



SAN FRANCISCO SILENT FILM FESTIVAL PRESENTS

PANDORA'S BOX

*“It was clever of Pabst to know even before he met me that
I possessed the tramp essence of Lulu.”*

— Louise Brooks



SAN FRANCISCO SILENT FILM FESTIVAL

LOUISE BROOKS IN

PANDORA'S BOX

SATURDAY, MAY 6, 2023

PARAMOUNT THEATRE, OAKLAND

DIEDRE McCLURE, CONDUCTOR

CLUB FOOT ORCHESTRA AND

SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC



CLUB FOOT ORCHESTRA AND SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

DEIRDRE McCLURE, CONDUCTOR

CLUB FOOT ORCHESTRA

FIRST VIOLIN

Alisa Rose

CLARINETS

Beth Custer

WOODWINDS

Sheldon Brown
Nik Phelps

TRUMPET

Chris Grady

TROMBONES, EUPHONIUM, and FLUTE

Richard Marriott

GUITAR and BANJO

Steve Kirk

BASS and GUITAR

Myles Boisen

PERCUSSION

Kjell Nordeson

SF CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

SECOND VIOLIN

Poyu Lee

VIOLA

Sarah Hooton

CELLO

Calvin Kung

OBOE and ENGLISH HORN

Haley Hoffman

TIMPANI

Eddie Virtgaym

PIANO

Jon Lee

Compositions by Richard Marriott, Sheldon Brown, Beth Custer, Steve Kirk,
Myles Boisen, and Nik Phelps



PANDORA'S BOX

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

It's not uncommon to leave a screening of *Pandora's Box* slightly dazed, irreversibly infatuated with its dangerous, attractive American dancer-turned-screen actor Louise Brooks. This response is only natural, but there is more to this film than its captivating star.

The origin of the film is the Lulu plays by German playwright Frank Wedekind, an enduringly outrageous figure, famed for 1891's *Spring Awakening*, which tackled taboos around adolescent sexuality and was recently transformed into a Broadway musical. He wrote the Lulu plays, *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box*, together at the end of the 19th century but published separately in 1895 and 1904 in an unsuccessful plan to avoid trouble from the censor. His Lulu, a scheming sexual monster who destroys the lives of those who fall for her, was partly inspired by two real-life women: a clown dancer named Lulu whom he had seen in a cabaret and Russian psychoanalyst Lou Andreas-Salomé, a woman of many affairs, who once rebuffed Wedekind's sexual advances, calling him (not without reason) an "indecent man."

Lulu is a dancer who has escaped a sleazy start in life and her first patron Schigolch to make a precariously comfortable life for herself. Her new patron is her lover Dr. Schön, a newspaper editor who supports her financially but keeps his distance from her socially. That is, until his upcoming marriage to a politician's daughter triggers a crisis. In many productions, the same

actor played Schön as Jack, the mysterious character introduced only at the end of the story. Wedekind himself played this role on stage, with his much younger wife, Tilly, as Lulu.

The Austrian director of this film, Georg Wilhelm Pabst was more of a puritan. A former actor and theater director, he had produced the Lulu plays on stage and attempted to film them once before but had been stymied by his production company's nerves about the controversial material. There was one previous Lulu film, 1923's *Earth Spirit*, directed by Leopold Jessner and starring Asta Nielsen: a striking work of Expressionism, with elaborate sets and zealous performances. Danish diva Nielsen offers a lively, if much older, Lulu, but it only told the first half of the story.

Pabst set to work in 1928. Unable to coax Brigitte Helm from Ufa, he launched a very media-friendly search for a star. After scouring Berlin, sending out his assistants to approach women on the streets, Pabst saw the sleek, minxy Brooks in Howard Hawks's comedy *A Girl in Every Port* (1928) and contacted her studio immediately. The delicious "what if" story goes that Marlene Dietrich was in Pabst's office ready to sign when Brooks eventually returned his message. Lola-Lola as Lulu? It could have worked.

Brooksie's Lulu is perfection, however. Born in Cherryvale, Kansas, in 1906, Brooks was also a dancer. She came to New York when

she was a teenager and made the most of the opportunities that came her way for being known as one of the most beautiful girls on Broadway. Even then she had the distinctive androgynous bob, as well as the sexy “Follies walk.” Almost inevitably, she signed a contract with Paramount and although she was a reluctant starlet, sniffy about most roles, she played some memorable bad girls in silent film and was excellent as the romantic lead in William Wellman’s *Beggars of Life*. Her relationship with Paramount was rocky, so when her contract was up for renewal, she could hardly resist the allure of a director and play she had never heard of, and the chance to make a fresh start as a serious actress in Berlin.

Brooks traveled willingly, but she found the set tense. She later claimed most of the rest of the cast hated her, especially Fritz Kortner who plays Schön, but it must be remembered that she didn’t speak any of their languages. Kortner was an illustrious man,

acclaimed for many German Expressionist films and impressive theater roles, including the Lulu plays. He resented both Pabst and Brooks: he felt the director curtailed his performance, which he had honed on stage, and he found his costar unprofessional. She was: arriving late and hungover to the set most days. Franz Lederer, who found Brooks delightful, plays Schön’s son Alwa who is also in love with Lulu. Lederer had matinee-idol looks but was carving out a serious career on the Berlin stage. As Francis Lederer, he went on to a long career in Hollywood, later becoming a drama coach. Carl Goetz plays the grotesque Schigolch; he was known for playing tramps and was beloved by German audiences. Siegfried Arno, who takes a small, hilarious role as a stage manager, was a popular stage comedian and later shined in comic character parts in Hollywood. One of Pabst’s favorite actors, Gustav Diessl, plays Jack, and Brooks made an exception for him. The feeling was mutual: they canoodled under the table between takes.

Pabst relished the tension, coaching each actor individually and possibly because of his complex psychological manipulations, this sophisticated film is a sensitive, creative update of Wedekind. With shimmering cinematography by Günther Krampf and Brooks in the lead, it’s also an object of great beauty. The film is notable, too, for one of the earliest lesbian characters in cinema. Brooks was scathing about Alice Roberte’s performance as Countess Geschwitz, but in truth it’s a remarkable depiction of a passionate woman whose importance to the film has been underrated.

Gschwitz’s character became one of the casualties of censorship when the film was released outside Germany, along with the film’s violent ending. Reviews in Germany were mixed, between good and bad. Reviews of the censored versions veered between horror and disappointment. When Mordaunt Hall reviewed the film for the *New York Times* he reported: “In an introductory title the management sets forth that it has been prevented by the censors from showing the film in its entirety, and it also apologizes for what it termed ‘an added saccharine ending.’”

So, *Pandora’s Box* was not a hit. It was not considered Pabst’s best work and it failed to make Brooks a star. Complicating matters, *Pandora’s Box* had a Jewish producer, Seymour Nebenzal, and an almost entirely Jewish cast and crew. During the 1930s virtually everyone who worked on it left the German film industry—for France, England, or the U.S.—and they were rarely asked about making the film. Some may have even refused to discuss it. For family reasons, Pabst stayed in Austria during the Second World War and

continued to work in the German film industry. Kortner, a principled man who spoke out against anti-Semitism, refused to mention the film in his memoirs.

After making two more brilliant films in Europe, *Diary of a Lost Girl* with Pabst and *Prix de Beauté* with Augusto Genina, Brooks’s film career was all but over. She briefly, unhappily, returned to Hollywood then spent the 1940s adrift in New York, drinking, depressed, and dependent on men for money.

Critical appreciation came belatedly, in the 1950s, when the film was championed by critics and curators at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris and George Eastman House in New York. Not only was it screened again, in better prints, and treated as a great of the silent era, but Brooks was also back in the spotlight. This fiercely intelligent woman had a second career as a writer, crafting brilliant essays from her insights into Hollywood and this film, which she described as an interrogation of “sexual hate”: how desire can be contorted into anger and violence. With her writing and the interviews given before her death in 1985, she has transformed our understanding of *Pandora’s Box*. The woman who turned heads in the 1920s was celebrated again, not just as a great beauty but as a subtle, distinguished screen actress and a first-class writer. Her Lulu remains a truly iconic performance, which leads but does not outshine this one-of-a-kind film.

Pamela Hutchinson is a regular contributor for the *Guardian*, *Sight and Sound*, and the *Criterion Collection*. She is the author of the *BFI Film Classic on Pandora’s Box* and writes the *Silent London* blog.





DAVID THOMSON:

WHY DID HE WANT HER?

HE had turned down the emerging Marlene Dietrich—a decision that amazed that haughty woman, though it's impossible to see her competing with Lulu's speed or nerve. Pabst had seen *A Girl in Every Port* and been impressed by Louise's fickle wit. He had seen still pictures of her and he had surely heard stories. Plus she was American with very little German. It might be amusing to seduce an American. He would handle her. So he did, but he never did another film that approached the incendiary *Pandora's Box*. Neither did she.

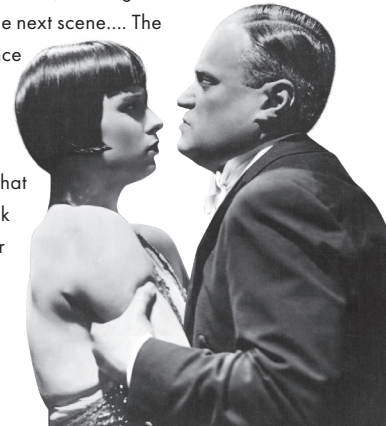
Brooks plays Lulu, a role taken from two plays by Frank Wedekind and transformed on screen. She who has no apparent occupation, except as a dancer on stage and the moth that tantalizes so many different men as a force they cannot own or subdue. There is Schigolch, a decrepit old man who is her pimp and her jester; there is a strongman in the circus; there is Alwa Schön, an effete artistic young man; and there is his father, Dr. Schön, a newspaper proprietor, a pocket battleship of power and reputation, an impacted bull of a master. But he is tormented by his lust for Lulu even while he is supposed to be marrying another younger woman.

Lulu knows that Schön is infatuated with her, and she plays him without ever denying that she is as attracted to him as she is to anyone else. She is a hunger, without any moral constraint. And in the cinema of that age that was unprecedented and self-destructive. It was a way of suggesting that an actor might be a savage animal let loose in a drawing room

where proper social safeguards were raw meat for her jaws. If Lulu had been a man she could have been a murderer. As it was, she had a destined date in the film with Jack the Ripper. Death is in the black-and-white air. Schön knows he needs to abandon Lulu, and she responds, "You'll have to kill me if you want to get rid of me." When Alwa suggests his father might marry Lulu, he answers, "One does not marry a woman like that. It would be suicide."

Dr. Schön represents the sturdy bourgeois spectator who would like to sleep with Lulu and might give up respectability for her. The actor cast as Schön was Fritz Kortner, fourteen years older than Brooks. He had studied with Max Reinhardt, and he was famous as a character actor. He resisted Brooks and her untrained spontaneity. He felt, with justice, that Pabst was in creative love with her, and he had to see that in their scenes together she was being favored.

"Kortner hated me," she would write later in an essay on acting with Pabst. "After each scene with me he would pound off the set and go to his dressing room. Mr. Pabst himself, wearing his most private smile, would go there to coax him back for the next scene.... The theatre sequence gave him an opportunity to shake me with such violence that he left ten black and blue finger prints on my arms."



IT'S uncanny how closely this dynamic fits with the script's design of having Schön desperate to get Lulu to go on stage and do her thing. The key action occurs in the theatre where Lulu is set to dance. Pabst films these scenes so that people are constantly crossing back and forth backstage. There is a feeling of a world crammed to bursting with vital performance, and Lulu seems infected by this like a dancer preparing for her rite of spring or fall. And in that whirling frenzy, her sensuality becomes the center of the world. She is in stage costume now with a nearly bare back, and she will not let us take our eyes off it.

When Schön's fiancée arrives, Lulu throws a tantrum (we feel it is put on, a kind of daring) and says she will not perform while "that woman" is in the theatre. She shuts herself in a props room, delaying the performance, and only Schön can go in there to reason with her. She hurls herself onto the floor, and the camera cannot miss that bare back and her flailing legs. Schön is crushed and humiliated. He gets down onto the floor with her. Whereupon she seduces him one more time—and Pabst interjects spasmlike close-ups, not quite in focus, neuronal glimpses of her face and her body bursting for freedom like an animal in a trap.

It is during this fateful embrace with Schön that the stage manager pushes the prop room door open so the onlookers can see Dr. Schön collapsed in Lulu's lap. That shocking moment. This is when Lulu, barely clothed by now, straightens up like an odalisque and surveys the attention she has provoked with insolent authority. Her triumphant smile is for the audience backstage, but doesn't its thrust reach us too? Hasn't Pabst made a wicked parable about how we come to the window of cinema to revel in the abandon of the caged animals? And doesn't Lulu smile at

us because she knows we have been shamed too? There it is, in 1929 (when the film was released), a revelation of the barbed contract of cinema and the willing servitude of its players. It's a film that makes kitsch junk, like *Cabaret*, seem soft-centered.

That climax comes just forty minutes into *Pandora's Box*. It is a film of 130 minutes that will end when she meets the Ripper on a foggy nocturnal street and nearly wills his knife into her. That is a more conventional conclusion, one that says, Well, of course, if a woman is this outrageous and does what we desire then she has to be destroyed. That rebuke lets the bourgeois leave the theatre feeling reassured. And it fits with the standards of cinema—then and now, and especially in America—that we would be allowed our artificial orgy (it can be sex or violence or pure destruction) but at the end of the show a semblance of order must be restored. In short, the prison bars will be reinstated, so we voyeurs can watch and get our thrill without having any hint of how exploitative the show and the business are.

Excerpted from David Thomson's *Acting Naturally: The Magic in Great Performances* (2023) and reprinted here with permission. Thomson is a critic and the author of many books about the movies, including *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*.

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San Francisco Silent Film Festival is dedicated to the presentation and preservation of silent cinema, and to demonstrating silent films as a relevant art form for modern audiences and as culturally valuable historical records. SFSFF presents live-cinema events that showcase important titles from the silent era, often in restored or preserved prints, with superb live musical accompaniment. SFSFF not only supports film preservation efforts by exhibiting major restorations but also partners with archives around the world to restore films, adding to the SFSFF collection held at the Library of Congress. silentfilm.org

CLUB FOOT ORCHESTRA

Founded by Richard Marriot and Beth Custer and named for a performance art nightclub in San Francisco's Bayview district, Club Foot Orchestra sparked a revival in the late 1980s playing live orchestral accompaniment for silent cinema. The ensemble's hybrid sound synthesizes East European, Impressionism, Jazz Fusion, and myriad other musical styles to bring these silent films alive for today's audiences. Club Foot's original score for *Pandora's Box* debuted in San Francisco in 1995. clubfootorchestra.com

SF CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

With roots in the Ada Clement Piano School begun with five instructors and four students, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music expanded to teach voice, theory, composition, and other instruments when it officially incorporated in 1923. Now celebrating its centennial, the conservatory has since become a vibrant world-class institution providing musicians a place to achieve their best possible selves. sfc.edu

DIERDRE McCLURE

Conductor Deirdre McClure has worked with many orchestras, opera companies, and chamber ensembles in the Bay Area, including the Oakland Opera Theater, where she has been Music Director and Conductor since 2001. McClure has toured the United States, Canada, and Mexico with the Club Foot Orchestra and has worked with the Oakland Community Orchestra, the Women's Orchestra of San Francisco, the University of California Youth Music Program, as well as the San Francisco Conservatory of Music's contemporary music ensemble. McClure is the conductor of the Odeon Orchestras in Rockport, Maine, and the First Parish Choir in Portland, where she and her family reside.

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And thanks to the Louise Brooks Society for the use of so many lovely images.