

REVIEW

RHONDA FLEMING – QUEEN OF THE B's

From the German original by ANDRÉ MALBERG

Robert Zions volumes are the gold standard for monographs on film personalities in the German speaking world. Norbert Grob once wrote in a book on William Wyler that there are among film-makers “the free ones and the precise ones”. This holds true for authors of film books as well. In his new book *Zion* even manages to combine the two into one. I would praise it all-out even if he were not a member of our editorial department. Why is that? As always, he does not proceed strictly chronological to move hand over hand from stage of life to stage of life and film to film. By this he succeeds in creating a look that does not just bundle film genres but aspects of Rhonda Fleming's life too, her reception and what defines the phenomenon and her work. The (briskly candid rather than coquettish) foreword-fear about the passionate fan standing in the way of objectivity and the very serious aspirations of cultural science will be dispelled in its entirety. The observations contained in the principal part dedicate themselves to subjects as diverse as the “soul” (Georg Seeßlen) of the adventure film, the ambivalent relationship with politics of Ronald Reagan friend Fleming, the more than just inverted gender roles in Fleming's greatest performances, the specific operating principles of individual production crews and even individual Technicolor consultants – yes, there was not only the towering above all Natalie Kalmus. Even though the American 1950's were derided as exceptionally conservative and “flaming head” Fleming had a certain reputation, *Zion* proves: She also did mediocre films, but when things were going along fine, she was not governed but governed herself. Even those who never heard about the the 50's b-movie queen Rhonda Fleming will subsequently want to view all her western movies, noirs and adventure films.

That side of the cinematic oeuvre: A appreciation of her private life devoid of any keyhole perspectives at all; in lieu of these *Zion* refutes stereotypes and canards who reared their ugly heads even in younger publications. Here another quality comes into play: Meticulousness. The research achievements and annotations are vast. The latter, moreover furnished with information on available home video releases, can in this

extensiveness for the most part only be found in academic publications or film books backed by a large collective such as the luxury volumes dedicated to the annual Berlinale retrospective. Zion tackled all of this alone and is evidently immune to the facebook university virus.

Yet for all this analytical astuteness and painstaking preciseness, alongside the critical look – yes, there are various poor films - passion and liveliness never fall by the wayside. Zion is a cineaste, and you don't want to do without Shakespeare thespians in cinema – but unique to the pure cinema is what Elinor Glyn called “it”, turned Clara Bow into the first “it girl” and is now, with good reason, dubbed “presence” here. Rhonda Fleming has it. The book as well. In contrast to the certainly formative for many film publicists and consulted by Zion as well Georg Seeßlen, it is averse to any convolution of the language. Rhonda's silver screen magic finds her equivalent in Zion's inflammatory analytical word wizardry. And the spell of a lavishly as evidently employed illustration.

Prof. Dr. Tonio Klein

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