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Film Notes
Restored Treasures of German
Expressionist Cinema from the
Munich Film Archives

Pacific Film Archive
University Art Museum
Berkeley

Pandora's Box (Die Buechse der
Pandora) (1928)

Directed by G.W. Pabst

Produced by Nero Film

Written by Ladislaus Vajda,
adapted from two plays by
Frank Wedekind, "Erdgeist" and
"Die Buechse der Pandora"

Photographed by Guenther
Krampf

Art Direction by Andrei
Andreiev and Gottlieb Hesch

With Louise Brooks, Fritz
Kortner, Francis Lederer, Carl
Goetz, Gustav Diessel, Alice
Roberts, Daisy D'Ora, Albert
Raschig, Siegfried Arno

131 mins, silent

In this unique series, PFA audiences will see these German classics for the first time as they were meant to be seen, thanks to the work of Enno Patalas, Director of the Munich Film Archives, who reconstructed and restored each film to a form close to that of the original release print.

In The Haunted Screen, Lotte Eisner attributes the artistic genius of G.W. Pabst in Pandora's Box in large part to "the miracle of Louise Brooks":

"...in Pandora's Box and Diary of a Lost Girl we have the miracle of Louise Brooks. Her gifts of profound intuition may seem purely passive to an inexperienced audience, yet she succeeded in stimulating an otherwise unequal director's talent to the extreme. Pabst's remarkable evolution must thus be seen as an encounter with an actress who needed no directing, but could move across the screen causing the work of art to be born by her mere presence. Louise Brooks, always enigmatically impassive, overwhelmingly exists throughout these two films. We now know that Louise Brooks is a remarkable actress endowed with uncommon intelligence, and not merely a dazzlingly beautiful woman...."

Louise Brooks, however, writes of the genius of Pabst: "...the truly greatest director of people, Pabst, in every vital scene, holds the camera on the actor, on his eyes. 'The audience must see it in the actors' eyes.' ...Pabst's genius lay in getting to the heart of a person, banishing fear and releasing the clean impact of personality that jolts an audience to life...." (in a letter to Pauline Kael, 1962)

In her article, "Pabst and Lulu," Brooks tells this story:

"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 1890s. 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...."

"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...."

"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!'.

"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....

"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'....

"At the Eden Hotel where I lived the cafe 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...." --in Sight and Sound, Summer 1965.

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