



ANASTASIA

Redefining Tragic History through Rose-colored Glasses

by Nick Zegarac



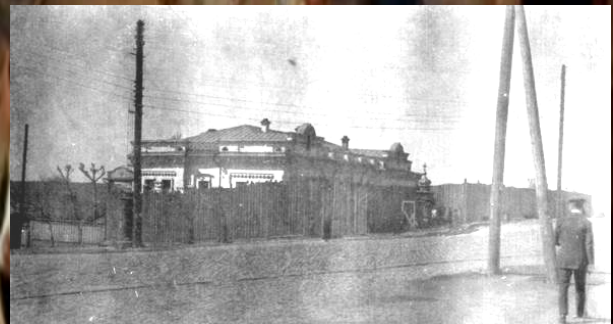
Anatole Litvak's 'Anastasia' is a retrospective immaculate fairytale grafted onto one of the most heinous and tragic events of the 20th century; the assassination of Tsar Nicholas and the Russian royal family.

A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON

True, Nicholas was hardly benevolent (he detested giving in to the people's demand for a Duma – or representative government) or capable of

maintaining order in a country slowly deteriorating into communism (in 1915 Nicholas assumed control of the army on the eastern front against Germany. The losses sustained thereafter branded Nicholas a weak-kneed commander in the eyes of his people), but did he really deserve death? Forced to abdicate his authority on July 15, 1917, Nicholas and his family were placed under house arrest. It was rumored that they would be exiled – perhaps to England.

However, the events of that tragic July eve of 1918 are well ingrained in historical fact: the Tsar placed in front of a Bolshevik firing squad in the cellar of a 'safe house' in Ekaterinburg then doused in gasoline, set on fire and buried in unmarked graves somewhere in the forests beyond. Yet even before those missing remains were rediscovered in 2002, rumors began to circulate that the youngest of the Tsar's daughters, the Grand Duchess Anastasia, had escaped the royal deluge, some said on the arm of an Imperial Guardsman who was smitten with the girl.



Quickly a rabid fascination stirred within Russia and abroad to locate the escaped Romanov. In the late 1920's exiled royalists and a large portion of the public finally settled on one woman for their imposter – Anna Andersen, a mentally unstable pretender to the throne who relished the fame she was garnering, but ultimately proved, through exhumation and DNA testing NOT to be the woman that she in fact had claimed to be.

What is perhaps most fascinating about the rediscovery of the bones of the Russian Royal family is the fact that Anastasia's (and those of the Tsar's only son, Alexei) are not among those remains. Since it seems highly improbable that the Bolshevik assassins, in all their zeal to quickly dismember and bury their handy-work, would have taken the effort to move or carefully conceal the remains of the two youngest children, the legend of Anastasia has remained an undiscovered fiction, presumably for all time.



REAL TO REEL ROMANOV HISTORY

Working from the successful stage play by Guy Bolton, screenwriter Arthur Laurents fashioned a crisp little bit of lighter-than-air intrigue about a trio of opportunistic relics from the glorious good ol' days of Imperial Russia: Gen. Sergei Pavlovich Bounine (Yul Brynner), Piotr Ivanovich Petrovin (Sasha

Pitoeff), Boris Adreivich Chernov (Akim Tamaroff) and their desire to will a girl of no account into the Grand Duchess Anastasia in order to collect her inheritance from Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna (Helen Hayes). Bounine is their ring leader. Together with his accomplices the trio of plotters set about finding a willing participant for their rouse, and also, to recover enough royalist exiles in France able to verify their claim, as Bounine puts it, "three stupid enough to believe that even (he) is Anastasia, three gullible enough to spread the word that she is Anastasia!"

After discovering a woman (Ingrid Bergman) lingering near an Orthodox Cathedral in Paris, and saving her from committing suicide, Bounine slowly sets to work on fashioning her mind and recollections about a world he believes she has no prior knowledge of. However, when the woman begins to provide background glimpses into the real Russian aristocracy, that she has not been taught and therefore would have no way of knowing, Bounine's doubt in his protégée begins to grow. Is she really Anastasia?



Laurents' script is clever never to offer definitive proof either way – thereby providing the film with an authenticity it otherwise might not have. The film neither claims to be or mimic historical accuracies, though there are quiet enough of them imbedded in the story to make the fairytale quite plausible. A pivotal sequence occurs half way through Anastasia's training when she is introduced to former members of the Imperial household, including one of Tsarina Alexandra's ladies in waiting, Irina Lissemskaia (Natalie Schafer).



Skeptical at first, Irina is brought to tears when the woman recalls the private name of 'Nini' that no one but her mother ever called her by.



What is remarkable about the film is its ability, not merely to function as faux history, yet extol a sense of the great tragedy that spawned its retelling. In the final moments of screen time the woman who may or may not have been a princess – having won the acceptance and affections of her grandmother – forgoes her engagement to Prince Paul von Haraldberg (Ivan Desny) to elope with her tutor, Bounine. When Paul asks the dowager, “What will you say to them?” meaning the group of royalist sympathizers who have gathered in a grand ballroom to meet Anastasia, the dowager dryly replies, “I will say, the show is over. Go home.” In Laurents’ original script that line was meant to be spoken directly into the camera, the dowager thereby addressing the movie going audience with a fond farewell to the proceedings. Presumably, director Litvak felt the premise too theatrical in nature, and opted instead for the line to be said directly in reference to Paul’s question, the final shot swollen in grand spectacle as the dowager and Paul descend a staircase into the ballroom of well wishers.

REGAL FACTOIDS

- Fox executives balked at the idea of casting Ingrid Bergman as their fairytale princess. Married Bergman’s affair with Italian director, Roberto Rossellini and her ‘abandonment’ of daughter Pia Linstrom was perceived as the epitome of wanton disregard for the sanctities of marriage and motherhood. Bergman was even denounced on the floor of congress. The notoriety had effectively killed her American film career from 1949 to 1956.
- Director Anatole Litvak and screenwriter Arthur Laurents absolutely refused to do the film until Fox acquiesced to having Bergman as their lead.

- Bergman's performance not only won her the respect of her colleagues and fans, it also earned Bergman the Oscar as Best Actress.
- A relative unknown to film audiences, Yul Brynner was a busy man in 1956. He starred in three colossal hits: *Anastasia* (for which he was nominated for the Best Actor Oscar), *The King & I* (which he had originated on the Broadway stage and was also nominated for as Best Actor) and Cecil B. DeMille's remake of *The Ten Commandments*. Although all three performances are worthy of his efforts and accolades attached, Brynner would take home his statuette for his performance as the King of Siam, not Gen. Bounine.
- The character of Gen. Bounine is pure fabrication on the part of scenarist Guy Bolton. No such Imperial charlatan ever existed.
- The film establishes reconciliation between the dowager empress and the woman who finally convinces her that she is Anastasia. In real life there were literally hundreds of imposters who attempted to win the dowager's affections and money. None, including Anna Andersen (the woman many believers thought was the real Anastasia for decades) ever received such royal acknowledgement.
- In 1997 Fox once again chose to explore the rumor, the legend and the mystery surrounding Anastasia – this time with a lavish animated musical by Don Bluth. The resulting film departs even more dramatically from history with an incarnation/revenge story involving real life monk to the royal court, Rasputin. Liberally interpreted and masterfully fleshed out with stunning animation, that film has a charm all its own.



ANASTASIA on DVD

Twentieth Century-Fox resurrects the past to glorious effect on DVD. After years of having to endure this Cinemascope masterwork in shabby cropped full frame television broadcasts and blurry VHS and laserdisc incarnations, Fox gives us a marvelously restored anamorphically-enhanced image. Although there are subtle instances where pixelization and edge enhancement crop up in the transfer, most of the image is quiet solid and lush and lovely to look at. Colors are vibrant, pure and nicely contrasted. Whites are generally clean. Blacks are solid and deep. Occasionally the image quality is slightly softer than one would hope for, but again – a minute oversight, easily forgotten once one becomes thoroughly engrossed in the story. The audio has been remixed to 5.1 stereo. Though dated, it represents the film's robust score to its full advantage.



Extras include a thorough and thoroughly entertaining audio commentary from Arthur Laurents, James MacArthur (son of the late Helen Hayes), musicologist, John Burlingame and Fox film historian, Sylvia Stoddard. There's also the A&E Biography: *Anastasia: Her True Story*, the film's theatrical trailer, a restoration comparison and some news reel footage of the premiere: first rate stuff.

