

MAUD
LE PLADEC
AND
MICKAEL
PHELIPPEAU
OF LE CLUBDES
["THE FAMOUS FIVE"]
INTERVIEW
WITH
MAUD
DESSEIGNES

MAUD DESSEIGNES

The *Fidelinka* project takes the representation of the hysterical body as its starting point. What got you interested in this as a subject?

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

When we began *Fidelinka* we were interested in the exploration of what a hysterical body can be for us today. It's amazing the way the meaning of the word "hysteria"—originally "disease of the womb"—has changed and become a part of everyday speech, being applied to people whose behaviour doesn't fit with some "norm". This definition implies a kind of surveillance of everything we do and for us—in this case the people on stage—this hinges on a presence, a stance that is always on the boundary, always shifting and unstable. There was a time when it was explained that people—mostly women, of course—were rendered diabolical, and thus hysterical, by the movement of the womb within the body.

We were intrigued by the different meanings of hysteria and even more so by what they point to today. We were also interested by the representation of the hysterical body; in France this is a legacy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and Charcot's work at the Pitié Salpêtrière hospital. What makes this period all the more highly charged for us today is that it comes to us in the form of those famous photos of women

Maud Le Pladec & Mickaël Phelippeau (Le Clubdes5), *FireZinka*, 2005, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Marc Domage



patients frozen in convulsively arched and acrobatic poses, with incredibly expressive, sometimes clownlike faces; this means the period can be seen as an integral part of art history, and we began *Fidelinka* with the admittedly ambitious urge to take a look at the issue and see what resonances it produced.

MAUD LE PLADEC

Working with the hysterical “type” enabled us to open up a broad field of aesthetic and political considerations. Via the study of the pathology we were able to establish links between the history of the representation of bodies—more specifically those of women—and the power of a discourse which, because it was medical, was the dominant one. The studies from the deviant behaviour period echoed some of our own questions, notably those to do with the norm and the way we embody it. So we set out to take a fresh look at the recording of the appearance of this pathology using the Salpêtrière photos. This recording was one of our sources of inspiration, but also a reference point, an analytical tool. We were intrigued by the uncertain character of the photos, which had a dual status as both medical archives and parts of a whole segment of art history.

In the course of our research we came up against the host of questions raised by our subject. This ultimately led to work on presence (the body *made present*) and disembodiment (separation from reality: ecstasy). As hysteria was defined as a body language, we wanted to decode it and create another one. To whom does a female body speak, and how? Unusual in their form and eloquent in their content, hysterical symptoms are a singularly effective way of calling on others. What I know now about the hysterical body is that it's a body that jolts indifference and inevitably generates a response.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

How did you organise and extend your research?

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

At the beginning of the project we went to the Charcot Library at the Salpêtrière and explored various areas; we met people who could guide us and we followed up the lines of research they suggested. Then we began working in the studio, but at the same time we were meeting more people and checking out pathways leading to subjects and forms different from the ones we'd

started with. After we met the psychoanalyst and philosopher Sabine Prokhoris, we began concentrating on simulating her personality, on putting it together out of a broad range of influences, references and everyday material. Out of this came the work on imitation that loomed very large in the project. The choice of sources was deliberately eclectic and followed the evolution of the project.

MAUD LE PLADEC

One of the driving forces for the project, in parallel with the research into movement, was the creation of a corpus of plastic, cinematic and image sources. We were looking for new “icons”. So we decided to base our work on personalities like Gena Rowlands in John Cassavetes's *A Woman under the Influence* and Liza Minelli in Bob Fosse's *Cabaret*, and well-known figures like the American woman performance artist Dirty Martini, Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman and Betty Page, Katarina Bosse's pinups, Augustine, who was one of Charcot's patients, and the pop singer Beyoncé. The agenda for *Fidelinka* was to reappropriate certain scenes from the films and incorporate the stances of these different cultural icons, the idea being to redraw their outlines, to get a disfigurement process under way and produce anti-copies of pre-existing images. For example, Dirty Martini's “balloon dress” became a “balloon head”, Gena Rowlands's walk became a crazy run, Augustine's contortions froze into ecstatic catalepsy, and Liza Minelli's cabaret routine was multiplied into four hysterical figures. The utopian side of the *Fidelinka* project lay in the fact that each movement and each sequence referred to an already existing image.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Watching the successive stages of *Fidelinka*, one sees that there's been special attention given to form. *Fidelinka* as you presented it at the Laboratoires is characterised by staging that's very elaborate in terms of sound, lighting, sets and costumes.

MAUD LE PLADEC

Yes, we really wanted to emphasise the staging, and the bifrontal relationship was vital from the start. We wanted to work on seeing, on the spectator seeing himself in the other person sitting opposite. We wanted the lighting to be “too obvious”. By stressing the spectacular side of certain lighting effects we hoped to contradict the feel-

ing of intimacy due to the nearness of the audience. It was a way of creating an unease, a feeling of uncanniness. The project revolves around the contradictions and complexity of bodily relationships: actors/actors, actors/musicians, actors/audience. Once again you've got one of the characteristics of hysterical symptoms. And as for the costumes, it's all a joke! *Fidelinka*© is the name of a Serbian handball team and the four women dancers come on wearing pink shorts and high heels, but this dopey nudge-wink also lets us use things we have in common in order to foreground differences.

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

It's true that we really wanted powerful staging. If we decided on an elaborate scenography it was initially with the idea of echoing the presentations organised at the Salpêtrière, with their spectacular highlighting of the bodies of the women patients. In his book on Charcot,¹ Georges Didi-Huberman talks about “setting up” a “show” and the “invention of hysteria”. We very quickly tried out this configuration facing each other and from there on in, given the point we'd reached, it would have been complicated to work without this input. The same is true of the high heels the women wear from beginning to end.

On the other hand, other choices took shape along the way. Initially we were keen to have a visually saturated space, with everything bathed in orange. This involved work on the lighting, the costumes, the colour of the floor and so on. This saturation expressed an urge to deliberately overdo things. As the work moved through successive stages we played this down, but then we returned to it more strongly at the Laboratoires, putting the orange back in more explicitly. We wanted a floor that was both fake and weird, a kind of kitchen floor. The imitation wood lino we used gives a village hall atmosphere which is heightened by the plastic chairs the audience is sitting on. What we were after, in fact, was having people come into a very open space that was simultaneously an entertainment area and a fake dance floor, like you find in a community centre. Leaving the doors open for

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Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie—Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, Paris, Macula, 1982.



Maud Le Pladec & Mickaël Phelippeau (Le Clubdes5), *Fidelinka*, 2005, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Marc Damage

the whole of the opening section was part of that: this was an acknowledgement of the place we were in while making it fictional.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Was this desire to fictionalise and thus to have the spectator form his own imaginative field also part of the actual dramatisation?

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

The dramatisation tends to do that in the same way as the staging. Apart from the drawing-out of time and the breaks in rhythm that are part of *Fidelinka's* creation of a fiction, this is most effective in the actual performance. If there's an idea we really stressed when we were working on the piece, it was that of "incorporation", in the sense of integrating things into the body. Integrating doesn't mean cloning, it means swallowing a foreign body and transforming it, whence the fulltime shift created by the fact that these women are playing a character. In this sense the term "play" is to be understood as meaning neither total incarnation, as in the incarnation of Christ, nor a total stage presence that could be described as "sincere", as in playing the part of yourself; rather there's an oscillation between

the two, a constant instability in the bodies, a ceaseless change of state. As a result, if the spectator creates an imaginative field, one contributing factor is his shifting perception and the impossibility of knowing at what level of performance he's seeing things.

MAUD LE PLADEC

We didn't start out with the idea of relating something, but ultimately the construction of the work could allow this: like a succession of associations of ideas the juxtaposition of scenes creates a time context, an imaginative field and a narrative. Nonetheless I have the impression of having been dispossessed of anything that can be related. Maybe if we had to rework the piece the narrative could become its starting point.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

How did you go about working with Benjamin Boiffier on the lighting and Mathieu Werchowski on the music?

MAUD LE PLADEC

When Mickaël met the violinist Mathieu Werchowski he was knocked out by his physicality

and his improvisation. Mathieu had already worked in dance and we wanted to go into the idea of performance with him and work on something to do with presence. For reasons of significance we didn't want him sharing the same space as the women dancers, but the configuration of the venue gave us the possibility of a space encircling the stage area and so we worked with him on creating a path running parallel to that of the performers, something reminiscent of a sound track and referencing the sources we'd drawn on. We also experimented with the same improvisation instructions as for the dancers. We wanted to play on the more or less obvious links between music and dance, jumping, for example, from synchronisation of movement and music to the counterpoint mode.

With regard to Benjamin Boiffier, we'd already worked together on an earlier duet that had been a preliminary to the *Fidelinka* project. And so he went further into the idea of isolation and multiple points of view.

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

Regarding Benjamin's work on *Fidelinka*, you could call it a light installation. He followed the evolution of the project, with all the unforeseen

elements this involves, and so he was able to design and develop his work as we went along. One example is the “bunches of PARs” that give the room its “concert” feel and are to be understood as objects in their own right; in formal terms they are a response to the balloon-heads worn by the people on stage, which, once laid on the floor, outline a landscape and impose a pathway right through to the end. As *Fidelinka* takes its course, lighting changes gradually direct the gaze towards the floor in a parallel with the pathway followed by the girls, but with a time lag; and at the end there is an abrupt return to a harsh, blinding light.

When I met Mathieu we were both working on loops as reiterations which, in spite of everything, would never be exactly the same. The concert by Mathieu that I saw was a possible musical response to what we were looking for with bodies. So he kept to this ritornello and with him we tried out various performance gambits and overlappings with the girls’ movements; we felt a pressing need for a strong fifth presence. Then there came the urge to radicalise this and to work with Mathieu on the edge both of the action and the girls’ involvement, but also on the edge of the performance space, with the idea that he should never set foot in it. This reinforces the idea of a limited, encircled space for the girls. So Mathieu prepared a solitary path, making himself potentially visible at the beginning and at a few moments when he moves past the open doors, playing the violin. Afterwards he remains a tangible, absent presence.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

The audience layout is a departure from the traditional frontal seating/stage arrangement: there are two rows of chairs bordering the performance area, so the performers are very close to the spectators. What are you trying to spark off—not only for the audience but also for the performers—with this set-up?

MAUD LE PLADEC

A relationship in the loosest sense of the word. This can be understood differently for each person. *Fidelinka* is a very open-ended form, an exercise in macro-writing that can be modified according to the context. This nearness to the audience makes the form porous and forces the performers to live in the present moment. *Fidelinka* comprises different sequences of different kinds and the performers have to make play with the sev-

eral modes of address we’ve identified and named. This could have generated desire, pleasure or frustration in the spectators. One of the core intentions of *Fidelinka* was to build a space for seeing, in which the spectators feel sometimes directly concerned and sometimes totally left to their own devices. There’s a ceaseless coming and going between the person seeing and the person providing what’s to be seen.

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

There’s nothing new about this kind of set-up, but it offered the best fit with our desire to provoke a certain kind of seeing and confrontation. In *Fidelinka* it seemed important to us that there should not be the “seating/stage” division you mentioned. The fact of the audience being on each side of a kind of corridor immediately implies a different relationship to the performance space and to other people, actors and spectators alike. Another thing is that the proximity created by this arrangement allows for focus on detail. At the same time we didn’t want to misuse an already forceful layout by overdoing direct confrontation or provocation—even if these are present. We didn’t want to stress this aspect. What counted most for us was the fact that the public should surround these four women, form a framework for them. This means they can be observed up close, scrutinised like animals at an agricultural show. Then there’s the point of view: according to where he’s situated, each spectator will see the stage differently. The spectator in front has a sort of image in negative. This doesn’t involve frustration or deprivation, it just emphasises the uniqueness of each person watching. And for each of the women on stage it’s an experience that imposes a special awareness of the body. Everything is potentially on offer to the eye and this means a presentation that is far from easy. This fragility is important to us, and it’s activated each time.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

In this framework, what was the involvement of the different performers?² Did each one come with her own wishes, ideas and hesitations? In the programme you used the term “persona”, which suggests the idea of shaping oneself in

relation to the surrounding context, but more precisely of defining oneself via the image each person has of himself in light of the way others see him. Did the personality of each performer influence your choices?

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

We’ve been working together for more than four years now, and *Fidelinka* is no exception to that rule. It’s true that each performer came with her wishes, ideas and hesitations. And the fact that you connect these different terms with that of the “persona” isn’t new to us. In fact that’s what’s at stake. As we were saying earlier, in order to keep *Fidelinka* always alive and active, there’s a constant oscillation for each of the performers between fictionalising herself and letting herself simulate, stage and be permeated by her own image. Image here can’t be summed up as a simple surface thing. It’s also the echoes sent back by the other person: how do you grasp those echoes and how do you react—or not—and so on? Isn’t this the way we all act in daily life, isn’t this what creates that “attitude always on the boundary” we were talking about at the beginning? Rather than “living in the present moment”, the girls take possession of the present, they seize it and outsmart it. If there’s one thing their individual personalities influenced here, it’s the idea that that personality must be actively present on stage at all times. As Maud was saying, we worked on “using things we have in common to foreground differences”. It was as we went along that we became aware of this possibility of leaving the project open-ended at that point too. And that was what happened, because we’d been exchanging and working together in that direction.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Fidelinka presents different images of the female body, drawing on references from the plastic arts, the cinema, the stage, music and so on. Beyond using simple visual quotes, do you adopt a more political or theoretical discourse in relation to the status of women in today’s society?

MAUD LE PLADEC

My urge is to say yes, even if I don’t feel committed to any particular cause. What’s involved is more a different way of putting the questions. By drawing on the current situation and daring to use what other people are doing, we put for-

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The four women on stage are Maeva Cunci, Maud Le Pladec, Carole Perdereau and Virginie Thomas.

ward a point of view in our own way. The fact of using hysteria as a search engine and of referencing various artists or contemporary works to speak about it points up our relationship to our era and the questions that go with it. The subject is one that raises a host of issues and we found it very difficult to limit ourselves to any one of them, for fear of closing off the subject. It's clear that we're targeting female stereotypes, and our approach is overkill. On stage you have four women wearing high heels, pink shorts and balloons on their heads—or maybe they're monsters from a science fiction movie, hybrid bodies somewhere between Charcot's hysterics and Beyoncé, or maybe they've just put on Dirty Martini's dress all wrong. Whatever, the important thing is to generate confusion—in the genre and in behaviour—and to create an imaginary domain. We've tried to cut free of all definitions and to transcend the normal/pathological dialectic—in other words to open up different fields of speculation for ourselves and, by extension, for others.

MICKAËL PHELIPPEAU

This is an intrinsic part of our approach. Setting out to put on a piece based on the representation of the hysterical body means not losing sight of the fact that, as briefly mentioned earlier, our choice of subject necessarily involves a commitment. There remains the question of whether this commitment is political or theoretical. The thing we stress is that it seems to us reductive to see our point of departure as summing up *Fidelinka*. We approach the subject, we put forward a point of view, but suggest no answers. We offer a framework we hope is open-ended. We express a reaction to what is going on around us. If we have recourse to references, some of them going back several decades—and thus representing a geographical, social and by extension political context different from our own—it's because they have something to tell us today. We then juxta-

pose them with other references from our own period. There's a reason for this. Nine months or so earlier, in Lyon, we devised an extension of *Fidelinka* for two performers, a woman and a man.³ This extension was possible because we wanted to keep things open-ended. In *Fidelinka* four women perched on high heels are there the whole time, in extreme proximity. On its own that's really something. And yet the result is in no way more hermetically closed. That's what we hope, anyway.

Maud Le Pladec and Mickaël Phelippeau are dancers and choreographers, associate artists of the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in 2005. Maud Le Pladec lives in Rennes (France). Mickaël Phelippeau lives in Paris (France). They are co-founders of the group Le Clubdes5 (with Maeva Cunci, Typhaine Heissat and Virginie Thomas). *Fidelinka*, shown at the Laboratoires on October 12-13-14, 2005. Coproduction Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers; Le Clubdes5. With the support of the Conseil général de la Seine-Saint-Denis. Partnerships: Centre Chorégraphique National de Rennes et de Bretagne / Thanks to Ielabo, Paris; Micadanses, Paris; Le Grand Cordel, Rennes.

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Fidelinka-Extension was performed on 15 and 16 January 2005 at Les Subsistances in Lyon. In a frontal stage-public presentation, the two protagonists wore only balloon-heads as they moved around the stage in isolation. *Fidelinka-Extension* involved working on the imitation of various

female figures sketched out in a fragmentary way. We used the same codes as for *Fidelinka*. While this version was perceived as a locus for research into ideas for *Fidelinka*, what happened was that we were overtaken by its title and it emerged as a separate, autonomous work.