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LOUISE BROOKS IN "ROLLED STOCKINGS" (1927).

PABST AND LULU

by Louise Brooks

FRANK WEDEKIND'S PLAY *Pandora's Box* opens with a prologue. Out of a circus tent steps the Animal Tamer, carrying in his left hand a whip and in his right hand a loaded revolver. "Walk in," he says to the audience, "walk into my menagerie!"

The finest job of casting G. W. Pabst ever did was casting himself as the director, the Animal Tamer of his film adaptation of Wedekind's "tragedy of monsters." Never a sentimental trick did this whip hand permit the actors assembled to play his beasts. The revolver he shot straight into the heart of the audience.

As Wedekind wrote and produced *Pandora's Box*, it had been detested, banned and condemned from the 1890's. It was declared to be "immoral and inartistic." If, at that time when the sacred pleasures of the ruling class were comparatively private, a play exposing them had called out its dogs of law and censorship feeding on the scraps under the banquet table, how much more savage would be the attack upon a film faithful to Wedekind's text made in 1928 in Berlin, where the ruling class publicly flaunted its pleasures as a symbol of wealth and power. And since nobody truly knows what a director is doing till he is done, nobody connected with the film dreamed that Pabst was risking commercial failure with the story of an "immoral" prostitute who wasn't crazy about her work, surrounded by the "inartistic" ugliness of raw bestiality.

Only five years earlier the famous Danish actress

Asta Nielsen had condensed Wedekind's play into the moral prostitute film *Loulou*. There was no lesbianism, no incest. Loulou the man-eater devoured her sex victims—Dr. Goll, Schwarz and Schoen—and then dropped dead in an acute attack of indigestion. This kind of film, with Pabst improvements, was what audiences were prepared for. Set upon making their disillusionment inescapable, hoping to avoid even my duplication of the straight bob and bangs Nielsen had worn as Loulou, Mr. Pabst tested me with my hair curled. But after seeing the test he gave up this point and left me with my shiny black helmet, except for one curled sequence on the gambling ship.

Besides daring to film Wedekind's problem of abnormal psychology—"this fatal destiny which is the subject of the tragedy"; besides daring to show the prostitute as the victim; Mr. Pabst went on to the final damning immorality of making his Lulu as "sweetly innocent" as the flowers which adorned her costumes and filled the scenes of the play. "Lulu is not a real character," Wedekind said, "but the personification of primitive sexuality who inspires evil unaware. She plays a purely passive role." In the middle of the prologue, dressed in her boy's costume of Pierrot, she is *carried* by a stage hand before the Animal Tamer, who tells her, ". . . Be unaffected,

"PANDORA'S BOX": ALICE ROBERTS, LOUISE BROOKS.

and not pieced out with distorted, artificial folly, even if the critics praise you for it less wholly. And mind—all foolery and making faces, the childish simpleness of vice disgraces."

This was the Lulu, when the film was released, whom the critics praised not less wholly, but not at all. "Louise Brooks cannot act. She does not suffer. She does nothing." So far as they were concerned, Pabst had shot a blank. It was I who was struck down by my failure, although he had done everything possible to protect and strengthen me against this deadly blow. He never again allowed me to be publicly identified with the film after the night during production when we appeared as guests at the opening of an UFA film. Leaving the Gloria Palast, as he hurried me through a crowd of hostile fans, I heard a girl saying something loud and nasty. In the cab I began pounding his knee, insisting, "What did she say? What did she say?" until he translated: "That is the American girl who is playing our German Lulu!"

* * *

In the studio, with that special, ubiquitous sense penetrating minds and walls alike, Mr. Pabst put down all overt acts of contempt. Although I never complained, he substituted another for the assistant who woke me out of my dressing-room naps, beating the door, bellowing, "Fräulein Brooks! Come!" The subtler forms of my humiliation he assuaged with his own indifference to human regard. Using his strength I learned to block off painful impressions. Sitting on the set day after day, my darling maid Josephine, who had worked for Asta Nielsen and thought she was the greatest actress in the world, came to love me tenderly because I was the world's worst actress. For the same reason, the great actor Fritz Kortner never spoke to me at all. He, like everybody else on the production, thought I had cast some blinding spell over Mr. Pabst which allowed me to walk through my part. To them it was a sorry outcome of Pabst's search for Lulu, about which one of his assistants, Paul Falkenberg, said in 1955: "Preparation for *Pandora's Box* was quite a saga, because Pabst couldn't find a Lulu. He wasn't satisfied with any actress at hand and for months everybody connected with the production went around looking for a Lulu. I talked to girls on the street, on the subway, in railway stations—'Would you mind coming up to our office? I would like to present you to Mr. Pabst.' He looked all of them over dutifully and turned them all down. And eventually he picked Louise Brooks."

How Pabst determined that I was his unaffected Lulu with the childish simpleness of vice was part of the mysterious alliance that seemed to exist between us even before we met. He knew nothing more of me than an unimportant part he saw me play in the Howard Hawks film *A Girl in Every Port*. I had never heard of him, and knew nothing of his unsuccessful negotiations to borrow me from Paramount until I was called to the front office on the option day of my contract. Ben Schulberg told me that I could stay on at my old salary or quit. It was the time of the switch-over to talkies and studios were cutting actors' salaries just for the hell of it. And, just for the hell of it, I quit. Then he told me about the Pabst offer, which I was now free to accept. I said I would accept it and he sent off a cable to Pabst. All this took about ten minutes and left Schulberg somewhat dazed by my composure and quick decision.

But if I had not acted at once I would have lost the part of Lulu. At that very hour in Berlin Marlene Dietrich was waiting with Pabst in his office. "~~Dietrich was too old and too~~ obvious—one sexy look and the picture would become a burlesque. But I gave her a deadline and the contract was about to be signed when Paramount cabled saying I could have Louise Brooks." It must be remembered that Pabst was speaking about the pre-von Sternberg Dietrich. She was the Dietrich of *I Kiss Your Hand, Madame*, a film in which,

"PANDORA'S BOX". BACK STAGE IN THE THEATRE SEQUENCE: MISS BROOKS, HER MAID AND THE MAKE UP MAN.

caparisoned variously in beads, brocade, ostrich feathers, chiffon ruffles and white rabbit fur, she galloped from one lascivious stare to another. Years after another trick of fate had made her a top star—for Sternberg's biographer Herman Weinberg told me that it was only because Brigitte Helm was not available that he looked further and found Dietrich for *The Blue Angel*—to Travis Banton, the Paramount dress designer who transformed her spangles and feathers into glittering, shadowed beauty, she said: "Imagine Pabst choosing Louise Brooks for Lulu when he could have had me!"

So it is that my playing of the tragic Lulu with no sense of sin remains generally unacceptable to this day. Three years ago, after seeing *Pandora's Box* at Eastman House, a priest said to me, "How did you feel? playing—*that girl*!" "Feel? I felt fine! It all seemed perfectly normal to me." Seeing him start with distaste and disbelief, and unwilling to be mistaken for one of those women who like to shock priests with sensational confessions, I went on to prove the truth of Lulu's world by my own experience in the 1925 *Follies*, when my best friend was a lesbian and I knew two millionaire publishers, much like Schoen in the film, who backed shows to keep themselves well supplied with Lulus. But the priest rejected my reality exactly as Berlin had rejected its reality when we made *Lulu* and sex was the business of the town.

At the Eden Hotel where I lived the café bar was lined with the better priced trollops. The economy girls walked the street outside. On the corner stood the girls in boots advertising flagellation. Actors' agents pimped for the ladies in luxury apartments in the Bavarian Quarter. Racetrack touts at the Hoppegarten arranged orgies for groups of sportsmen. The night club Eldorado displayed an enticing line of homosexuals dressed as women. At the Maly there was a choice of feminine or collar-and-tie lesbians. Collective lust roared unashamed at the theatre. In the revue *Chocolate Kiddies*, when Josephine Baker appeared naked except for a girdle of bananas, it was precisely as Lulu's stage entrance was described. "They rage there as in a menagerie when the meat appears at the cage."

* * *

I revered Pabst for his truthful picture of this world of pleasure which let me play Lulu naturally. The rest of the cast were tempted to rebellion. And perhaps that was his most brilliant directorial achievement—getting a group of actors to play characters without "sympathy", whose only motivation was sexual gratification. Fritz Kortner as Schoen wanted to be the victim. Franz Lederer as the incestuous son Alva Schoen wanted to be adorable. Carl Goetz wanted to get laughs playing the old pimp Schigolch. Alice Roberts, the Belgian actress who played the screen's first lesbian, the Countess Geschwitz, was prepared to go no farther than repression in mannish suits.

Her first day's work was in the wedding sequence. She came on the set looking chic in her Paris evening dress and aristocratically self-possessed. Then Mr. Pabst began explaining the action of the scene in which she was to dance the tango with me. Suddenly she understood that she was to touch, to embrace, to make love to another woman. Her blue eyes bulged and her hands trembled. Anticipating the moment of explosion, Mr. Pabst, who proscribed unscripted emotional outbursts, caught her arm and sped her away out of sight

behind the set. A half hour later when they returned, he was hissing soothingly to her in French and she was smiling like the star of the picture . . . which she was in all her scenes with me. I was just there obstructing the view. In both two-shots and her close-ups photographed over my shoulder she cheated her look past me to Mr. Pabst making love to her off camera. Out of the funny complexity of this design Mr. Pabst extracted his tense portrait of sterile lesbian passion and Madame Roberts satisfactorily preserved her reputation. At the time, her conduct struck me as silly. The fact that the public could believe an actress's private life to be like one role in one film did not come home to me till last year when I was visited by a French boy. Explaining why the young people in Paris loved *Lulu*, he put an uneasy thought in my mind. "You talk as if I were a lesbian in real life," I said. "But of course!" he answered in a way that made me laugh to realise I had been living in cinematic perversion for thirty-five years.

Pabst was a short man, broad shouldered and thick chested, looking heavy and wilful in repose. But in action his legs carried him on wings which matched the swiftness of his mind. He always came on the set, fresh as a March wind, going directly to the camera to check the set-up, after which he turned to his cameraman Guenther Krampf, who was the only person on the film to whom he gave a complete account of the scene's action and meaning. Never conducting group discussions with his actors, he then took each separately to be told what he must know about the scene. To Pabst, the carry-over of the acting technique of the theatre, which froze in advance every word, every move, every emotion, was death to realism in films. He wanted the shocks of life which released unpredictable emotions. Proust wrote: "Our life is at every moment before us like a stranger in the night, and which of us knows what point he will reach on the morrow?" To prevent actors from plotting every point they would make on the morrow, Pabst never quite shot the scenes they prepared for.

On the day we shot Lulu's murder of Schoen, Fritz Kortner came on the set with his death worked out to the last facial contortion; with even his blood, the chocolate syrup which would ooze from his mouth, carefully tested for sweetness lest it might surprise an unrehearsed reaction. Death scenes are dearer than life to the actor, and Kortner's, spectacularly coloured with years of theatrical dying, went unquestioned during rehearsal. Pabst left it to the mechanics of each shot to alter Kortner's performance. The smoke from the firing of the revolver became of first importance, or the exact moment when Kortner pulled my dress off my shoulder, or the photographic consistency of the chocolate syrup—all such technical irritations broke a series of prepared emotions into unhinged fragments of reality.

WITH FRANZ LEDERER IN "PANDORA'S BOX".

Dialogue was set by Pabst while he watched the actors during rehearsal. In an effort to be funny, old actors and directors have spread the false belief that any clownish thing coming to mind could be said in front of the camera in silent films. They forget the title writer had to match his work to the actors' speech. I remember late one night wandering into Ralph Spence's suite in the Beverly Wilshire, where he sat gloomily amidst cans of film, cartons of stale Chinese food and empty whisky bottles. He was trying to fix up an unfunny Beery and Hatton comedy and no comic line he invented would fit the lip action. Silent film fans were excellent lip readers and often complained at the box-office about the cowboy cussing furiously trying to mount his horse. Besides which, directors like Pabst used exact dialogue to isolate and intensify an emotion. When Lulu was looking down at the dead Schoen, he gave me the line, "Das Blut!" Not the murder of my husband but the sight of the blood determined the expression on my face.

* * *

That I was a dancer, and Pabst essentially a choreographer in his direction, came as a wonderful surprise to both of us on the first day of shooting *Pandora's Box*. The expensive English translation of the script which I had thrown unopened on the floor by my chair, had already been retrieved by an outraged assistant and banished with Mr. Pabst's laughter. Consequently I did not know that Lulu was a professional dancer trained in Paris—"Gipsy, oriental, skirt dance", or that dancing was her mode of expression—"In my despair I dance the Can-Can!" On the afternoon of that first day Pabst said to me, "In this scene Schigolch rehearses you in a dance number." After marking out a small space and giving me a fast tempo, he looked at me curiously. "You can make up some little steps here—can't you?" I nodded yes and he walked away. It was a typical instance of his care in protecting actors against the blight of failure. If I had been able to do nothing more than the skippity-hops of Asta Nielsen his curious look would never have been amplified to regret, although the intensity of his concern was revealed by his delight when the scene was finished. As I was leaving the set he caught me in his arms, shaking me and laughing as if I had played a joke on him. "But you are a professional dancer!" It was the moment when he realised all his intuitions about me were right. He felt as if he had created me. I was his Lulu! The bouquet of roses he gave me on my arrival at the Station am Zoo was my first and last experience of the deference he applied to the other actors. From that moment I was firmly put through my tricks with no fish thrown in for a good performance.

Four days later I was less wonderfully surprised when he also subjected my private life to his direction. His delight in Lulu's character belonged exclusively to the film. Off the screen my dancing days came to an end when a friend of mine from Washington, with whom I had been investigating Berlin's night life till three every morning, left for Paris. On the set the next day I had just accepted an invitation to an "Artists' Ball—Wow!" when Mr. Pabst's quiet, penetrating voice sounded behind me. "Pretzfelder! Loueees does not go out any more at night." Pretzfelder melted away as I began to howl in protest, "But Mr. Pabst, I have always gone out at night when I worked! I can catch up on my sleep between

LEFT: WELCOME TO BERLIN, 1928. PABST (IN SPECTACLES) IS TO THE RIGHT OF MISS BROOKS. RIGHT: LOUISE BROOKS, 1964.

scenes here at the studio. I always have!" He didn't hear me because he was busy laying down the law to Josephine, who thereafter, when the day's work was done, returned his Eve to the Eden where I was bathed, fed and put to bed till called for next morning at seven. Cross and restless, I was left to fall asleep listening to the complaints of the other poor caged beasts across Stresemann-Strasse in the Zoologischer Garten.

In the matter of my costumes for the picture I put up a better fight, although I never won a decision. My best punches fanned the air because Pabst had always slipped into another position. Arriving in Berlin on Sunday and starting the picture on the following Wednesday, I found he had selected my first costume, leaving me nothing to do but stand still for a final fitting. This I let pass as an expedient, never suspecting it would be the same with everything else I put on or took off, from an ermine coat to my girdle. Not only was it unheard of to allow an actress no part in choosing her clothes, but I had also been disgustingly spoiled by my directors at Paramount. I had played a manicurist in 500 dollar beaded evening dresses; a salesgirl in 300 dollar black satin afternoon dresses; and a schoolgirl in 250 dollar tailored suits. (It tickles me today when people see these old pictures and wonder why I look so well and the other girls such frumps.)

With this gross over-confidence in my rights and power, I defied Mr. Pabst at first with arrogance. The morning of the sequence in which I was to go from my bath into a love scene with Franz Lederer, I came on the set wrapped in a gorgeous negligée of painted yellow silk. Carrying the peignoir I refused to wear, Josephine approached Mr. Pabst to receive the lash. Hers was the responsibility for seeing that I obeyed his orders, and he answered her excuses with a stern rebuke. Then he turned to me. "Loueees, you must wear the peignoir!" "Why? I hate that big old woolly white bathrobe!" "Because," he said, "the audience must know you are naked beneath it." Stunned by such a reasonable argument, without another word I retired with Josephine to the bathroom set and changed into the peignoir.

Not to be trapped in this manner again, when I objected to the train of my wedding dress being "tied on like an apron" and he explained that it had to be easily discarded because I could not play a long, frantic sequence tripping over my train, I answered that I did not give a damn, tore off the train and went into an elaborate tantrum. The worst audience I ever had, Mr. Pabst instructed the dress designer to have the pieces sewn together again and left the fitting room. My final defeat, crying real tears, came at the end of the picture when he went through my trunks to select a dress to be "aged" for Lulu's murder as a streetwalker in the arms of Jack the Ripper. With his instinctive understanding of my tastes, he decided on the blouse and skirt of my very favourite suit. I was anguished. "Why can't you *buy* some cheap little dress to be ruined? Why does it have to be *my* dress?" To these questions I got no answer till the next morning, when my once lovely clothes were returned to me in the studio dressing-room. They were torn and foul with grease stains. Not some indifferent rags from the wardrobe department, but my own suit which only last Sunday I had worn to lunch at the Adlon! Josephine hooked up my skirt, I slipped the blouse over my head and went on the set feeling as hopelessly defiled as my clothes.

Dancing for two years with Ruth St.Denis and Ted Shawn had taught me much about the magic worked with authentic costuming. Their most popular duet, *Tillers of the Soil*, was costumed in potato sacking. In her *Flower Arrangement*, Miss Ruth's magnificent Japanese robes did most of the dancing. But the next three years of uncontrolled extravagance in films had so corrupted my judgment that I did not realise until I saw *Pandora's Box* in 1956 how marvellously Mr. Pabst's perfect costume sense symbolised Lulu's character and her destruction. There is not a single spot of blood on the pure white bridal satin in which she kills her husband. Making love to her wearing the clean white peignoir, Alva asks, "Do you love me, Lulu?" "I? Never a soul!" It is in the worn and filthy garments of the streetwalker that she feels passion for the first time—comes to life so that she may die. When she picks up Jack the Ripper on the foggy London street and he tells her he has no money to pay her, she says, "Never mind, I like you." It is Christmas Eve and she is about to receive the gift which has been her dream since childhood. Death by a sexual maniac.

A complete checklist of Louise Brooks' films, compiled for us by Miss Brooks herself, is published simultaneously with this article in the July issue of THE MONTHLY FILM BULLETIN.