

Legong: Dance of the Virgins DVD



This soundtrack recording is the result of a fruitful collaboration between Richard Marriott of Clubfoot Orchestra and I Made Subandi, guest musical director of Gamelan Sekar Jaya, during 1998-1999.

THE MUSIC

Legong: Dance of the Virgins: A Story of the South Seas was released by Paramount Pictures in 1935 without recorded dialogue, but it did have a musical score. Although the original score included a brief field recording of the Barong dance, it was otherwise scored exclusively for symphony orchestra in a style consistent with American interwar travelogue films. Thus, the many scenes of the film that featured Balinese musical ensembles were represented by the flutes, cymbals, and drums of the symphony orchestra. These sounds, though pleasing, could in no way approximate the shimmering tonal qualities of a Balinese gamelan gong kebyar or the haunting resonances of an angklung ensemble. The composers, together with the members of Gamelan Sekar Jaya, saw the opportunity to create a new score for the film which thoroughly integrated the instruments of Bali with the Western

Legong: Dance of the Virgins: A Story of the South Seas was filmed entirely on location in Bali in 1935 by the Marquis Henry de la Falaise, a World War I hero and French nobleman who was married at the time to actress Constance Bennett.

The film is a tragic tale of love denied — Poutou, a respected Legong dancer, falls in love with young musician, Nyoung. Poutou's father is delighted with her choice and wants to help her to conquer Nyoung's heart. But Poutou's half-sister Saplak pines for the musician and pursues him. When Nyoung chooses Saplak, Poutou drowns herself.

Legong's real theme is much more than mere melodrama — it is the delineation of Balinese culture. De la Falaise captured religious rituals including frenetic dances and mystical parades, everyday dealings at the local marketplace, a cockfight (which was cut out of the British version) and, in the final scene, a mass cremation.

The film was beautifully photographed and featured an all-Balinese cast. Released in 1935, the movie was the final silent film release from a major studio (Paramount) and was one of the last films to feature two-strip Technicolor (red and green) which was replaced the same year by three-strip Technicolor (red, green, and blue).

instrumentation. In this way, they could respond not only to its drama, but to the brilliant music and dance scenes that punctuate each important moment in the story.

After viewing a rare copy of the film (painstakingly restored by the UCLA Film and Television Archive a few years earlier), Marriott and Subandi were commissioned by Gamelan Sekar Jaya to collaborate on a new score for the film. The composers quickly decided that traditional Balinese music would be used for the scenes that featured dance ceremonies, cremations, and other rituals, and Western instruments for the scenes that focused on Western-style plot development.

After several months of intensive rehearsal, ***Legong: Dance of the Virgins*** premiered at the Castro Theatre in San Francisco in May 1999, featuring Subandi and Marriott's new score, performed live by Gamelan Sekar Jaya and members of the Clubfoot Orchestra. A few years later, this recording of the score was made to document this extraordinary collaboration.

ABOUT THE FILM

"Out in the Dutch East Indies, just south of the equator, lies Bali – isle of perpetual summer. In this peopled paradise, untouched by civilization, lives a contented race who joyously worship their gods – to them life is a continuous feast – to them death holds no fear. Here we relate a romance of Balinese life, based on facts and authentic customs – enacted with an all-native cast, and produced in its entirety upon the Isle of Bali."
With this exotic invocation opens the film Legong: Dance of the Virgins: A Story of the South Seas.

Legong: Dance of the Virgins (Bennett Pictures Corporation, 1935) was shot on location in Bali, Indonesia, between May and August 1933. Directed by Henry de la Falaise, known as Marquis Le Bailly de la Falaise de la Coudraye (1898-1972), with Gaston Glass (1898-1965), *Legong* featured an all-Balinese cast.

Legong was one of two films produced by Bennett Pictures, for which La Falaise – previously Gloria Swanson's third husband – served as the principal along with his better-known screen actress wife, Constance Bennett (1904-1965), founder of Bennett Pictures Corporation.

La Falaise and Glass traveled to Bali with their cameraman, William Howard (Duke) Greene, the highly regarded Technicolor specialist who went on to win an Academy award for his work on *Phantom of the Opera* (1943). This film, along with *Kliou: The Killer* (1936; also directed by La Falaise and produced by Bennett Pictures), a jungle story about a deadly tiger, were among the last of the two-color Technicolor films produced in Hollywood.

The "exotic" Balinese mise-en-scène contributed to the success of *Legong* at the box office; the film played for an exceptionally long 10-week run at the New York World Theater in 1935.

Legong: Dance of the Virgins was reconstructed in 1992 by the UCLA Film and Television Archives using censored prints from the United States, Britain, and Canada. At the time of the film's distribution by Paramount Pictures Corporation, scenes of nudity were trimmed for domestic release in the United States, and shots of cockfights were excised from the British prints. By duplicating and splicing the remaining negatives of prints from Canada, England, and the United States, the film was restored to its

complete length. The original, restored print was first shown at the 5th Festival of Preservation, on April 25, 1993, nearly sixty years after La Falaise began shooting the film.

PLOT SUMMARY

According to a 1935 review in *Variety*, the story of *Legong: Dance of the Virgins* could be summarized in the following sentence: "Native beauty kills herself by plunging off a high bridge when she finds her lover has tossed her overboard for her sister."

Succinct though such a summary may be, there is more to *Legong: Dance of the Virgins* than a sentimental love story. It belongs to a genre of interwar narrative films, shot in an exotic locale, which adapted indigenous folklore to American and European tastes. This was an auspicious genre of documentary filmmaking because it supported the fantasy and mythology that accompanied the first wave of the far-flung mass international tourist trade.

Legong is also an exceptional example of the successful interplay between exotic spectacle, ethnographic detail, and a compelling story. Small details chronicling the life of the villagers make *Legong* an absorbing and mesmerizing quasi-documentary.

In the film, a young girl, Poutou, has been selected as one of her village's Legong dancers. She is to remain "the chaste maiden and sacred dancer of the Temple" until she falls in love, after which she will dance for the final time in celebration of her impending marriage.

Poutou is attracted to the young musician Nyong, a talented newcomer in the local gamelan orchestra. Poutou's father is delighted with her choice, and Poutou spends much time preparing food for Nyong's visit to their house, officially marking their engagement. But Nyong's interest is soon diverted to young Saplak, who is Poutou's half-sister. The two meet each other clandestinely, in groves and on bridges, but several villagers see them together and disclose their secret. When Poutou discovers that Nyong and Saplak are eloping to be married, she is so distraught that she chooses suicide as the only way to maintain her honor. The love story is linked to the various rituals portrayed in the film, ending with a dramatic parade of funeral pyres to the cremation grounds.

BONUS FEATURES

Featured on the DVD is a restored picture and soundtrack by the UCLA Film & Television Archive, a second optional track featuring a new score composed by Richard Marriott and I Made Subandi and performed by Gamelan Sekar Jaya and the Club Foot Orchestra, Henry de la Falaise's previously "lost" feature film, *Kliou the Killer*, shot in Indonesia. (1937. B&W version. 52 minutes), and a feature documentary *Gods of Bali* (1952. 56 minutes) with camerawork by Nikola Drakulic and prepared under the supervision of Robert Snyder. Courtesy of Allegra Fuller Snyder.

Researched, edited and co-written by Maria Sundeen

Original academic content written by Peter J. Bloom and Katherine J. Hagedorn