

Review #27 : *Pandora* (1951)

James Mason and Ava Gardner

TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwny27jQwLE>



REVIEW

Albert Lewin wasn't your average Hollywood director : a professor and antiquities expert, friend of artists Man Ray and Max Ernst, he wound up at MGM – who funded this flamboyant and passionate 1950 fantasy. Exemplifying the true magic of Lewin's cinema, this retelling of the *Flying Dutchman Tale* enshrines a vision of **desire stronger than death**. He brings off the near-impossible task of positing a **transcendent and spiritual love** in a sceptical age where everything is brought back to materiality and bodily pleasures – certainly

because Ava Gardner seems as much screen goddess as mere mortal – an apotheosis rendered by cameraman **Jack Cardiff** in Technicolor so heady it's the stuff of legend. A film ahead of its time? Quite possibly, as Lewin conjures a mysterious and surreal atmosphere steeped with the poetical presence of canvases and statues in the style of **De Chirico** and **Dali** – all in superb and lyrical Technicolor – by Powell and Pressburger favourite Jack Cardiff...

SYNOPSIS

'The measure of love is what one is willing to give up for it.'

The film takes place around 1930 in the picturesque Spanish town of Esperanza, on the Mediterranean Coast. There, fishermen find the lifeless body of Pandora Reynolds (Ava Gardner) and another man. Pandora's fiancé – race car driver Stephen Cameron – is among those at the beach when the two bodies are recovered...



Antiquities scholar Geoffrey Fielding tells Pandora's story via flashbacks. American nightclub singer Pandora is the social core among the wealthy expatriates in Esperanza. Desired by all men – a quality the incredibly alluring Gardner makes entirely believable – Pandora loves none of them, selfishly expressing her own terrible loneliness by destroying her devoted followers.

In an early scene she drives her latest boyfriend – a troubled alcoholic – into committing suicide, then goads Stephen into pushing an experimental race car he's been developing for the last 2 years off a cliff – as proof of his love. Impressed by his sacrifice, she agrees to marry him...



However, that very same night, Pandora is drawn to a yacht owned by mysterious Dutchman Hendrik van der Zee (James Mason) who may be the immortal 16th c. Flying Dutchman, cursed to sail the seas for eternity aboard a ghost ship unless he can find a woman willing to sacrifice her life on his behalf...



In 2 hours, *Pandora* goes on and on with some incessant flowery narration and several unneeded peripheral characters – including Janet who loves Stephen who loves Pandora who is loved by both Reggie and bullfighter Juan while she loves Hendrik. Instead of the classical love triangle, *Pandora* is more like a **misshapen hexagon...**



However, much of the film is visually extremely impressive. Some individual shots are so clever they can't help but draw attention to themselves : a wide angle peering down on Esperanza's beach from on high, which pulls back, revealing a bell tower ; Reggie's suicide, including a subjective angle as he falls unconscious, incredibly done hand-held. Throughout the film are numerous trick shots : flawless **matte paintings**, sometimes incorporating more obvious but sill ingenious miniatures. The film uses painted backdrops and rear-projection better than just about any Hollywood production of the period...

The film tries hard but never succeeds in making Pandora sympathetic : her obvious pleasure watching men destroy themselves to prove their love dominates the character, a quality Gardner can't shake, and her turnaround with Hendrik never quite comes off.

Pandora's look is frequently dazzling : face to an excellent and subtle James Mason, Ava Gardner was **never more beautiful** and the film has a half-dozen outstanding scenes – with almost as many stunning gowns...

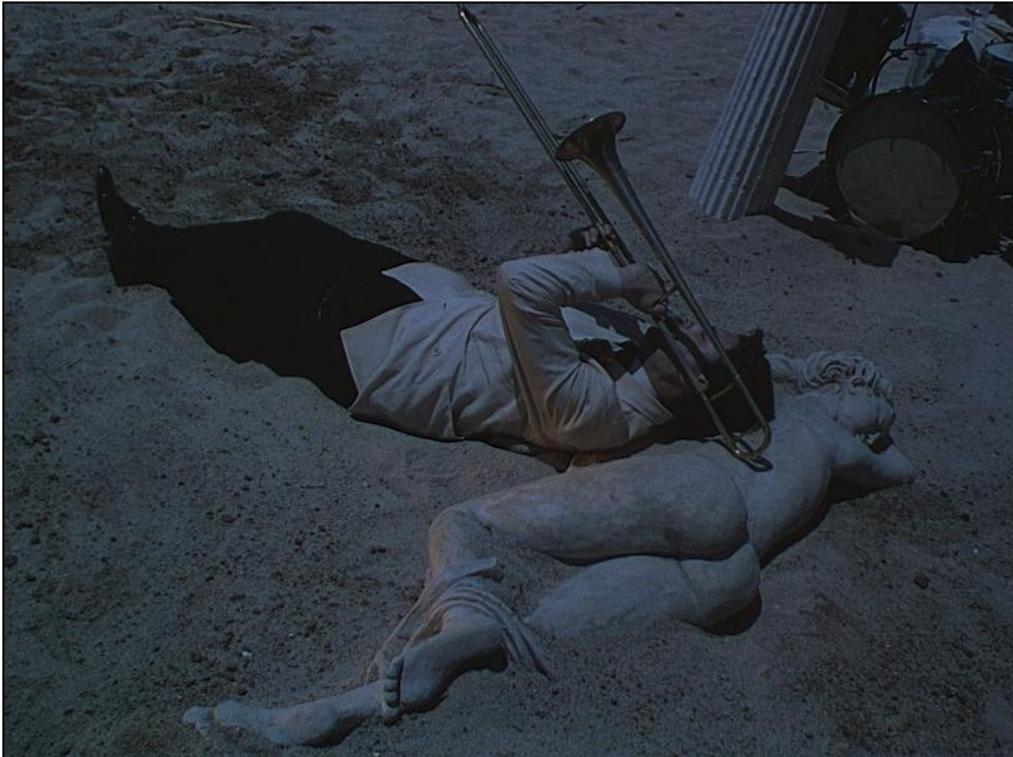


Pandora and the Flying Dutchman was his fourth film and many consider it the culmination of Lewin's obsessions: a proudly romantic, visually fascinating attempt to bring his love for myths and art to cinematic life.

THE LESS GOOD

(1) *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* might be considered an embarrassment of references. The film takes the original legend of the Flying Dutchman and combines it with the Greek legend of Pandora, the fabled 'darling of the gods'. The name of the village in which the film is set is Esperanza (*hope*), famously the only thing Pandora had left after she opened the box. And the Dutchman is given a backstory straight out of *Othello*, with a chance at redemption that hails from Heinrich Heine's classic opera. Lewin threads the film with other, smaller details : the film opens with lines from the *Rubaiyat* and Hendrik recites **Matthew Arnold's** *Dover Beach* at one point. Hendrik' painting of Pandora is an actual painting by **Man Ray**, who also designed a chess set for the film. The cast roams over beaches strewn with broken statuary directly taken from the Antiquity and Baroque era. This last detail leads to one of the film's more memorable set pieces, as a crowd of partygoers

dance and laugh amidst the statues, the new merrily tramping all over the old. It's like a sequence straight out of *La Dolce Vita*.



(2) **Gardner and Mason have almost no chemistry together.** And that's the least of the love story's problems. For reasons best known to himself, Albert Lewin decided to keep the development of Pandora and Hendrik's relationship mostly off-screen to rack up more minutes on the shallow lives of Pandora's former lovers. If not for a stray comment by Pandora's friend Geoffrey, you would never know that Hendrik and Pandora were falling in love. The only hypothesis I can make for this is that Lewin thought the **grandeur and spiritual essence of their love was best left to the imagination.** Unfortunately, this tactic means that the audience doesn't have any emotional stake in their love. We don't know what they talk about, nor why they even love each other. In the few moments where they do interact with each other, Lewin saddles the actors with somehow flat, portentous dialogue :

- **Hendrik** : Perhaps you haven't found what you want yet, perhaps you're unfulfilled. Perhaps you don't even know what you want, perhaps you're discontented. Discontentment often finds vent through fury and destruction.
- **Pandora** : Fury and destruction, is that what you think? Well perhaps I can find something here to destroy...Would you like me to destroy your painting?
- **Hendrik** : If it would help to quiet your soul.

These aren't characters talking, these are *concepts*. You can't just have your characters announce and tell plainly how they feel ! It's flat enough on paper, but in the mouths of actors it's just painful. It's all **formal declarations in tones of deadly seriousness**. In his attempt to impress on us the importance of his ideas, Lewin bypasses both realism and poetry and comes up with something that's neither.



(3) **Ava Gardner's blank personality.** Ava is heart-stoppingly beautiful in this film; she seems to glow from every angle. It's her beauty more than anything that makes Pandora's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* reputation seem utterly plausible. Unfortunately her personality doesn't match up to her looks. Pandora is cold, distant, and callous ; you wonder how her suitors ever bother to actually listen to anything she says. I can't help wondering, given Lewin's choice of setting, if he wasn't influenced by a **Zelda Fitzgerald** or a **Duff Twysden**. If he was, he forgot to give his protagonist the charm and lust for life that made these women so unforgettable. It's bold of him to make his heroine so unlikable, but the **expected payoff of the selfish Pandora being reformed by love isn't convincing**. Alas, we are not given any indication that Pandora has the deeper feelings that would make such a transformation possible. Gardner's performance doesn't **smooth the transition**. She floats through most of this film, speaking her lines in a **hypnotized monotone**. The few times she struggles for more emotion, she just sounds petulant. This isn't entirely her fault, as Lewin's script doesn't give

her many chances to explore her character. Too much is given to exposition and grandeur. Gardner ends up looking lost, unable to find a foothold in her own film.

Fortunately James Mason fares somewhat better than Gardner because he delivers Lewin's granite-faced dialogue with complete conviction. Hendrik van der Zee is a man out of his time, haunted by past regrets. He is drawn to Pandora, but his tormented face and demeanour don't exactly fit in with her party-loving crowd. Faced with both long stretches of exposition and long stretches of silent glowering, James Mason does both admirably. Mason cut his teeth on dark and romantic roles – Gainsborough melodramas and Ophüls films. If anybody could unlock the swoon-worthy, **Gothic-hero potential** in Hendrik van der Zee, Mason could. Yet here, he surprisingly comes across as rather **stiff and remote**.



With all the charges I've laid against *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, what could redeem it? **The visuals.** This is one of the most stunning films I've ever seen. The night-time scenes glow sapphire blue, purely unreal, while the daytime colours blaze hot. The shadows soften the actor's faces until they seem to shimmer in and out of the fantasy dreamscape that Jack Cardiff crafts from the Spanish coast. Lewin directs **with a painter's eye** : he has the ability to wed small details to strong, dynamic lines. Look at the moment when Mason is being held by guards as the floor pattern stretches beyond him to infinity. Lewin wasn't afraid to reach for the obscure or the strange in his visual work and it works greatly to the film's advantage.

Pandora and the Flying Dutchman is a film about timeless passion, the kind that would make a man kill the wife he loves, that would make a faithless woman risk death. And it was a film driven by the passion of one man, Albert Lewin, who wrote, directed, and produced it. How odd then, that the film ultimately feels so **empty of passion or feeling**. **It's a strange mixture of the sublime and the dull**. It reaches astonishing heights of beauty through Cardiff's colours, Lewin's compositions and Ava Gardner's genetics. But they're laid at the service of a self-important, humourless script and pacing that just plods along. Still, if Lewin doesn't succeed in making a masterpiece, he does create a memorable and utterly unique film nevertheless...

