

## CODA

## LULU IN SILENCE

by Barry Paris

The most famous Lulu of them all never sang a note.

"Imagine!" fumed Marlene Dietrich — "Pabst choosing Louise Brooks for Lulu when he could have had me!"

It was 1928, and Dietrich was in film director G. W. Pabst's Berlin office, on the verge of being signed to star in *Pandora's Box*, at the moment Brooks's cable arrived, casually and belatedly accepting Pabst's offer of the role, made many months earlier.

Dietrich was not alone in her outrage. Except for Goethe's Gretchen, Wedekind's Lulu was the most important woman in German literature. Pabst's transatlantic casting call for the perfect Lulu was rivaled only by Hollywood's search for Scarlett O'Hara a decade later; his casting of Brooks, and her tumultuous arrival in Berlin, made the cover of every film magazine in Western Europe. And just as the choice of the British Vivien Leigh to play Margaret Mitchell's heroine once offended sensibilities south of the Mason-Dixon line, the choice of an unknown American flapper for Lulu struck Deutschland as a major cultural affront. Nevertheless, Pabst would make her an erotic icon in a silent masterpiece.

Alban Berg's *Lulu* was first heard, in partial form, in 1937 — eight years after *Pandora's Box* was first shown. Contrary to American belief, Pabst and Berg were not Germans but proud Austrians, born the same year (1885). Both had long been fascinated to the point of obsession with Frank Wedekind's Lulu plays: *Der Erdgeist* (Earth Spirit) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (Pandora's Box). Both had begun work — on film and opera, respectively — in 1928, facing the same initial hurdle: how to combine the two plays into one coherent story? Pabst's task was to render Lulu's psychological complexity and bizarre inter-relations in silence, without the aid of Wedekind's hysterical Expressionist dialogue. In Brooks, he found a brilliant artistic collaborator. Brooks seems to have understood instinctively that Lulu is nothing more than a fantasy of each male who desires her.

1928 Berlin: what a city, and what an exciting time in its life! The thing to do with the Nazis was ignore them, which was still possible. The goal now was pleasure, for tomorrow — who knew? Audiences flocked to Max Reinhardt's fabulous Shakespeare productions. Three opera companies thrived: the Staatsoper, the Kroll (under Otto Klemperer) and the Städtische (under Bruno Walter). Berg was working on *Lulu*. Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* had opened in August.



ENTER LULU: BROOKS, PABST'S EROTIC ICON

Albert Einstein lived in Berlin. So did young Wernher von Braun, co-founder of a student group called the Society for Space Travel. Auden and Isherwood wrote there. Vladimir Nabokov, the refugee, was giving tennis lessons in Berlin to subsidize his writing.

Louise Brooks — a Lulu offscreen as well as on, a woman who refused to play by the rules in her personal and professional life — was most dazzled by Berlin's erotic smorgasbord: "Sex was the business of the town," she wrote. "At the Eden Hotel, the café bar was lined with the higher-priced trollops. The economy girls walked the street outside. On the corner stood girls in boots, advertising flagellation. The nightclub 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 theater. In the revue *Chocolate Kiddies*, Josephine Baker appeared naked onstage except for a girdle of bananas."

Brooks was a curious kid in a sexual candy store, and in her childlike eroticism Pabst saw Lulu's: a satanic mirror of all the evil in men, "innocently" reflected from the gaze of a black-bobbed beauty whose sexuality was wholly unlike any previous siren's vamping on the screen. At the time, however, Brooks's performance was mercilessly panned. A typical dullard's view came in from *New York Times* critic Mordaunt Hall: "Whether she is endeavoring to express joy, woe, anger or satisfaction is often difficult to decide." That, of course, was the intent. Dismissed for her subtlety, Brooks would not be vindicated until a quarter-century later when James Card of Eastman House resurrected her and the Pabst film in which a twenty-two-year-old Kansas girl had been induced to "reinvent the art of screen acting."

The exact impact of Brooks's Lulu on Berg is unknown, but we know the effect of her wordless power on some great operatic Lulus — not least Teresa Stratas, who said she was "devastated" by Brooks's performance and who consciously or subconsciously channeled certain Brooksonian qualities into her musical rendering of the character. "Lulu's story is as close as you'll get to mine," wrote the actress herself years later. They shared a certain lethal outlook, summed up in Brooks's own chilling description of the final scene in *Pandora's Box*: "It is Christmas eve, and she is about to receive the gift that has been her dream since childhood: death by a sexual maniac." □

BARRY PARIS is a music and film historian, biographer and Slavic linguist whose articles have appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*.