

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lulu at the Met

Elisa Leonelli · Tuesday, November 10th, 2015

A new production of *Lulu*, the twelve-tone opera by Austrian composer Alban Berg, premiered at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) on November 5 and will run until December 3. It is directed by South African artist William Kentridge and performed by German soprano Marlis Peterson. I have not seen it, but the *New York Times* reviewed it as “visually stunning.” I look forward to watching it on HD video, when it will be shown in movie theaters around the world starting November 21. Check your AMC listings for Los Angeles.

Lulu was created at the turn of the 19th century by German playwright [Frank Wedekind](#), as the heroine of his sex tragedies, *Earth Spirit* (1892) and *Pandora's Box* (1904). The plays were banned by the imperialist government of Germany as offensive to public morality, until the end of World War I, and the persecuted author became a champion of artistic freedom for the European Intelligentsia.

Here's the story. Lulu, a 12-year-old orphan selling flowers in the streets, is rescued by newspaper publisher Dr. Schön, who takes her into his home and makes her his mistress. After his wife's death, to avoid rumors about this scandalous relationship, Schön marries off Lulu to an older man, Doctor Goll, who dies of a heart attack when he discovers his wife in the embrace of a young painter. Lulu then marries the painter, Walter Schwarz, who slits his throat when Schön reveals to him that Lulu is still his lover. Alwa, Schön's son, who had grown up with Lulu as his sister and is secretly in love with her, casts her as the lead dancer in his musical revue, while his father is about to marry a young heiress from his social class. Lulu forces the man she loves to marry her instead, and ensures her own rise in society. Driven mad by jealousy about his wife's suspected lovers, Schön hands her a gun ordering her to kill herself; in the struggle it is Lulu who shoots Schön. She is sentenced to jail, then freed by Countess Geschwitz, who is also in love with her and takes her place. Lulu returns home to Alwa, and, finally together, they leave for Paris; but when Alwa loses all his money gambling, Lulu is forced to walk the streets of London, where she picks up a man, Jack the Ripper, who murders her with a knife.

In Alban Berg's version of this story the same baritone plays Schön and Jack the Ripper, to underscore that Lulu is punished for murdering one man when she is killed by another. Berg had seen the play *Pandora's Box* at its Vienna premiere in 1905, where Wedekind played Schön, and was inspired to compose his opera, which he started in 1929, but was left incomplete at his untimely death in 1935 at age 50. *Lulu* premiered at the Zurich opera in 1937 in two acts. Berg's widow asked Arnold Schoenberg to complete the third act, but when he declined, she never allowed the unfinished third act to be performed during her lifetime, so that only happened after

her death in 1976. A three act version premiered at the Paris Opera in 1979.



Louise Brooks as Lulu, *Pandora's Box*

In 1929 Austrian filmmaker George Wilhelm Pabst directed the classic silent film *Pandora's Box*, from Wedekind's two plays, and set the story in the modern Berlin of the Weimar Republic, with American actress Louise Brooks portraying Lulu. The title refers to the Greek myth of Pandora, created by Zeus as a woman endowed with all the gifts, who gave in to curiosity and opened a forbidden jar, releasing all evils into the world.

The significance of Lulu was examined by feminist film scholar Mary Ann Doane, in her 1991 book of essays *Femmes Fatales*. She concluded: "Femininity constitutes a danger which must systematically be eradicated." Lulu represents the power of female sexuality, struggling to assert itself in a patriarchal society that fears it and seeks to suppress it. She is actually a male fantasy, the personification of men's guilt about their own sexual desire, that becomes a self-destructive addiction in a repressive environment.

I am personally very close to this story, because when I was a young woman in the 1970s, San Francisco artist Ronald Chase asked me to play Lulu in an experimental film he was directing, that premiered at Filmex in 1978. I was a photographer living in Los Angeles by then, but the filmmaker had been impressed by my screen presence, when he had seen me perform in *The Chicken Little Comedy Show*, that aired weekly on KEMO-TV in 1972. Chase, who for the past 20 years has been teaching filmmaking to teenagers through his foundation *Art & Film*, has recently cut a [trailer for Lulu](#) that you may watch on Vimeo.

In the 1990s, while studying for a Master's Degree in Critical Studies at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, I wrote a paper about the Wedekind plays and the Pabst film for my Silent Cinema class, also articles for the Italian film monthly *CIAK* and for *VENICE*, the Los Angeles Arts and

Entertainment magazine.

Reflecting back on Lulu today, I still view her sympathetically, as the authors of these artistic works did. Wedekind portrayed himself as Alwa the playwright, the only man who loved Lulu without condemning her. Berg also identified with Alwa, turning him into a music composer. Pabst choose Brooks over Greta Garbo because he wanted a younger, more innocent heroine for his film. They all agree that Lulu is not to blame for her lovers' demise, she is simply trying to survive in a male-dominated world.

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