

Document Citation

Title	Look back in wonder
Author(s)	Kelly Vance
Source	<i>East Bay Express</i>
Date	1985 Sep 13
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Die büchse der Pandora (Pandora's box), Pabst, Georg Wilhelm, 1929

Look Back in Wonder

QUEEN KELLY. Directed and written by Erich von Stroheim, from his short story "The Swamp." Photographed by Gordon Pollock and Paul Ivano. Produced by Joseph Kennedy/Gloria Swanson Productions. With Swanson, Walter Byron, Seena Owen, Wilhelm von Brincken, Sylvia Ashton, and Tully Marshall. **PANDORA'S BOX.** Directed by G.W. Pabst. Written by Ladislaus Vajda, from the play by Frank Wedekind. With Louise Brooks, Fritz Kortner, Franz Lederer, Gustav Diessl, Alice Roberts, and Carl Goetz. At the UC Theater, Wednesday, September 18.

By Kelly Vance

Of all the films re-released as "directors' cuts" and "rediscoveries" in the past few years, Erich von Stroheim's *Queen Kelly* is the most deserving of a film buff's fanfare.

MOVIES

Not only was it truly "lost" to theatrical audiences for more than fifty years, it also provides, even in its truncated, unfinished form, a further clue to the largely unrealized destiny of Erich von Stroheim, one of the silent era's richest talents and arguably the most perplexing auteur in American film history.

Begun in 1928 with the financial backing of Joseph Kennedy for his protegee Gloria Swanson who was at the peak of her silent film career, *Queen Kelly* was an extravagant project even for the director who had already made *Greed* and *The Wedding March*. The story, originally entitled "The Swamp" when Stroheim wrote it, traces the life and times of Patricia Kelly, who progresses from a convent schoolgirl to madam of an East African brothel and thence to queen of the Ruritanian kingdom in which we first meet her. The catalyst for this chemical change, as is typical for



"Pandora's Box"

Stroheim, is an amiably hedonistic love affair between Patricia (nicknamed Kitty) and the lusty Prince "Wild Wolfram" (Walter Byron), a rakehell officer with all the usual Stroheim accoutrements, including a built-in leer which converts easily to a sincere smile, a splendid uniform dripping brass and leather, and a proclivity for kinky sex with a large side order of fetishism.

The famous meet-cute of Kitty and Wolfram is pure Stroheim. While on morning maneuvers with his mounted troopers, Wolfram,

hung over from a night of debauchery and eager to escape the wrath of his cousin and fiancée Queen Helene (played one notch below hysteria by Seena Owen), pauses along the road to admire a group of teenage girls being conducted to their convent by nuns. Wolfram is particularly taken by Kitty, whose loss of composure is considerably heightened when her knickers drop to her feet in front of the prince, his men, and her classmates. Her Irish temper flares, and Wolfram is hooked for life. Later, the prince and his aide sneak into the convent at midnight, start a fire as a diversion, and kidnap the not entirely unwilling Kitty to the royal palace where she is wine and dined, and eventually driven out with a whip by the jealous queen who discovers the young woman in Wolfram's chambers. Kitty finds herself, after a suicide attempt in the river, back at the convent a sadder but wiser girl, whereupon the plot takes a dizzying turn and deposits her in the seedy section of Dar es Salaam at a bordello owned by her ailing aunt. Coerced by her aunt's dying wish that she marry a haggard, drooling old lecher, Kitty nevertheless makes the best of a smelly situation and evidently becomes the pre-

miere madam in Africa.

"Evidently," because at that point the movie trails off into title cards and bits of scenario. After shooting about one-third of the film, Stroheim had his financial lifeline disconnected by Kennedy, for reasons that are open to conjecture. Reportedly the negatives were given to Gloria Swanson as a gift and remained in her possession and that of her estate until this re-release. The footage already shot was stitched together into an aborted release print which Stroheim disowned, and the reputation of *Queen Kelly* as a "lost classic" began to grow. Film critic and historian Herman G. Weinberg subsequently carried out a search-and-preserve mission for missing footage, and through his efforts most of the produced ten reels (of the thirty planned by Stroheim) were either found intact or utilized as stills to make up this re-release.

I wish Stroheim could have finished this one. The prologue section before Kitty's arrival in Dar es Salaam contains enough grandiloquent flourishes to put *Queen Kelly* in a class with *Foolish Wives* and *The Merry Widow*, if not into the rarefied heights of *Greed*. Stroheim's mania for detail is nicely balanced by a cynical love story which nonetheless comes around to the Hollywood norm, for all its perversity. Stroheim's favorite themes and objects are all on display: spit and polish military hardware, sadomasochistic toys, whorehouses, and an overlay of crucifixes, shrines, and other Roman Catholic symbols. The African section looks to be the ultimate Stroheim comment on sexual hypocrisy, placed as it is in juxtaposition to the scenes at the convent. One can only guess how the story line was received by the elder Kennedy.

In retrospect, *Queen Kelly* does more for the present-day reputation of Gloria Swanson than it does for Stroheim. Her performance is as sweet and appealing as anything she ever did, with the sexual innuendo bubbling over at each provocation until she reaches her full glory (shame?) as the triumphantly sardonic madam. Byron stands solidly in the dashing mold of John Gilbert in his uniform, a romantic foil for Kitty's repressed passions. Along with Mae Murray in *The Merry Widow*, Swanson is Stroheim's finest heroine. That her role was buried along with the movie since 1928 is especially ironic considering Billy Wilder's re-teaming

of Swanson and Stroheim as demented ex-movie queen Norma Desmond and her former director/husband turned servant in 1950's *Sunset Boulevard*. The incompleteness of *Queen Kelly* compares to the brilliant-unfinished ideas of Stroheim's career, in which the most pregnant images are doomed to forever carry an asterisk.

The recent death of actress Louise Brooks makes the co-billing of G.W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* sadly appropriate. The image of Brooks's face, an intriguing combination of sensuality and perkiness framed in her signature "helmet" hairstyle, is one of the best-known in the history of cinema. *Pandora's Box* is where the image flowered.

Made the same year as *Queen Kelly*, 1928, Pabst's film deals with a woman whose mind is already made up as the action begins. As the "kept woman" actress whose beauty seemingly drives men mad, Brooks's Lulu is blithely unrepentant, the perfect mixture of flapper and schoolgirl at play in the frantically liberated atmosphere of Jazz Age Germany. While the respectable bourgeois men surrounding her destroy themselves trying to possess her, her true friends are a group of outcasts: a dwarf, a side-show strong man, a dissolute heir, and a lesbian for whom Lulu shows an ingratifyingly natural affection. The scenes shift through a torrent of melodrama from Berlin to Paris and an unlikely encounter with Jack the Ripper, but Lulu maintains her will to live exactly as she pleases, an attitude which coincides with Brooks's own philosophy as expressed in her book *Lulu in Hollywood*.

Like Stroheim, Brooks was a maverick who was unappreciated and underemployed by the powers which ran the film industry. The fact that she was a woman undoubtedly tinged her outlook with the skepticism of the tossed-aside beauty queen who once conquered the world on her own terms and now refuses to play by the rules anymore. *Pandora's Box*, with Pabst's *Diary of a Lost Girl*, is Brooks's best work and Pabst's as well. The overt expressionism of the era is kept to a minimum in favor of the expressiveness of Lulu's features. As a youthful inducement to be creatively bad, with as much style as possible, it has few equals in any decade, and in the context of the 1920's the film, and the actress, are incredibly liberating.