



RE-RELEASES

# The Queen of Spades

Described by Martin Scorsese as ‘A uniquely haunting film’ and once thought lost forever, *The Queen of Spades* is the perfect horror tale for a winter’s day. It’s 1806 and in St Petersburg, Captain Suvorin (Anton Walbrook) refuses to partake in the fashionable card game of faro, infamous for fortunes being won and lost on the turn of a card. Instead, he purchases an old book that unveils supposedly true stories about people who have sold their souls for power or wealth. He becomes fascinated by one story, which he believes is about the now elderly Countess Ranevskaya (Edith Evans). Desperate to learn the secrets of her wealth, he starts to court her ward, Lizavyeta (Yvonne Mitchell). But danger lies ahead. Thorold Dickinson (*Gaslight*) does a fine job creating a sinister, claustrophobic atmosphere and adopts a variety of innovative techniques to create a sense of foreboding. This new restoration is the perfect winter’s day antidote to those needing a post-Christmas chill.

**Justin Johnson, Lead Programmer**

It seems we’re finally witnessing some degree of posthumous restitution for the spectacular run of bad luck that afflicted one of Britain’s most talented directors. In a stop-start feature-directing career that was strikingly diverse and highly international, Thorold Dickinson (1903-1984) only managed to make nine films. One of his two best, *The Queen of Spades* (1949) is finally emerging on DVD in the UK, with extras including an endorsement from one of his most eminent admirers, Martin Scorsese, who calls it ‘one of the few real classics of supernatural cinema’. If not actually lost, it’s been a mislaid treasure of British cinema, a giddyingly dynamic ‘art film’ *avant la lettre* made on the margins of the British industry.

Based on Alexander Pushkin’s short story of 1833, *The Queen of Spades* was conceived as a film long before Dickinson got involved. The script was written by Arthur Boys and Rodney Ackland for the Russian-born producer Anatole de Grunwald. Originally Ackland was to direct, but when he left at short notice the whole production was in danger of closing down. The film’s Austrian-born star Anton Walbrook, who knew Dickinson’s gift for melodramatic intensity from their work together on the director’s other masterpiece *Gaslight* (1940), telephoned him on a Tuesday, asking him to start the following Monday. It was the kind of challenge Dickinson’s instincts responded to (on *Gaslight* he’d had three weeks’ notice).

Dickinson inherited promising ingredients. The Boys-Ackland script was already an ambitious piece of work, though De Grunwald and Dickinson undertook major rewriting. The sets were conceived by the theatrical designer Oliver Messel; the cinematographer was the great Otto Heller, with whom Dickinson had worked on his first film *The High Command*. Walbrook, between *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *La Ronde* (1950), was on superb form as the Faustian anti-hero Herman Suvorin, an impoverished, envious captain of engineers ready to sell his soul to procure the secret of winning at cards. The cast also included two notable screen debuts, from Edith Evans – marvellous as the aged Countess Ranevskaya, reputed holder of that secret – and Yvonne Mitchell, as her put-upon young companion Lizaveta Ivanovna, the victim of Suvorin’s scheming. De Grunwald, meanwhile, guaranteed unusual

Russian authenticity; he brought in the unforgettable rough-voiced Maroussia Dimitrevitch as the sensual gypsy singer in the officers' den where the gambling scenes take place, with Russian ballerina Violetta Elvin as the gypsy dancer. Later Dickinson would get Georges Auric to write the film's razor-sharp score.

Dickinson films this fable of thwarted ambition and intense desire with the pent-up force of years of frustration – and in a startlingly un-English, high Romantic style. The stiff upper lip, he quickly decided, didn't work for 1815 St Petersburg. 'We'll go all out for flamboyance,' he declared, 'and see what the result is.' It was hugely untimely – the film was booed at Cannes for so eschewing neo-realism – but 60 years on its attack, wit, economy, emotional intensity, inventive visual magnificence and auditory richness seem thrilling. Walbrook takes breath-taking chances as his character accelerates from resentful taciturnity to cunning manipulation to ecstatic overweening to total madness – and carries us with him all the way.

Dickinson, who began as an editor, shifts from scene to scene with intoxicating rapidity and impact, often with a drastic change in musical register (wild gypsy singing, an animated society waltz, a Russian Orthodox choir for the funeral, Gluck's opera *Orpheus and Eurydice*). His camera moves with rare fluidity and eloquence, and as in *Gaslight* the claustrophobically cluttered period detail in the compositions (with especially ingenious use of mirrors) is dramatically integrated, not mere decoration.

It's a headlong tale of pacts with dark forces in which evil really seems palpable. As one nobleman in the film declares: 'Evil is... a mighty force that is abroad in the world to take possession of men's souls – if they will allow it to.' Dickinson keeps it nicely ambiguous how far the story's supernatural elements are products of superstition and Herman's fevered imagination; but the vision is dark, poignant, even tragic. Watching this film makes it seem well-nigh tragic too that Dickinson only made one more feature in Britain, the cruelly underrated and equally unconventional *Secret People* (1951) with Serge Reggiani, Valentina Cortese and a young Audrey Hepburn. But at least *The Queen of Spades* can now take its rightful place in our newly enriched history of British cinema.

**Philip Horne, *Sight and Sound*, January 2010**

---

## THE QUEEN OF SPADES

*Directed by:* Thorold Dickinson  
*Associated British Picture Corporation Limited present Anatole De Grunwald's production*  
*Distributed by:* Associated British Pathé  
*Produced by:* Anatole De Grunwald  
*Associate Producer:* Jack Clayton  
*The Production Manager:* Isobel Pargiter  
*The Assistant Director:* John Gaudioz  
*The Continuity:* Marjorie Owens  
*The Screenplay by:* Rodney Ackland, Arthur Boys  
*The Story by:* Alexander Pushkin  
*The Director of Photography:* Otto Heller  
*The Camera Operators:* Gus Drisse, Val Stewart  
*The Film Editor:* Hazel Wilkinson  
*The Art Director:* William Kellner  
*The Settings and Costumes by:* Oliver Messel  
*The Assistant to Oliver Messel:* Ann Wemyss  
*The Set Dresser:* Philip Stockford  
*Draughtsman:* Ken Adam \*  
*The Wardrobe Master:* W. Smith  
*The Fabric Adviser:* Scot Slimon  
*The Furs by:* Deanfields  
*The Clothes Executed by:* Simmons  
*The Make-up:* Robert Clarke  
*The Hairdressers:* Frank Cross, Betty Cross  
*The Music by:* Georges Auric  
*The Musical Director:* Louis Levy  
*The Dances Arranged by:* David Paltenghi  
*The Sound Recordist:* Frank McNally  
*The Dubbing Recordist:* L.H. Shilton  
*The Dubbing Editor:* Audrey Bennett  
*Sound System:* RCA Sound System  
*The Period Adviser:* Dr Baird  
*Made at:* Welwyn Studios

## Cast

Anton Walbrook (*Herman*)  
Edith Evans (*the old countess*)  
Ronald Howard (*Prince Andrei*)  
Mary Jerrold (*old Varvarushka*)  
Yvonne Mitchell (*Lizaveta Ivanovna*)  
Anthony Dawson (*Fyodor*)  
Pauline Tennant (*young countess*)  
Miles Malleon (*Tchybukin*)  
Athene Seyler (*Princess Ivashin*)  
Michael Medwin (*Ilovaisky*)  
Maroussia Dimitrevitch (*gypsy singer*)  
Ivor Barnard (*bookseller*)  
Violetta Elvin (*gypsy dancer*)  
Jacqueline Clarke (*milliner's assistant*)  
Yusef Ramart (*countess's lover*)  
Valentine Dyll (*St Germain's messenger*)  
Gordon Begg (*General Volcholnikov*)  
Gibb McLaughlin (*bird seller*)  
Drusilla Wills (*countess's old servant*)  
Aubrey Mallalieu (*Fedya*)  
George Woodbridge (*Vassili*)  
Pauline Jameson (*Anyutka*)  
Hay Petrie (*Herman's servant*)  
Brown Derby (*the countess's footman*)  
Geoffrey Dunn (*hair dresser*)  
Ian Colin, Clement McCallin, John Howard, Aubrey Woods,  
David Paltenghi (*officers in gaming room*)

UK 1949

95 mins

\* Uncredited

A Studiocanal release

---

## NEW RELEASES

### Lynch/Oz

From Fri 2 Dec

### Bones and All

From Fri 2 Dec

### Tori and Lokita

From Fri 9 Dec

### Triangle of Sadness

From Fri 16 Dec

### Decision to Leave

From Fri 16 Dec

### The Banshees of Inisherin

From Fri 16 Dec

### She Said

From Sat 17 Dec

### Living

From Mon 19 Dec

### Corsage

From Tue 27 Dec

### Enys Men

From Fri 13 Jan (intro + Q&A with Mark Jenkin on Fri 13 Jan 18:00)

---

## RE-RELEASES

### Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)

From Fri 2 Dec

### The Queen of Spades

From Fri 23 Dec

### Rashomon

From Fri 6 Jan

---

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

---

## BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

---

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780