



ANIME

# Belladonna of Sadness (Kanashimi no Beradonna)

+ intro by Helen McCarthy, founder of Anime UK (later Anime FX)  
(Monday 4 April only)

An outlier from the moment of its conception, *Belladonna of Sadness* is a psychedelic watercolour trip that is as lurid as it is tragic. Born in the midst of Japan's 'pink film' boom – when directors brought creative titillation to the arthouses – it was the third in an informal trilogy of adult anime conceived and produced at Osamu Tezuka's Mushi Production studio, marketed under the 'Animerama' banner and all directed by Eiichi Yamamoto, a Tezuka collaborator since the days of *Astro Boy* (1963-66) and *Kimba the White Lion* (1965-67). The leap from such family fare to animated erotica might seem jarring, but Tezuka himself was no prude, spending the 1970s exploring adult themes in manga such as *The Book of Human Insects* (1970-71) and *MW* (1976-78). That said, neither the more traditionally cartoonish *A Thousand and One Nights* (1969) nor *Cleopatra* (1970 – released in the US a couple of years later as *Cleopatra: Queen of Sex*, a week after *Fritz the Cat* became animation's first-ever X-rated feature) gave much hint of the out-there artistry of *Belladonna*.

Set in feudal Europe, it begins on the wedding day of dreamy peasant couple Jean and Jeanne. That night they're summoned to the castle of their lordship, a skull-faced seigneur who demands Jeanne's virginity as his right. Jeanne herself is mortified at her own helplessness and further by her husband's shame. It's then that she's offered a deal with the Devil, who appears like a phallic guardian, set on awakening her rage and, subsequently, her own power to free herself and the women around her from subjugation through a series of satanic trysts.

Jeanne's fortunes in the town wax and wane – she first attempts to gain power within the system through capital as she works as a tax collector – only to be outcast, then finally harness her strength as a sexually emancipated 'witch' who can cure the plague ravaging the countryside.

Even in 1973, *Belladonna of Sadness* was regarded as just too weird – its box-office failure was the final nail in Mushi Pro's coffin. For starters, with some set-piece exceptions most of it is minimally animated, the narration running over panning shots and close-ups of – admittedly beautiful – watercolour art inspired by Klimt and tarot illustrations, in keeping with the European setting. (A final image settles on Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*.) Dialogue is also limited to some key scenes; in short it's self-consciously experimental and arty, far from the cartoon or 'anime' norm.

After a festival premiere at Berlin, the film remained largely obscure in the West until a restoration and rerelease in 2016. Today, we can recognise *Belladonna of Sadness* for its many qualities: it is psychedelic, erotic, beautiful and essentially feminist. It asserts that there is power within female sexuality and that only by harnessing that power can women regain their rightful spot as leaders of a revolution both for themselves and for a just society, morality be damned.

**Lynzee Loveridge, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 2020**

The capstone of the 'Animerama' series, a trilogy of erotic fables made in the animation atelier of Mushi Production by studio head Osamu Tezuka and director Eiichi Yamamoto, *Belladonna of Sadness* was recently rescued from obscurity in the West by the still-young Los Angeles-based distributor Cinelicious Pics, who gave it a remunerative run in American boutique cinemas 40-plus years on.

Unlike the previous Animerama entries *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (1969) and *Cleopatra: Queen of Sex* (1970), which draw from fairly well-known historical properties, *Belladonna* traces its source to *Satanism and Witchcraft*, an 1862 occult study by the historian writer Jules Michelet. It sets its scene Once Upon a Time in a France still under the yoke of the aristocracy, when chaste peasant girls must submit to the *droit de seigneur* of the local lord on the eve of their weddings. Not long after one such incident, our heroine Jeanne (voiced by Nagayama Aiko and drawn like Catherine Deneuve) begins to commune with the devil, who lends her occult powers with which she leads a revolt against the in-cahoots church and gentry, before finally being brought to heel by sentiment and burnt at the stake. *Belladonna of Sadness* displays a dazzling plethora of styles, telling its story with images animate, still or some combination of the two – tendrils of blood, smoke and tears in an otherwise static frame, or tracking along unfurling tapestries that do the work of time-passing montages. Bravura passages that feature roiling, lovemaking silhouettes against a field of gold leaf, a Yellow Submarine-esque wig-out and kaleidoscopic stop-motion psychedelia stray very far from the usual tropes of anime, and the visual references here are principally western – the folklore illustrations of Ivan Bilibin, the Viennese Secession, Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* (1922).

I was conscious of being impressed by the film's myriad techniques, occasionally titillated by the dirty pictures, but never exactly moved by the relentless virtuosity – though I suspect it benefits to be stoned as a bat before popping in the Blu-ray, for *Belladonna* has all of the gonzo extravagancies that make for a cult rediscovery.

**Nick Pinkerton, *Sight & Sound*, September 2016**

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**BELLADONNA OF SADNESS**  
**(KANASHIMI NO BERADONNA)**

*Director:* Eiichi Yamamoto

*Production Companies:* Mushi Production, Nippon Herald Films

*Producer:* Osamu Tezuka

*Screenplay:* Eiichi Yamamoto, Yoshiyuki Fukuda

*Based on the book La Sorcière by:* Jules Michelet

*Cinematographer:* Shigeru Yamazaki

*Animator:* Gisaburo Sugii

*Original Artwork by:* Kuni Fukai

*Music:* Masahiko Satô

**Voice cast**

Aiko Nagayama (*Jeanne/Belladonna*)

Tatsuya Nakadai (*Devil*)

Katsuyuki Ito (*Jean*)

Masaya Takahashi (*lord*)

Shigako Shimegi (*lord's mistress*)

Masakane Yonekura (*priest*)

Natsuka Yashiro (*witch*)

Takao Inoue

Japan 1973

87 mins

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## THE HISTORY OF ANIME

**Early Days of Anime Shorts Programme 1917-1946** Mon 11 Apr 20:40

**Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors (Momotarō: Umi no Shinpei)** Wed 13 Apr 18:30

**Astroboy** Sun 17 Apr 12:10

**Kimba the White Lion (Jangaru Taitei)**

Sat 9 Apr 12:40

**Belladonna of Sadness (Kanashimi no Belladonna)**

Mon 4 Apr 20:30 (+ intro by Helen McCarthy); Mon 18 Apr 15:30

## ANIME AT THE IMAX

**Ghost in the Shell (Kōkaku Kidōtai)**

Mon 25 Apr 15:00, 21:00

**Belle (Ryū to sobakasu no hime)**

Thu 31 Mar 20:40 (NFT1); Mon 25 Apr 18:15

## EMERGING FEMALE VOICES

**A Silent Voice (Koe no Katachi)**

Wed 6 Apr 20:30; Mon 18 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Dr Rayna Denison, Professor in Film and Digital Arts, University of Bristol)

**The Anthem of the Heart (Kokoro ga Sakebitagatterunda)**

Thu 7 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 18:10

**Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms (Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana o Kazarō)**

Fri 8 Apr 18:00; Sat 23 Apr 17:45

**Liz and the Blue Bird (Rizu to aoi tori)**

Thu 21 Apr 18:15; Sat 30 Apr 17:45

## ANIME CLASSICS PART 1

**Steamboy (Suchimubōi)**

Sat 9 Apr 20:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:30; Wed 20 Apr 18:10

**Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honneamise (Ōritsu Uchūgun: Oneamisu no Tsubasa)**

Tue 12 Apr 18:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:40

**Patlabor: The Movie (Kidō keisatsu patorebā: Gekijō-ban)**

Wed 13 Apr 20:40; Sun 17 Apr 18:20; Thu 28 Apr 18:15

**Cowboy Bebop: The Movie (Cowboy Bebop: Tengoku no tobira)**

Thu 14 Apr 20:45; Sat 16 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 20:40

**Patlabor 2: The Movie (Kidō keisatsu patorebā: The Movie 2)**

Fri 15 Apr 18:15; Thu 21 Apr 20:30; Thu 28 Apr 20:45

**The Case of Hana & Alice (Hana to Arisu Satsujin Jiken)**

Sat 16 Apr 18:35; Tue 26 Apr 20:55

## STUDIO GHIBLI

**Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)**

Mon 28 Mar 20:35; Fri 29 Apr 18:00

**When Marnie Was There (Omoide No Mani)**

Tue 29 Mar 20:40

**My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)**

Tue 5 Apr 18:20; Fri 8 Apr 20:50

This season was co-programmed by writer and academic Hanako Miyata



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