



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Scarlet Empress

+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large (Wednesday 13 July only).

Arguably the finest of the Dietrich-Sternberg collaborations, this offers a magnificently ornate, gleefully excessive account of the rise to power of Catherine the Great, from naively innocent princess to murderously ambitious, sexually voracious Empress of Russia. Packed with spectacular sets and costumes, not to mention plentiful visual innuendo, it's a mischievous masterpiece; the wedding scene, especially, is quite extraordinary.

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A 1965 review

One of the handicaps facing any film historian is the difficulty of seeing an artist's work in the right order. As far as Josef von Sternberg is concerned, younger critics in this country have so far been deprived of his silent films (except for a brief appearance years ago at the NFT of *The Salvation Hunters*), though I have a vague memory of a bad print of *The Last Command*, with Jannings as an aristocratic extra lording it over a fantastically populated film set. (As for *The Sea Gull*, only Chaplin knows why he suppressed it in America, and he's not telling.) At the moment, then, Sternberg remains for us the director of 'the Dietrich films' of the early Thirties, from *The Blue Angel* to *The Devil Is a Woman*, in which each film became 'a mounting hymn to her beauty,' to quote a contemporary commentator. This is true in the sense that Sternberg seemed to have discovered an infinite number of ways of exploring the divine features. In reality, however, she only provided the main human-cum-plastic material for her director's grander designs.

Sternberg viewed the cinema at this time as if it was a gigantic canvas, where subtly controlled lighting took the place of brushstrokes and a hovering camera caressed faces and sets as if it too was obsessed by the heady atmosphere. And it is amazing how much Sternberg got away with. Taking over Stroheim's reputation for extravagance, he proceeded to prove his artistic theories by assuming complete control of his productions, personally supervising the lighting and decor (aided by the great Hans Dreier), and even doing some of his own musical arrangements. *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935) belong to a fantasy world out of reach of time. To a New Deal-conscious America they must have seemed the height of extravagant incongruity: today their inspired self-indulgence acts as a reminder of a Hollywood that has gone for ever.

The Scarlet Empress had been unavailable for years, until its recent revival in the invaluable Vintage Years of Hollywood series on BBC-2. Ostensibly it is about the marriage of the young and innocent Sophia Frederica to the mad Grand Duke Peter of Russia, and the insurrection which resulted in her becoming the new Empress Catherine. Looking at it today, one is continually puzzled (and delighted) by Sternberg's ambivalent attitudes towards the material. Surely nobody could have doubted that he was sending it up ('those ideas are old-fashioned-this is the 18th century' proclaims the ardent, black-wigged Count Alexei to the pouting young Catherine). Yet Sternberg's insolent wit was the last thing commented on at the time. Strange, too, how these comic anachronisms are made to alternate with set-pieces played solely for their dramatic or exotic appeal; all dialogue ceases and Sternberg constructs a sequence 'painted with light' which fully confirms his reputation as one of the cinema's great visual stylists.

The wedding ceremony, for instance, begins with a long track back over a vision of tapestries, candles and chanting monks to close-ups of Catherine and Peter holding candles before them. As the music mounts, Sternberg cuts a little closer and the focus becomes softer; Catherine's face is seen through her veil, at first apprehensive and then more resigned, with tears slowly forming in her eyes. Cut to the court crossing itself, the placing of rings on fingers, then a reverse track up the church and a dissolve to the Empress Elizabeth, triumphant that her match-making has succeeded. The confident bravura of this sequence is equalled in the night encounters between Catherine, Alexei and the randy old Empress. After the candles are ceremoniously blown out in the bedroom, Catherine is instructed to go downstairs to let in the Empress's lover-Alexei. Horrified, she slowly remounts the stairs; and it is her passage through dark shadows and bright pools of light which conveys the moment's emotional stress. Later, when she exacts her revenge on Alexei, the face is seen again through a veil, used at first to emphasise her sensuality and then, as the lighting hardens, to make her appear cold and unyielding.

These episodes rely mainly on a static camera and highly charged close-ups, but Sternberg indulges in sweeping camera movements when he needs to show his characters dwarfed by their nightmarish Byzantine surroundings. The now famous low tracking shot along a hideously loaded supper table is followed by the same movement in reverse at a slightly higher angle, to reveal the equally heavily-laden diners and the background details of the set. His camera is continually tracking the ladies-in-waiting, rushing about the palace, or following Dietrich in motion, inspecting the guard or gliding across the exquisitely lit garden set into the arms of an unexpected lover ('tonight you are fortunate – very fortunate').

Dietrich's sweetly accented delivery makes the most of both good and bad lines, as she prattles on about telling her mother everything, as Concha does in *The Devil Is a Woman* (another private Sternberg joke, no doubt), and progresses from cooing innocent to revenge-seeking mistress. Other characters fare less well, and the fact that the film becomes a little lethargic in the middle may be due to Sternberg's curiously monotonous direction of the dialogue, as if the actors were being dubbed into American. Least successful of all are Louise Dresser as the old Empress, and Sam Jaffe as a gibbering Duke Peter who looks unnervingly like Harpo Marx. Sternberg is supposed to have thought of the Empress as a fishwife, but it is all too raucous and calculated for comfort. The film's portrait of a harsh, hypocritical Court looks artlessly naive by comparison with the cynical inventions of Stroheim or Lubitsch. They may not have had all the experience of middle European high life that they claimed, yet they had a more genuine and ingrained sophistication which protected them against some of the traps Sternberg falls into.

Neither of these directors, however, could have surpassed *The Scarlet Empress's* grand finale, with its clamour of trumpets and bells (in an enthusiastic flurry of Sternberg's favourite lap-dissolves), Dietrich stomping about the palace in a hussar's outfit and *The Ride of the Valkyries* on the soundtrack. Here, in the film's most strikingly assembled sequence, mad Peter is quickly despatched behind a huge black cross, the horsemen charge up the stairs and into the throne-room, and Sternberg's camera wings up to a final exultant close-up of Catherine, now looking as pop-eyed as the Grand Duke himself. After this, it would be churlish to ask for more.

John Gillett, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1965

THE SCARLET EMPRESS

Director: Josef von Sternberg

Production Company: Paramount Productions

Presented by: Adolph Zukor

[Screenplay Arranged] By: Manuel Komroff

Director of Photography: Bert Glennon

Music Arrangers: John Leipold, W. Franke Harling

uncredited:

Executive Producer: Emanuel Cohen

Producer: Josef von Sternberg

Contributor to Script Construction: Elizabeth McGeary

Film Editor: Sam Winston

Art Director: Hans Dreier

Icons and Wall Paintings: Richard Kollorz

Statues: Peter Ballbusch

Costumes: Travis Banton

Titles/Effects: Gordon Jennings

Additional Music: Josef von Sternberg

Additional Music Arranger: Milan Roder

Recording Engineer: Harry Mills

Cast

Marlene Dietrich (*Sophia Frederica, later Catherine II*)

John Lodge (*Count Alexei*)

Sam Jaffe (*Grand Duke Peter*)

Louise Dresser (*Empress Elizabeth*)

C. Aubrey Smith (*Prince August*)

Gavin Gordon (*Gregory Orloff*)

Olive Tell (*Princess Johanna*)

Ruthelma Stevens (*Countess Elizabeth*)

Davison Clark (*Archimandrite Simeon Tevedovsky*)

Erville Alderson (*Chancellor Bestucheff*)

Philip G. Sleeman (*Count Lestocq*)

Marie Wells (*Marie Tshoglokof*)

Hans von Twardowski (*Ivan Shuvalov*)

Gerald Fielding (*Lieutenant Dmitri*)

Maria (*Sophia, as a child*)

uncredited:

Jameson Thomas (*Lieutenant Ovtsyn*)

Edward Van Sloan (*Herr Wagner*)

Jane Darwell (*Mademoiselle Cardell*)

Harry Woods (*doctor*)

John Davidson (*Marquis de la Chetardie*)

Kent Taylor (*Paul*)

Richard Alexander (*Count von Breummer*)

Eric Alden, James Burke (*guards*)

Belle Stoddard Johnstone (*1st aunt*)

Nadine Beresford (*2nd aunt*)

Eunice Moore (*3rd aunt*)

Petra McAllister (*4th aunt*)

James Marcus (*innkeeper*)

Thomas C. Blythe (*1st Narcissus*)

Clyde David (*2nd Narcissus*)

Agnes Steele, Barbara Sabichi, May Foster, Minnie Steele

(*Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting*)

Dina Smirnova, Anna Duncan, Patricia Patrick, Elaine St. Maur, Julanne

Johnston, Elinor Fair, Katherine Sabichi (*Catherine's ladies-in-waiting*)

Bruce Warren (*lackey*)

Hal Boyer (*2nd lackey*)

George Davis (*jester*)

Blanche Rose

John Beresford

USA 1934©

104 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Scarlet Empress

Wed 13 Jul 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun 24 Jul 13:20

The Piano

Thu 14 Jul 14:20; Sat 23 Jul 17:50; Sat 30 Jul 11:45

Mandabi (The Money Order)

Fri 15 Jul 20:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:10

Pandora's Box (Die Büchse der Pandora)

Sat 16 Jul 12:20 (with Peer Raben score); Sun 31 Jul 15:20 (with live piano accompaniment)

Blue Velvet

Sun 17 Jul 18:30; Fri 29 Jul 20:40

Rome Open City (Roma città aperta)

Mon 18 Jul 18:20; Wed 27 Jul 20:40

Matewan

Tue 19 Jul 18:00

His Girl Friday

Wed 20 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Thu 28 Jul 20:45

Manhunter

Thu 21 Jul 18:20; Sat 23 Jul 20:40

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Fri 22 Jul 18:30 and Mon 25 Jul 20:50 (with Edmund Meisel score)

Theorem (Teorema)

Tue 26 Jul 18:00

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