

# BOXING HELENA [1993]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

Copyright © – 1993, 2020

A brilliant young surgeon (Julian Sands) has a one-night stand and consequently falls in love with a woman (Sherilyn Fenn) who totally rejects him. She claims he is a bad lover. He pursues her by desperately abasing himself in various ways. When she is seriously injured, he takes her into his house and saves her life by amputating her legs. After her recovery, she finds herself held captive and the object of his misguided love. After she attacks him and tries to escape, he amputates her arms. One of her ex-lovers traces her and attacks the doctor in an attempt to rescue her. A statue falls on the doctor and knocks him unconscious. When he wakes up, he finds that most of the adventure was simply a dream.

At once visually elegant and politically simplistic, *Boxing Helena* resembles many recent films produced and directed by a younger generation of film makers who are apparently trying to make their marks as “artists.” With its long pauses in the story to insert MTV-like interludes of rock music and misty camerawork or apparently random bits of operatic arias, the recent film that comes to mind as a match in its pretensions is *Orlando* [1993]. Both films take on popular, that is, politically corrected, issues from the “correct” point of view, but when one steps back to look at what the film is indeed saying, neither bear the burden of their advertised convictions. The bottom lines, so to speak, don’t pan out. Yet what is most painful is that the issues nodded to but not addressed by *Boxing Helena* are so frighteningly important.

The question of who is good and who is bad is pretty clear with a film that centers around a man who ejaculates prematurely, compulsively changes his shirt in the middle of a party, is emotionally immature, moves into his dead mother’s house (the psychological consequences of this are pretty obvious, as are its references to *Psycho* [1960]), pursues a woman who could care less for him by shamelessly abasing himself, and, last but certainly not least, kidnaps, abuses and mutilates the object of his distorted affections. (I use the term “object” with full awareness of its implications.) There is not much equivocation about which of the characters – the mutilator of women or his victim – the film casts its lot with. Another example: the film’s level of rhetoric is obvious when a man sleeps with multiple partners, *Boxing Helena* treats it as a psychosis, but when a woman does the same, it is a reflection of her independence and power. There is not a lot of room for ambiguity in here.

As a simplistic, single-minded tract of anti-male sentiment, *Boxing Helena* could make its mark. After all, there are many films that are just as virulently anti-female. But even with films that simply center on men, we need a multiplicity of voices to ultimately achieve any sort of balance; every *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* [1969] needs a

*Thelma and Louise* [1991]. Perhaps *Boxing Helena* is an answer to the mad woman of *Fatal Attraction* [1987]. But the difference between this male-bashing film and the mirror-image female-bashing films is that the former rarely have cop-out endings. The problem, I believe, is that once *Boxing Helena* has generated this fiend who makes women powerless by the most brutal means imaginable (and is a clear echo of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*), the filmmakers were left with no means whereby the now-powerless heroine can right the situation. It feels as though the filmmakers found themselves boxed in a corner with no escape possible, as though their own inept symbolization had done them in – if someone rescues her, she's powerless; if someone doesn't, then she is equally powerless – and simply copped out by making most of the man's diseases and corruption a safe, and perhaps even therapeutic, dream.

Philosophical challenges, of which there are several in *Boxing Helena*, are perhaps more successful than its political questions. Over the past decade we have encountered many films with strong female central characters who avenge themselves against their male brutalizers. These range from the rape-revenge genre like *I Spit on Your Grave* [1977] and *Ms. 45* [1981] to the horror/slasher films like *Nightmare on Elm Street* [1984] or *Friday the 13th* [1980]. In each case the brutalizer is ugly – like the classic Freddie, Jason, or Michael Meyers – or at least uncouth. And the female central figure alone, without male help, takes care of the brutalizer. Normal men, in the slasher film cycles at least, are cast in the role of “heroine:” a passive, ineffectual and powerless role previously reserved exclusively for women! By violating this history, *Boxing Helena* brings up an interesting issue.

Since the ancient Greeks took up sculpture, we have been asked to associate external beauty with internal perfection. The opposite, of course, is the assumption that internal ugliness is reflected externally. Examples are legion: Paul Muni portrays a doomed and insane murderer clearly described by the film's title: *Scarface* [1932]; the Indian sought by John Wayne in *The Searchers* [1956] is named “Scar;” the Sheriff of Nottingham is never a handsome man. Nineteenth century romanticism crept into this ancient idea with the appearance of sympathetic physical monsters like Charles Laughton in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* [1939], or John Hurt in *The Elephant Man* [1980], or Eric Stoltz in *Mask* [1985]. But like most of the issues treated by *Boxing Helena*, this history doesn't work for the film, but against it. It is difficult getting rid of someone who is shown in terms of physiognomy as almost terminally handsome – hollow cheeks, just the right touch of androgyny, not an excess ounce of body fat, not a single out-of-place body hair. In the slasher films of the last decade, the villain survives because he symbolizes the evil of society or the personal sexual repression of the female hero or the hopelessness of dealing with evil in the late twentieth century. In *Boxing Helena*, he survives for no apparent reason beyond the fact that it's hard to kill someone that good looking.

Symbolism is paraded before us the film in a way that the filmmakers apparently think is clever, but in reality is a simplicity more infantile than the hero is. We are constantly shown, front and center, a reproduction of the school-book-famous armless statue of Venus (a stand-in for Helena as ancient goddess mutilated by society – get it?).

Toward the end of the film, the statue falls on the doctor as if the armless statue attacks him in revenge for what he has done to Helena. The attack is less on the hero than on the audience's sense of intelligence . . . with one exception – pomegranates.

Pomegranates are perhaps the only symbolic element of the film not burdened with the curse of transparency. Early in the film Helena orders out for liquor and pomegranates. We don't know whether they are delivered or not, but later, as the doctor's captive, she is "rescued" because he orders some pomegranates for her. (By the way, if all this is a dream, how does the doctor know about her penchant for pomegranates?) This seed-filled and "bleeding" fruit is (and has been for millennia) an obvious symbol for the womb. In Greek mythology, pomegranates play an important role in the story of Persephone, the only daughter of Zeus and Demeter. Persephone, like Helena, was a victim of male brutalization – kidnapped and raped by Hades with her father's collusion! To find her daughter, Demeter resorted to blackmail, and, upon her rescue, she asked Persephone if she had eaten anything while in the underworld, for if she had not, she would be free. Unfortunately she had eaten three pomegranate seeds and would therefore have to spend part of each year in the underworld, bound interminably to her rapist/lover.

Persephone is portrayed as the goddess who returns to earth from the underworld in springtime, causing the seeds, which have spent some time under the ground just like the goddess, to sprout. At the same time, she is the goddess of the underworld who controls the activities of the spirits of the dead perhaps even more than Hades himself. Although these apparently opposing sides of Persephone's personality may seem contradictory today, they did not seem so to the Greeks. I suggest that they portray both sides of the personality of any powerful woman: control of life and control of death. This is the way that *Boxing Helena* attempts to symbolically flesh out the central character, and the pomegranate reference certainly helps, but it is insufficient to the task.

Women kidnapped for love have been treated before in, for example, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* [1990]. Women abused by amputation has been treated before in, for example, *Santa Sangre* [1990]. Amputation by crazed surgeons, of course, is a theme that has also been worked before *Boxing Helena*. The first American version in the sound-era, for instance, is *Mad Love* [1935] featuring Peter Lorre in his first American role playing the mad surgeon Dr. Gogol. As a result of Gogol's ministrations, famous pianist Orlac receives a hand transplant from a murderer. While Orlac can't play the piano any more, he unexpectedly acquires a talent – quite useful in the end to ironically dispatch the mad doctor - of knife throwing. The question here was the locus of the soul – the heart or the hands? In the post-Nietzscheian *Boxing Helena*, no one has a soul – so the question is moot. But the film's nihilism and cynicism extend beyond the screen and attack the audience itself. Worse yet, the film throws away an opportunity to inspect the very real historical victimization of women by the male dominated medical profession. It is as if everything Frida Kahlo was trying to say in her agonizing art has been debased.

For years, I looked forward to seeing a film called *Mark of the Vampire* [1935]. It was a remake of the lost silent vampire masterpiece, *London After Midnight* [1925], directed by Tod Browning and starring Lon Cheney, Sr. in makeup that has become the

most famous toothy grin in film history. Since no known prints of *London After Midnight* exist, I thought the director's own remake would be the next best thing. *Mark of the Vampire* features such horror luminaries as Bela Lugosi, Jean Hersholt, Lionel Atwill, and Lionel Barrymore. The body of the film is an interesting story with wonderful atmosphere – all fog and cobwebs. Lugosi reprises the classic vampire stylization he invented for *Dracula* [1931]. However, in the last three minutes of the film, we find out that the “vampire” was actually an actor hired by the police to intimidate a murder suspect into incriminating himself. What a let down. What a cop out. I wanted to scream because what could have been a wonderful film was ruined. *Boxing Helena* has a similar ending. However, the political implications are far more serious than the ruined ending of *Mark of the Vampire*. *Boxing Helena* is an insult to the audience. All the political rhetoric, all the vitriol, all the gender bashing, all is simply posturing with no sense of conviction: it was all a dream. As teenagers are wont to say, “Just kidding.” Rarely has a film so brutally pulled the rug out from under the audience, never with issues so serious. Women – and men – deserve better.

*Boxing Helena*. Directed by Jennifer Chambers Lynch. Screenplay by Jennifer Chambers Lynch. Story by Philippe Caland. Distributed by Orion Classics. 1993