

# Tripping In The Name Of Celluloid!



Ken Russell, in London, England, May 12, 2008,  
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## A Tribute to Ken Russell

By Jarrod Emerson

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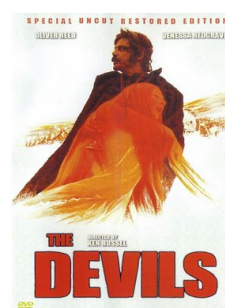
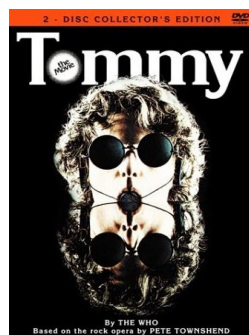
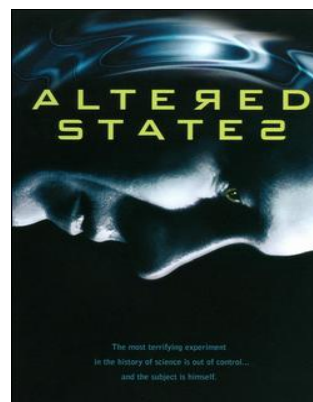
I kicked off my shoes, brewed a fresh pot of coffee, and doused the lights. As I plopped down on my bed/sofa and fired up the DVD player, I had no idea where my latest assignment was going to take me. Over the course of several films I'm plunged into a bizarre trip of psychological oddities: the cacophonous musical journey of a pinball wizard, through a convent of sexually repressed nuns and one seductive priest, and the physical manifestations of a mad scientist's hallucinations. But, that is just the beginning! 19<sup>th</sup> century Tchaikovsky agonizingly hides his homosexuality, a demented soapbox preacher whips out his sharp, metallic vibrator, and an LA prostitute takes me on a tour of her life – and it sure ain't *Pretty Woman*!

Only one man could have had a hand in all these escapades: the late British filmmaker Ken Russell, who died on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Love him or loathe him, the ferociously flamboyant storyteller could always be depended on for one thing: a potent mixture of intense visual and psychological flare that drew as many detractors as it did supporters. Basically, once you ride the roller coaster that is Ken Russell's career, you aren't likely to forget it! Here's to you Ken, for not holding back!

To pay tribute to this late cinematic maverick, I viewed the following films:

***Altered States***  
***Crimes Of Passion***  
***The Devils***  
***The Music Lovers***  
***Tommy***  
***Whore***  
***Women In Love***

Based on this sampling,  
I highly recommend  
These Five Russell films  
→



1) **Women In Love (1969) ★★★★★**: “Ursula” (Jennie Linden) and “Gudrun Brangwen” (Glenda Jackson) discuss love and marriage on their way to the wedding of “Lara Crich” (Sharon Gurney), a local socialite. At the wedding, Gudrun becomes fascinated by the Laura’s brother “Gerald” (Oliver Reed), while Ursula fixates on Gerald’s friend “Rupert Birkin” (Alan Bates). A subsequent house party brings them together, resulting in each girl entering into vastly different romances amongst the four. Each couple explores the nature of sex and love - some more painfully than others.

*Women In Love* was a turning point for Mr. Russell. Receiving his first and only Academy Award nomination, Mr. Russell delivered something few had seen prior to this time: a complex, and dark, and sensual film. Working from D.H. Lawrence’s novel, screenwriter Larry Kramer keeps the characters interesting and engaging. The main cast builds wonderful chemistry with each other.

Perhaps the most interesting of the bunch is Rupert, portrayed marvelously by the late Alan Bates. Rupert, while attracted psychically to women, also has an emotional attachment to his friend Gerald, which leads him to ask for “Declaration of Love” from him, after the two engage in a rather homoerotic nude wrestling match. Sure, this particular scene (as well as the film’s other sex scenes) were groundbreaking, but the film’s real achievement is the depth to which it explores the unpredictability we all endure in relationships. While the film’s director and many

cast members are no longer with us, may the messages about romance and sexuality endure!

**2) Altered States (1980) ★★★★★:** Abnormal Psychology Professor “Eddie Jessup” (William Hurt), theorizes that schizophrenia and other similar disorders might actually be “altered states” - rather than a “disease”. Experimenting on himself, Jessup fixates on sensory deprivation and uses a flotation/isolation tank to induce changes in consciousness. When he adds a powerful hallucinogen obtained from an obscure Mexican tribe to the experiments, Eddie’s “visions” cause him regress to a more primal form of being. These nightmarish effects threaten to sabotage his marriage to “Emily” (Blair Brown) and further detach him from humanity.

Ken Russell first set foot into Hollywood with *Altered States*. On one level, it’s a creepy Cronenbergesque body-horror flick with philosophical overtones, but on another it’s an intimate love story. It’s beyond me why screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky disowned the film. William Hurt makes a truly impressive movie debut as Eddie Jessup, whose obsession with discovering the ultimate truth robs him of any interest in his personal life. Blair Brown is fantastic as Emily. She is not merely a bombshell, but is a highly intelligent woman who spends the entire film struggling to reach her husband before she loses him forever to his existential quandary. The supporting cast, including veteran character actors Bob Balaban and Charles Haid, also do very well with their roles. Suit yourself Mr. Chayefsky, *Altered States* fits Ken Russell like a glove!

**3) Tommy (1975) ★★★★★☆:** “Nora Walker” (Ann-Margaret) gives birth to her son Tommy, even as she grieves that her husband, Captain Walker, is missing and presumed dead during the war. Lonely, she eventually takes a new lover in “Frank” (Oliver Reed). One fateful night, a young Tommy awakens to find his father home – only to witness Frank murder him. Traumatized, Tommy enters a state of shock appearing deaf, dumb and blind. After years of attempted “cures” fail, a now adult “Tommy” (Roger Daltrey) becomes a pinball wizard and attains messianic status, which may hold the key to recovery.

From the moment I first heard those majestic synthesizer notes in the opening sequence, I knew I was in for a fun ride! Ken Russell does a fine job adapting and directing The Who’s classic concept album to a full-on Rock Opera. Russell and The Who however, do not simply fit the script to the album, but they took the liberty to alter and add music. They also left most of the singing to a spectacular cast of character actors (i.e. Russell favorite Oliver Reed and some other surprises) and an impeccable roster of rock stars (Elton John, Tina Turner, Eric Clapton among many others). Roger Daltrey impressed me in the title role, pouring every ounce of his energy into portraying Tommy. Russell and veteran cameraman Dick Bush pull out all the stops with bold colors and explosive camera work. In the end, all of the creative energy gels together quite nicely, making *Tommy* a magnificently trippy musical funhouse! Besides, how often does one get to hear Jack Nicholson sing?

**4) THE DEVILS (1971) ★★★★★☆:** Power, corruption, and lust reign supreme in 17<sup>th</sup> century France. Popular but dissolute “Father Urbain Grandier” (Oliver Reed) has

been given control of the city of Loudun. “Cardinal Richelieu” (Christopher Logue) wants to increase his own power, and, among other things, convinces Louis VIII that tearing down the fortifications around cities throughout the country will prevent a Protestant uprising. However, the king has one stipulation - the walls of Loudun may not be destroyed.

In the meantime, mentally unbalanced and sexually repressed “Sister Jeanne” (Vanessa Redgrave) becomes obsessed with Grandier – along with the other members of her convent! When Sister Jeanne learns of Grandier’s affairs and clandestine marriage, all hell breaks loose!

As notoriously violent and sexual as this film is, for me the most difficult part of watching it was tracking down a damn copy! *The Devils* has spent decades buried by critical mauling, censorship and out-of-print VHS, and it’s easy to see why. To put it in Spinal Tap terms, Ken Russell cranked his amp up to 11 here! *The Devils* knows it’s uneven, over-the-top, violent, and borderline pornographic and makes no apology for it! Maybe that’s why I enjoyed this darkly splendid historical costume drama. Whether it’s Oliver Reed’s thunderous, over-the-top portrayal of Grandier, Vanessa Redgrave’s eerily shocking and bold performance, or the monumental production design, Russell has never been more unrestrained. I applaud Russell and company for having the balls to throw this brooding little tale out there in ’71!

**5) THE MUSIC LOVERS (1970) ★★☆☆☆:** Lengthy excerpts of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s work, woven with interludes of dialogue delve into the agonizing personal life of the composer himself (Richard Chamberlin). As Tchaikovsky’s fame increases, so too does the agony of being in the closet. Despite his lust for “Count Anton Chilovsky” (Christopher Gable), the tormented composer takes a wife in “Antonina Miliukova” (Glenda Jackson). Unfortunately, Antonina is a nymphomaniac, and Tchaikovsky is unable to satisfy her. How far will Tchaikovsky go to bury his feelings, and what price will he pay for it?

*The Music Lovers* is one Ken Russell’s many forays into the biopic genre and it’s one of his most interesting. Yes, it’s full of historical inaccuracies, but I have news: It’s a work of fiction and so was *Amadeus*! Sure, *The Music Lovers* is no *Amadeus*, but it’s a fairly entertaining, trippy journey down the mind of a talented, but traumatized auteur. Ok, so I admit that I’m nobody’s classical aficionado, but watching *The Music Lovers* may just spark interest in the world of classical composers for some viewers.

No one can accuse Russell on being stingy with Tchaikovsky’s work, as the film displays frequent dialog-free montages of fantasies and flashbacks underscored to perfection with various pieces of his music. For me the most memorable scene is set to the *1812 Overture*, with several outrageous images metaphorically portraying Tchaikovsky’s simultaneous success and internal deterioration. Richard Chamberlain carries the role well, with a perfect theatrical flare. His over-the-top performance is perfectly suited to the film’s flamboyant, claustrophobic tone. Only Ken Russell could so effectively convey inner-turmoil with these antics!

**Not all of Ken's films have aged like a fine wine. As much as I wanted to like the following films, I found it downright impossible!**

**1) WHORE (1991) ★☆☆☆☆:** Roaming the streets of Los Angeles, "Liz" (Theresa Russell) gives us insight into her life as a hooker. As she reflects on her past and ponders her future, Liz is forced to hide from her vengeful, abusive pimp "Blake" (Benjamin Mouton). She also has multiple run-ins with eccentric street hustler "Rasta" (Antonio Vargas) whom may or may not be what he appears. If you thought being a prostitute was easy or fun, you have another think coming!

*Whore* was Ken Russell's answer to Gary Marshall's romantic blockbuster *Pretty Woman*. It's a noble enough cause, but I would've appreciated the result more if it was A) deep, B) entertaining, C) well written, D) well acted, or god forbid, E) all of the above! Unfortunately it's none of these! Adapted from David Hine's stage play, *Whore* is a diluted, contrived, and mean-spirited mess of a film! While the film has a couple interesting ideas, namely Liz's fourth wall-breaking monologues, it has trouble deciding what to focus on. If Russell had picked one direction to go in, things may have turned out differently. It's very clear what his intentions were in terms of an "*Anti-Pretty Woman*", but much of the film feels simply forced and directionless. If *Pretty Woman* was too romantic for some, then *Whore* may just be too dark for them as well! I could think of a million better ways to conclude a silver screen career than this!

**2) CRIMES OF PASSION (1984) ★☆☆☆☆:** Electronics store owner "Bobby Grady" (John Laughlin) takes on a night job, tailing suspected sports fashion mole "Joanna Crane" (Kathleen Turner). Instead, Bobby discovers her true nocturnal activity: moonlighting as a prostitute under the name "China Blue". Curious and restless from his crumbling marriage, Bobby becomes her latest client. But things get complicated when the two develop genuine romantic feelings. Meanwhile, the psychotic "Reverend Peter Shayne" (Anthony Perkins) torments China with bizarre rants and an arsenal of sex toys, intent on her salvation, or so he claims!

*Crimes Of Passion* marks Ken Russell's second American film. Like most of his films, the film is an ambitious blend of genres: in this case drama and film noir. Despite a decent pack of character actors, the film is painfully uneven. By far the best thing in the film is the late Anthony Perkins, eerily wonderful as the psychotic, sex-obsessed Soapbox Preacher Shayne. He and Kathleen Turner play very well together. John Laughlin also turns in a decent performance, but the subplot with his wife "Amy" (played by Annie Potts) feels very forced and isn't helped by some poorly written dialogue. Cinematographer Dick Bush provides almost as many vivid colors as he did on *Tommy*, it's just a shame it isn't supported by a stronger story. While Ken Russell has seamlessly blended genres on many occasions, this one just feels like a muddy hodgepodge struggling to find it's own voice.

**My Bottom Line:**

**While the Russell catalogue is certainly uneven, when he hits the mark, it's a bullseye!**



A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod's life!