



Moira Shearer, Robert Helpmann, Anton Walbrook, Austin Trevor and Léonide Massine in *The Red Shoes* (1948)

## THE DANCE OF DEATH: ABJECTION MEETS THE UNCANNY IN *THE RED SHOES*

By Phoebe Collins

In Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's classic 1948 film, *The Red Shoes*, many overt roles and visual modalities find obvious expression on the story's surface. However, beneath this complex theatrical façade of backstage tensions and onstage performance, of the unique trajectory of a young dancer's career under the authoritarian figure of a ballet company's despotic artistic director, and the internecine relationships undermining performance, personal ambition, and desire, there lurks more—a fascinating subtext wherein other roles find a forum and are played out on their own terms. Disrupting roles that influence the direction of the narrative and characters' choices within a seemingly organized plot construction that conforms not only to cinematic convention, but also to that of the classical three-act ballet. This plot duality, wherein the primary story—however conflicted—is reflected in the fairytale plot of the ballet is achieved via director Michael Powell's signature, visually lush style, enhanced in

this instance by production designer Hein Heckroth<sup>1</sup>, who received a 1948 Academy Award for his work.

Here, we will look not only at the pertinent plot symbols, but the considerably less obvious, and often confused, psychological elements driving the narrative and the ballet story, both of which end with the heroine's death. From this aspect, Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection as letting go of that which we would like to keep, and then confronting it outside of ourselves (and outside of the symbolic order), will be used to understand and find meaning in the duality of Victoria Page's (Moira Shearer) meteoric rise in the ballet company, as measured against the role that confirms her stardom: the doomed girl who makes a Faustian bargain for a seductive pair of beautiful red shoes, shoes that ensure her destruction while engaging in the activity that provides her greatest joy—dancing. But shoes alone—as inanimate objects, without a context, as in Kristeva's famous example of the heap of children's shoes in the Auschwitz Museum—do not sufficiently support abjection. For that we must go deeper, to Hans Christian Andersen's original tale on which *The Red Shoes* ballet is based. What is revealed there provides the needed context for abjection (in terms of physical connection preceding loss) and consequent horror, imperceptible on the film's surface.

Assuredly, ballet is full of famous roles regarding tragic heroines engaged in death; deaths that, however beautifully carried out with exquisite music and choreography, are death nonetheless and deny these heroines—all of whom (such as Odette and Giselle) have clearly demonstrated the ability to live and love passionately—the opportunity to be anything other than static symbols. These two ballets, *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, figure hauntingly at pivotal moments in the film, foreshadowing Victoria's destiny—particularly the latter, with its second act full of the ghosts of betrayed women (the Wilis). If “the depth of horror is in the will of those who command it” (Bataille/Rottenberg), then these phantoms, locked in eternal vengeance against living men, luridly exemplify its destructive capabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hein Heckroth (1897-1970) belongs with the designers of *Caligari*, with Walt Disney, and William Cameron Menzies, as an auteur in production design whose creativity was in his day rarely appreciated. Moreover, his genius for fantasy, or at least fantasmagoria, emerged when film theorists were preoccupied with literary qualities and realism. He [first] became known in German theatre in the 1920s for his startlingly modern theatre and opera designs at Essen (including three productions of *Tales of Hoffman*)” (Durgnat).