



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Queen of Spades

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 Dyllal (*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
Digital 4K

* Uncredited

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 giddily 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

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Queen of Spades

Sun 29 Oct 12:20; Tue 31 Oct 14:40; Wed 8 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by Josephine Botting, BFI National Archive Curator); Thu 16 Nov 20:40

Casablanca

Mon 30 Oct 14:30; Sat 18 Nov 11:40

French Cancan

Wed 1 Nov 14:30; Thu 9 Nov 20:30

Blood and Sand

Wed 1 Nov 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 18 Nov 20:30

Orlando

Thu 2 Nov 20:50; Fri 10 Nov 14:30; Wed 29 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by writer, curator and researcher Jenny Chamarette)

The Grand Budapest Hotel

Fri 3 Nov 20:50; Sat 11 Nov 20:40; Fri 24 Nov 18:15

The Age of Innocence

Sat 4 Nov 14:20; Mon 13 Nov 17:50; Tue 28 Nov 20:20

Blackmail

Sun 5 Nov 12:00

The Private Life of Henry VIII

Tue 7 Nov 20:50; Mon 27 Nov 14:40

Phantom Thread

Fri 10 Nov 10:30; Thu 23 Nov 20:30

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Sun 12 Nov 12:00

La Ronde

Tue 14 Nov 20:45; Sun 19 Nov 12:00; Thu 30 Nov 18:20

Black Orpheus Orfeu Negro

Wed 15 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by journalist and broadcaster Kevin Le Gendre)

Do the Right Thing

Fri 17 Nov 18:10

The Tempest

Sat 18 Nov 13:00; Wed 22 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by Claire Smith, BFI National Archive Senior Curator)

Pandora and the Flying Dutchman

Mon 20 Nov 20:30

Wings of Desire Der Himmel über Berlin

Tue 21 Nov 14:30; Sat 25 Nov 20:25

An American in Paris

Thu 23 Nov 18:00; Sun 26 Nov 11:30

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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

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