reveals that filmmakers Powell and Pressburger are among his great cinematic influences, and claims that the fight scenes in his Academy Award-winning film *Raging Bull* were inspired by the 15 minute ballet sequence, *The Red Shoes*.

In all, *The Red Shoes* was nominated for five Academy Awards, winning for Best Score (Brian Easdale) and Best Art Direction (Hein Heckroth), and losing in the Best Picture, Best Film Editing (Reginald Mills) and Best Story categories.

Title: The Red Shoes

Year of Release: 1948

Genre: Drama

Country: UK

Running Time: 153 minutes

MPAA Rating: Not Rated

Directed by: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

Screenplay by: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

Photographed by: Jack Cardiff

Cast: Moira Shearer, Anton Wallbrook, Marius Goring, Leonide Massine, Robert Helpmann, Albert Basserman, Esmond Knight and Ludmilla Tcherina

Available on DVD: Yes

DVD Distributor: The Criterion Collection