

The Red Shoes

In the dark days of 1944, when the whole community lived by bartering because there was nothing in the shops, I was given a pair of red shoes. They were tap dancing shoes. I was around seven at the time, and other girls in my class were taking tap dancing lessons. But tap dancing was outside my parents' cultural range, so I got no lessons but just clattered about in those shoes till they disappeared from my life.

Ever since Scorsese remastered it last year, the 1948 Powell and Pressburger movie of *The Red Shoes* has been on my mind to write about. I love dancing but it doesn't seem to be part of my life this time around. Maybe when I turn 80 I shall take up ballroom dancing, if there is any left by then. Fortunately I never aspired to ballet.

The Red Shoes must be the classiest movie ever made. It is about excellence; high art on the subject of high art. I am told there is an arts person in England somewhere who watches this film every day, to remind himself of what true standards are.

I can think of no other film which so focuses on excellence. There are plenty of films about the fight to get to the top, and the rivalries and jealousies and other problems along the way. Powell and Pressburger don't show us that. There is no need, as the main characters in their film are people who are at the very top of their profession. If you dance like Nureyev or have a voice like Maria Callas you don't need to compete with anybody once you have been recognised. People in that league are so rare that there is always a shortage. It is in the ranks immediately below them that many highly gifted people exist and have to compete with each other for a place.

The Red Shoes is about a ballerina, Vicky Page (played by the lovely Moira Shearer) who is totally dedicated to her profession and then finds she has to choose between dancing and love. I have never found this a believable proposition. There has to be a conflict in a movie, but in real life it is more likely she would have had to choose between pursuing her art and something more mundane, like looking after her sick mother. Among people who work in the arts you are more likely to find that love enriches their work rather than distracts their attention from it. One has only to think of Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn, whose careers only really took off after they came together. No one doubts they loved each other, although no one has ever been able to work out what sort of love it was.

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There are two strands to Vicky Page's story and they reflect each other. One is the ballet itself called *The Red Shoes*, which is seen in the film and is central to the plot. This is based on a fairy tale by Hans Andersen in which a girl puts on a pair of red shoes and finds that they take over her life. It's a story about obsession. The other strand in her life is that she falls in love with another high achiever, a musician in the company, and love is forbidden by their impresario Lermontov, played by Anton Walbrook.

High romance is uncomfortable; no one can live with it for long if they take it too seriously. It was invented in the Middle Ages at a time when people wanted to compensate for the sordid trade whereby the aristocracy sold their daughters in marriage to the highest bidder. The troubadours brought together music and poetry in love songs, and there was colour, elegance, and jousting in which a knight was licensed to show his admiration of his lady so long as he didn't break the rules. Basically he was entertaining another man's wife to keep her happy. As long as it remained light-hearted it was fine, and it brought sweetness and beauty to lives which otherwise might have been rather dismal. The trouble came when the knight and lady fell in love, and love became more important than their life obligations. This is the story of Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere and many others in our old legends and tales. High romance leads to tragedy, because what was originally intended as a form of play becomes a dangerous obsession.

In many third world countries today women are still bought and sold by their menfolk, mostly without the charm of romance. But in the West, now that there is more freedom in marriage, complications and confusions abound. Romance has been corrupted and commercialised and the old courtship routines are worn out. Somehow we need to get back to seeing romance as a form of play, something graceful and imaginative that genuinely refreshes the spirit and lightens up the load we all carry.

Play is a central feature of the universe, part of the Great Cosmic Dance. It's all play really. God plays. Animals play. For all baby creatures, and for a fortunate few adults, play is their work.

The more one understands about the true immensity of our being the more one realises that everything we do is ultimately a game we play. We are here for a while, in this body, playing the game of survival, of conflict, of marriage, of romance, of high achievement in our chosen field - whatever it is, we are learning and perfecting our game. And as for the red shoes, which dance you off to obsession - the trick is to first put in the 100% dedication and years of practice which are required by the standards of excellence in any art or skill, and then let go the obsession and the effort and simply dance. The best art looks effortless and to reach this stage requires a certain detachment.

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There is a point at which we can let go and break through the glass ceiling which separates the ordinary human consciousness from a higher level of consciousness. Mozart didn't write music. He somehow managed to reach the divine source of creativity within himself so that he could tap into the music and it just poured through him and wrote itself. His main problem was getting it to manifest in physical reality in the most practical and convenient way.

Play and rest. I would not say *The Red Shoes* is my favourite film. I like the sense of personal dignity that shines through it, the opulence and spaciousness it showed audiences in Europe so soon after the war, and the glimpses of the long vanished world of 1948 which are visible in the background. It is a bit too intense for me so I don't watch it very often. But it is right up there among the best films ever made.

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