

THE MYTH OF LULU (and the men who created it)

By ELISA LEONELLI (c) 1993

DIE BÜCHSE DER PANDORA (PANDORA'S BOX, 1929), the silent masterpiece by W. G. PABST (1885-1967), butchered by censors and considered a failure by contemporaries, was thankfully rediscovered by critics in the 60s; as was its luminous star, American actress LOUISE BROOKS. The myth of LULU was originally created by German playwright FRANK WEDEKIND (1864-1918) in two plays: ERDGEIST (EARTH SPIRIT, 1895) and DIE BÜCHSE DER PANDORA (PANDORA'S BOX 1905), which were defined "sex tragedies" and were also subjected to censorship. Austrian composer ALBAN BERG (1885-1935), a brilliant disciple of Schönberg, wrote LULU, an opera based on the same material, which remained incomplete upon his death in 1935. RONALD CHASE, a San Francisco artist, undertook a modern retelling of the Lulu saga in the 70s with an experimental film that used elements of silent cinema and the music by Berg. It was around this time that Louise Brooks reached a peak of recognition, with the article by Kenneth Tynan "The Girl in the Black Helmet" appearing in the New Yorker in June 1979. That same year the Berg opera was first performed in its entirety at the Paris Opera (directed by Pierre Boulez with Teresa Stratas as Lulu, and the incomplete third act reworked by Friedrich Cerha). In 1989 Barry Paris' biography "LOUISE BROOKS" was published, in 1988 a recently discovered Wedekind play, LULU, was performed and videotaped in Hamburg, in 1991 it was Louise Brooks' face that Mary Ann Doane put on the cover of her book of essays "FEMME FATALES".

As the story of Lulu continues to unfold on stages and movie screens around the world, while books and articles are written on the subject, using the Pabst film as a point of departure, we'll try to examine why the archetypical myth of the sexual siren, that brings ruin upon man, remains a male fantasy of such enduring power.

G.W. Pabst did not treat PANDORA'S BOX as a period piece, he set the film in contemporary Berlin, at the times of the Weimar Republic, when the capital city was in full decadent swing, and filled it with a pervasive atmosphere of modernity. The elegance of the clothes, the luxury of the settings, the lively social parties, the bustling theatre life, paint a portrait of a rich and sophisticated bourgeoisie at the height of its power. It is in this milieu that a poor girl raised in the streets like Lulu is intent on raising her social status, as a matter of survival. She has obtained the favors of a wealthy patron, newspaper publisher Dr. Ludwig Schön, but she's still loyal to her old lover Schigolch, who remains like a father figure throughout. This is visually expressed by Lulu frequently sitting on his lap (as she will do with Jack the Ripper in the end) and her childish joy while dancing at the tune of his harmonica in an early scene. Lulu is anxious to express her creative talents and obtain some measure of fame and success, that's why she is planning a trapeze act with Rodrigo Quast, a strongman acrobat. She is not pleased that Schön is about to marry a high society girl, the innocent blond daughter of the Prime Minister; not because she's jealous, she knows that his heart belongs to her, but because she wishes to be socially acceptable enough to become the bride herself. As Schön explains to his son Alwa, who asks why: "Men don't marry such women, it would be suicide". But Schön still wants to help his lover, so he suggests that Alwa put Lulu in his new musical review; she will look sensational in those elegant avant-garde costumes, and his newspapers will insure the success of the show. Earlier Lulu had come waltzing into Schön's house, even though he had warned her to stay away, as not to feed rumors of their affair that could ruin his marriage plans. She exhibited an easy friendship with Alwa, a dashing young composer, and Countess Augusta Geschwitz, a talented costume designer, both secretly in love with her, but unable to admit it openly, one because Lulu was his father's lover, the other because she

was afraid to reveal her lesbian tendencies. They were contemporaries, young people like herself, with hopes and optimism to create something new and exciting in their artistic careers, so Lulu wished to be accepted as an equal in this world, and she succeeded. In the next scene we're backstage, while she's getting dressed in a feathered tiara for the next number, people are scurrying about every which way, the stage manager is comically frantic; Schön has committed the unforgivable faux-pas of bringing his fiancée to see the show, and Lulu, after a cross exchange of glances, throws a temper tantrum, consistent with the childish behavior expected of kept women in those days. She refuses to go on and Schön is summoned to calm the temperamental star. As they argue in the dressing room, Schön is overwhelmed by his desire for the alluring young woman, just as his son and his fiancée open the door and witness the lovers' passionate embrace. Lulu flashes a satisfied wicked smile. It is the wedding party we witness next, an elegant social gathering with servants pouring champagne, a radiant Lulu dressed in white makes sure that her old friends Schigolch and Rodrigo are comfortable; as they laugh and drink together in the bedroom, Schön enters and perceives social and sexual improprieties that are not there; insanely jealous of his wife, he takes a gun and throws out the intruders, he's a man obsessed, facing his own demons; he faults the woman for his troubles, wants her to kill herself and put an end to his misery. Lulu struggles with the gun and pulls the trigger in such an understated way that the audience is barely aware of what happened, until we see Schön collapse, after a last desperate embrace, in an complex interplay of mirror images and a symbolic statue of tragedy. Alwa, who was about to leave for a long trip, unable to live in the same house with Lulu as his father's wife, watches in horror his death. "Watch out for this woman, you're next", is his father's last warning. During the trial, after the lawyer for the defense has claimed Lulu's innocence (he's also smitten by her beauty, as she smiles seductively behind a black veil), the prosecutor uses the Pandora's myth as his argument to prove guilt, a distinctly illegal device to offer a dramatic explanation of the reason why woman is the ruin of man. Zeus created women out of revenge against Prometheus who cared too much for men; he made a beautiful maiden endowed with all the gifts (Pandora means 'the gift of all') and gave her to Epimetheus, who lived among men

and accepted her against his brother's advice. Zeus had also given Pandora an insatiable curiosity and a sealed jar that she was forbidden to open; but one day she could not resist looking inside and out came all the evils: Greed, Vanity, Slander, Envy, that were therefore unleashed upon mankind; except Hope, that remained inside, when a horrified Pandora quickly closed the lid. After Lulu is sentenced to five years in jail for manslaughter, a commotion orchestrated by Geschwitz allows her to escape. She returns to her dead husband's house, frivolously leafs through a fashion magazine and takes a bath. It is here that Alwa finds her and is shocked by the woman's indifference to the tragedy that took place in those rooms; but he soon succumbs to his desire for her and they escape together on the night train to Paris. Another passenger, Casti-Piani, recognizes the fugitive, blackmails the pair, then suggest a discreet place where they can hide. We cut to three months later, when Geschwitz joins her old friends on a gambling ship; while Alwa is losing money at the tables, Lulu is besieged by vultures, everyone wants to profit from her; Casti-Piani has sold her to the owner of an Egyptian bordello for rich Europeans, after convincing him with photographs of the beautiful model, and Rodrigo demands money to get married to his fiancée. Lulu is desperate to escape, begs Schigolch to help her out, and together they trick Rodrigo and Geschwitz to sleep together in order to get them off her back; it is a cruel ploy, because the man is a brute and the woman a lesbian repulsed by men's sexual advances. It is probably the singularly most despicable act Lulu commits, but it's once again dictated by the necessity to survive. As police board the ship, Lulu changes clothes with a sailor and escapes on a boat with Alwa and Schigolch. We find them next in a cold London attic, poor and hungry; Alwa is too depressed to do anything, Schigolch only thinks about whiskey; it is up to Lulu to go out in the streets and sell her body for a piece of bread. Meanwhile we have met Jack, a lonely man who had found compassion in the eyes of a young woman collecting money for the Salvation Army on Christmas Eve. In the foggy streets it's Jack the Ripper that Lulu runs into and takes home. Even the brutal murderer of women is momentarily fascinated by the beauty and innocence of Lulu, he drops the knife, she sits in his lap for an embrace, it's not about money, she likes him; but when the woman is no longer looking at his

face, the temptation to grab the kitchen knife is too strong to resist. The film ends with another understated murder: Lulu's hand drops lifeless.

Pabst's interpretation of the Lulu myth differs substantially from Wedekind's original plays, not only because of a difference in artistic sensibility and historical context, but also because of the specific nature of silent film; the director believed that the image was the most powerful element in films, therefore kept the use of words to a minimum, with a spare use of intertitles. He accentuated the contrast between light and dark, exploiting to its maximum effect the properties of black and white film, used titled camera angles, frequent close-ups, a fast cutting rate; he orchestrated complex scenes with several people and elements intersecting within the frame. Some critics have called PANDORA'S BOX the apotheosis of silent cinema, the last masterful and sophisticated expression of an art soon to be lost with the advent of sound films. Pabst had to take into consideration the fact that the story was familiar to the German public, especially since Asta Nielsen had played Lulu only five years before in a film directed by Leopold Jesser, ERDGEIST (*Lou Lou*, 1923). He was acutely aware that the success of his film hinged upon finding an actress that could visually embody the innocently alluring quality of the Lulu of his dreams, a disarmingly immoral young woman, scarcely aware of the implications of her action, a childishly seductive gay spirit, indifferent to the chaos her intoxicating presence created. He bypassed Greta Garbo, who had starred in his previous film, DIE FREUDLOSE GASSE (*The Joyless Street*, 1925), purposefully avoided Marlene Dietrich, because of her knowing seductiveness, and found his Lulu in a 21-year-old American actress, Louise Brooks. His instincts turned out to be even more right than he had imagined; Louise had been trained as a dancer, and this was an invaluable quality for the light, airy and supple appearance of Lulu; director and star got along famously on the set, as far as being in tune about the essence of the character. Off the set, Brooks exhibited a carefree behavior that annoyed the director, by staying out all night partying with her lover in the lively clubs of gay Berlin; not only because Pabst was concerned about the quality of her performance the next day, but also because he was smitten by the woman's charm, as he lovingly photographed her face surrounded by the

bluntly cut casket of black hair and her slender body slithering in shimmering low-cut short dresses. Pabst did keep the passionate sexuality as the brutal violence very subdued, this was not a play of screams and vulgar displays, as in other stagings (namely the 1988 stage version, set in 1945 Berlin), nor a decadent erotic fantasy (as Ronald Chase LULU, 1978).

In respect to the Wedekind plays, Pabst eliminated several characters and story elements, not only out of the necessity to shorten and simplify the plot, that is normally required in an adaptation of a literary work to cinema, but probably also because he wanted to avoid the background history that would explain some of Lulu's behavior, and the self-conscious quality of a playwright reflecting on the nature of his art and the mores of his society. Pabst's approach was more psychological than sociological; Freud's theories were all the rage in Vienna in his time, and his psychosexual explanations of human behavior were finding expression in the arts. Pabst himself had just directed *GEHEIMNISSE EINER SEELE* (*Secrets of a Soul*, 1926), the first overtly psychoanalytic film. A proponent of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity), he was committed to realism and did not carry the symbolism of his images too far; there is no explicit identification of Pandora's box as the female vulva, source of all evil, that gets literally mutilated by Jack the Ripper's knife in the end. There is a symbolic play of paintings, sketches, photographs, sculptures and mirror images, to illustrate the central concept that woman is a reflective mirror in which man sees his own depravity. The intellectual male, the older, wealthier, more educated Dr. Schön, cannot subdue the instinctive female to his will, the natural animal qualities of women bring out the beast in men, unleash irrational passions that lead them to their doom.

Wedekind's conception of this myth, ubiquitous in the misogynist culture of turn of century Europe (see the intensely researched and fascinating study by Bram Dijkstra, "IDOLS OF PERVERSITY" 1986), was justified in a wider context, and indicated a compassion for the tragic destiny of Lulu that defied the predominant social constraints of his time. She was the personification of Eros, the life instinct that becomes destructive in a repressive society. Inspired by Freud and Nietzsche, Wedekind preached *lebensgenuss* (enjoyment of life), a revaluation of

spiritual sensuality and earthly pleasures, he aspired to a world liberated from sexual taboos. He was jailed for writing a political poem against the imperialism of the Kaiser in the satirical magazine "Simplizissimus", and became the hero of artistic freedom against an authoritarian patriarchal society; after "EARTH SPIRIT" was staged in Berlin by Max Reinhardt in 1892 and his work received recognition, the religious groups and the government brought his new play "PANDORA'S BOX" to court, under the charge of offense against the public morals and dissemination of indecent literature, and banned it from public performance.

In the opening prologue of "EARTH SPIRIT" an animal tamer with a whip and a revolver invites the spectators into the zoo, to see how beast and man fight in a narrow cage. This premise is reprised in the experimental film by Ronald Chase, which was actually shot in part inside the elephant cages of the San Francisco zoo, the clangor of the heavy metal doors closing on our heroine, trying to survive in a repressive society; the animal symbolism is then carried throughout, with tiger skins, eagle masks, feathered theatre costumes. In the original play Lulu is first presented as "a snake, created to poison and seduce, a wild beast". While the Pabst film starts in 'medias res', with the meter man representing the male uncomprehending adoration for this vision of female beauty, the Wedekind play describes Lulu's two first marriages: to Dr. Goll, who dies of an heart attack, after seeing his 'Nellie' flirt with a painter, and Walter Schwartz, who cuts his own throat, after learning of the sordid childhood of his 'Eve'. All the while Lulu remained Schön's lover, because he was the man who had taken her in from the streets at the age of twelve, given her an education, and trained his 'Mignon' to satisfy his sexual desires. Schön was her benefactor and Lulu loved him, but she was not an unconscious creature, she was well aware of who she was and of her power over him. In the dressing room of the theatre, when he's powerless to conquer his passion for her, she's the one who dictates the letter (as Theda Bara as the vampire-vamp woman does in the 1915 silent A FOOL THERE WAS) by which he releases his fiancée from her promise to marry him : "I'm unworthy of your love". She unmasks his hypocrisy, how can he callously make an innocent girl unhappy by marrying her, when he's in love with another woman? So Lulu gets her wish, she marries the man who was hers all along, but that

does not bring fulfillment; she says: "When I look at myself in the mirror, I wish I were a man, my own husband". With these words, Lulu seems to be expressing the essential dilemma of contemporary women; when a male dominated society considers them inferior beings, that should be confined to their genetically determined function of wives and mothers, they can never become truly independent individuals, because any human being needs the opportunity to express both the creative/masculine and the nurturing/feminine qualities to be complete. Men have recently been discovering that they'd been shortchanging themselves in this Faustian bargain, and they will not be completely fulfilled either, unless they develop their own parenting skills and get more involved in the raising of their children, male and female.

It is not the wedding scene that we see in the play, but life at home, where Lulu, risen to a higher status in society, entertains her friends: Rodrigo the acrobat, Countess Geschwitz, Alfred, a student in short pants who's in love with her; while her husband, driven insane by jealousy, says Lulu, "suffers from a persecution mania". Alwa is the expected visitor, invited to lunch before they leave for a matinée at the theatre. He had always been in love Lulu, since they were raised as brother and sister as children, but only now he confesses his adoration. When the father comes back to the house to spy on his wife and finds his son's head buried in her lap, his fury explodes, she's a disgrace and ought to kill herself. He doesn't listen to Lulu's sensible proposal of a divorce, he's too obsessed with her and cannot allow another man to have her.

The nature of this much discussed sexual obsession, that produces hatred toward the object of its passion, strikes me as very similar to drug addiction. It is the dependency on the foreign substance, the inability to control your desire, the degradation of reason, that generate self-loathing. Of course the object of desire doesn't have much to do with it, although it's true that some women have taken advantage of this power for personal gain, when other avenues of self-advancement were not open to them. It is obviously a puritanical concept, inspired by centuries of cultural domination of the Catholic Church and its Protestant variations, that sex should be seen as evil, as are drug taking and other forms of sensual pleasure. To excess sex could produce a kind of

physical addiction, but normally sexuality should be an essential expression of humanity. Non-western cultures have of course extolled the virtues of tantric sex for centuries.

The second play by Wedekind, "PANDORA'S BOX", is much more somber and depressing in tone, the author having been subject to the evils of censorship. He had to write a justifying statement in the forward to the book, and he also included a prologue in a bookshop where a normal reader, an enterprising publisher, a timid author and a public prosecutor all express their views on the subject of censorship of works of art. The first act contraposes the venal vulgarity of Rodrigo Quast, to the self-sacrificing nobility of Countess Geschwitz, who exchanges places with Lulu to allow her escape from jail, and of the student Alfred Hugenbergh, ready for a similar noble action. Alwa is identified as the playwright, who has written "EARTH SPIRIT" about Lulu: "I have only two alternatives, either to exploit you creatively or love you". He rails against "the curse of literature today", that is "too literary", "for a rebirth of a vigorous art we should go among men who have never read a book in their lives", echoing Wedekind's own aesthetic theories. Alwa and Lulu have a house in Paris and entertain several friends at the baccarat table. Lulu rebels at the idea of being sold by Casti-Piani, which is "worse than prison"; insensitive to Geschwitz's desperate love for her, Lulu uses her devotion to plot Rodrigo's murder. In the third act, there are three other suitors that parade in the miserable attic before Jack the Ripper, the forever faithful Countess is also present and dies next to her beloved. In fact, Wedekind argued in his forward that Geschwitz, not Lulu was the "tragic central figure" of the play, with her "terrible destiny of abnormality". In his attempt to fend off the censors he quotes Jesus Christ as the one who built the Kingdom of heaven for the sinner not the righteous man. Alwa absolves Lulu in the end, looking at the painting in Pierrot costume that follows her through the story: "Let him who can feel his position in bourgeois society to remain unassailed in face of these full, ripe lips, these great innocent child's eyes, this exuberant pink and white body, let him be the one to cast the first stone". And Schigolch takes away the stigma of prostitution: "She can't make a living out of love, because love is her life". Wedekind absolves Lulu of all sins, she is the victim of a repressive society bent on destroying the pleasure principle.

Alban Berg was also fascinated by the figure of Lulu, he agreed completely with the interpretation given by Karl Kraus in his speech preceding the premiere of the play in Vienna in 1905. "She became the destroyer of all because everyone destroyed her", it was "the tragedy of the hounded grace of woman, eternally misunderstood". The author also identified with Alwa, whom he turned into a music composer, and kept the libretto faithful to the Wedekind text, combining the two plays around the central event of prison, the absence of Lulu, that he composed as a musical interlude to be illustrated by a silent film. Interestingly he wrote the parts of Schön and Jack the Ripper to be performed by the same singer, with musical themes obviously connecting the two characters, the man killed by Lulu is the avenger who kills her. Wedekind himself had become an actor, after playing Schön in the premiere performance of "EARTH SPIRIT" in Leipzig in 1898, and Berg had seen him as Schön in the Vienna staging of "PANDORA'S BOX" by Karl Klaus, with his future wife Tilly Newes as Lulu.

All these men who fantasized of Lulu identified with the helpless lovers at her feet, adored at the shrine of primitive sexuality. It is an attempt to divorce their own intellect from instinctual desires, but it's a fantasy to presume that such a woman could exist. Lulu is an archetype, created by men who are afraid to relinquish control, men who feel impotent to satisfy a woman's natural sexual desires and resent the demands of a human being that is as much endowed of conscious and intellect as they are. This divorce and separation between heart and intellect, body and mind, as identified by Freud, perpetuates outmoded sexual stereotypes and prevents men and women from reconciling in their common humanity. Like racism, sexism is an evil that still runs rampant in our world.

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