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'The Adventures of Prince Achmed'

A rare gem of animation history

DISNEY'S *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) is commonly called the first animated feature. But 11 years before its release, at the age of 23, Berlin-born avant-gardist Charlotte Reiniger designed an exquisite "silhouette film" that has scarcely been seen for decades. Drawn from parts of the original Persian-Indian-Arabian fable compendium *A Thousand and One Nights* (a.k.a. *The Arabian Nights*), *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* deploys elaborate cut-outs, early multiplane camerawork, and experiments with wax and sand to produce an enchanting visual feast. An evil sorcerer creates a flying

horse to spirit away the Baghdad Caliph's only son. Prince Achmed first ends up "east of the sun, west of the moon" in the "magic islands of Waq-Waq," where he meets Princess Peri Baru and does a little abducting of his own. The duo land next in China, where new perils—an ogress, a mountain of fire, etc.—await, along with an ally in the form of Aladdin and his magic lamp.

The original negative was destroyed in World War II. The version screened Saturday night at the Victoria by Reel Women and the Cinema Preservation Society was beautifully restored and tinted from a "new" British Film Institute negative. Apart from some dated racist overtones, this 60-minute rediscovery is a total delight. The gorgeous, fast-moving images suggest Georges Méliès's early fantastical shorts (which Reiniger cited as an influence) as well as Ja-

vanese shadow-puppetry, Erte's art deco illustrations, and Bay Area "shadowmeister" Larry Reed's more recent stage experiments. The show features the live performance of an original score for small ensemble by D.L. Sebastian; it's in perfect synch with the film's lush, sensual fantasia. *Sat/31, 7:30 p.m. Victoria Theatre, 2961 16th St., S.F. \$8. (415) 665-5682. (Dennis Harvey)*

We also recommend: *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery, Brassed Off, Breakdown, Broken English, Children of the Revolution, Hollow Reed, A Mongolian Tale, Night Falls on Manhattan, Nothing Personal, Romy and Michele's High School Reunion, Warriors of Virtue.*



Shadow play: *Silhouettes produce an enchanting visual feast in The Adventures of Prince Achmed (1926).*