La Bambola di Carne

Letizia Renzini, with Marina Giovannini
The Place, Dance Umbrella, London, October 28, 2008

By Johannes Birringer

La Bambola di Carne, Letitizia Renzini/Mariana Giovannini. Photo courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

Snow started to fall inexplicably on a noisy night just before Halloween, as I left The Place after a single night performance of *La Bambola di Carne*, part of the 2008 London International Festival of Contemporary Dance. Organized by Dance Umbrella, this year's festival featured twenty-one different productions by well-known companies (including Merce Cunningham, Richard Alston, Mark Morris, O Vertigo, Stephen Petronio and Batsheva Dance Company) as well as other established and emerging choreographers or solo artists from Europe and overseas. Letizia Renzini was introduced to the festival as the creator of *La Bambola di Carne*, credited with direction, video composition, sound, and live performance, while her partner Marina Giovannini danced the major role in the piece and was responsible for the choreography.

The two Italian artists from Firenze had not been seen in the UK before, and *La Bambola* appears to have been their first collaboration, receiving its world premiere in June 2008 during the Venice Biennial. After an extended period of dancing for the Balletto di Toscana, Giovannini made her choreographic debut in 2003 (winning the Ubu Prize for *Empty Space, Requiem*), while Renzini has worked for a number of years as DJ, video artist and performer collaborating with female bands (jazz, vocal improvisation, electronic music) and RAI Radio3, as well as with maverick theatre directors such as Romeo Castellucci (whose Societas Raffaello Sanzio has made a name for its stunning visual performances).

As unexpectedly as the early snowfall, Renzini's creation startled our attention by taking us onto a backward journey into the darker recessses of the animated expressionism of the silent film era. The journey, however, is carried out with a complex, innovative weave of design and visual choreography. Renzini achieves something that is quite rare in today's multimedia and technology-driven experimental performance world – a fully developed, finely tuned and superbly structured live film-dance-music work featuring an almost completely integrated (interactional) synthesis between moving image composition and a physical dance character that moves in and out of the projected visual narratives with the same ease with which Renzini works the turntables and mixes the sonic layers.

What kind of projectionist world of dance is this? It certainly works on an entirely different level as many VJing performances in the club scene. There are very few visual/graphic effects here that are not integral to the telling of a story and an overall compositional coherence. We are struck by the effortless ease with with the dancer (Giovannini) seems to inhabit the screen world, initially as a shadow silhouette, then stepping out of it into the stage light, downstage right before the triptych screens, where she becomes a double of "her" film doubles. The sharply contoured rectangles of light almost appear to create screen spaces on the floor where the dancer slowly creates images of a body animated as if by invisible machinations, as if controlled by something outside of her. Dressed only in her underwear, and her slender, androgynous body perceived in stark contrast with the opulently dressed women characters on film, Giovannini's first onstage appearance creates a sense of tenderness and even unease.

from the opening of Lubitsch's film "Die Puppe". Archival photo.

The evening had begun with a surprise. There is an empty stage with three screens arranged as a triptych upstage, and during the first ten minutes of rear-projections we watch an old movie with intertitles, the sound-track creating a lush atmosphere of mystery as we watch a man set up a card board set of a town (projected onto the central screen). After a while, the film on the center screen slowly expands outward onto the whole triptych, then the architectural contours seem to become uncannily warped almost as if the images were seen through a prismatic mirror. The film town

seems to blur and lose its clear outlines. Renzini adds back light onto the right side panel, as Giovanni's silhouetted body appears life-size in the film and animated little spiders crawl around the panoramic vista, from left to right and right to left. Giovannini's silhouette grows larger, almost enormous. At this point, Renzini has wheeled out her turn table desk in front of the stage left screen, and her presence in the dark is now felt, rather than seen, while see geometric lines crawl out onto the screens to form mysterious spider webs. The graphics enter into a playful relationship with the old movie, almost as if the contemporary digital medium tried to re-master and echo the animate frame rates of the old reels.

Slowly and unmistakingly, the precision of the editing, lighting and the dynamic alternation of the black and white tonalities of early film, overlaid with crisp animated lines, crawling insects, and – later – contemporary video scenes shot in color, creates one of the sustaining, and increasingly heightened, rhythmic aspects of the evening. This rhythm is both musical and choreographic, initially applied exclusively to the image-movement, then developed further by the live dancer on stage. The other main feature of the work is the overall graphic quality of the "visual music" (digital animations working from right to left, from one screen to the others, isolated in the center or spreading out to the panoramic totality of all three screen). Its symphonic quality builds the composition of a narrative that moves from film projection to the flesh body of the dancer (and her mostly silhouetted musican partner), from the "machine" to the human (and back). Renzini's techno-music/jazz mix and her vocals form the other component of the visual narrative; she combines "film music" with numerous layers of often extremely low frequency electronic music, microtonal glitches and hisses conjured from the subterranean levels of her sonic samples.

One might argue that this type of "choreography" does not compare well with conventional contemporary dance of any persuasion. Trying to place this work, I was reminded having witnessed an eccentric "live film" performance (*El Automóvil Gris)* by the Mexican company Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes, a few years back in the U.S, and that production was shown in a music-theatre, not a dance context. The Mexican troupe had unearthed Enrique Rosas's 1919 semi-documentary movie *El Automóvil Gris* about a band of robbers who end up being caught and shot by the police; they performed the entire silent film in a mock-Japanese rendition revisiting the early tradition of *benshi* live-narration (voice over) and creating a vocal-musical translation of the film which was so brilliant that it dwarfed other artistic attempts to use silent era films (e.g. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*) for live concerts with newly composed symphonic music. *La Bambola di Carne* does not showcase an early film, it recomposes it into something new. The only other examples I know of such quasi-archaeological revisionings of early modern art are Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (recomposing found and nearly decomposed archival film stock to a violent music track by Michael Gordon) and Martin Arnold's equally haunting visualization concept for *Deanimated,* an installation of three digitally reprocessed and disintegrated horror movies in which the filmmaker "scratches" individual minimal scenes frame by frame to achieve unexpected intensities of what one might call "motion gestures." These gestures, of course, are created technologically through the digital re-editing process and the halting/jittering of single frames.

Renzini sticks a bit closer to the history of dance, "re-processing" Ernst Lubitsch's film *Die Puppe* (1919) and focussing on the movement motifs in it, or rather,

inventing her own unique graphic style of gradually morphing the film's frame architecture and narrative content. *Die Puppe* is a comedic story of Baron von Chanterelle's effort to find the right bride for the young heir, Lancelot. Based on E.T.A Hoffman's darker tale (*Der Sandmann*), the heroine of Lubitsch's film – a real girl and her "double" (a mechanical doll built by toymaker Hilarius) – of course revisits the Coppélia figure of classical ballet, first created by the young Giuseppina Bozzacchi in 1870 in what became the most-performed romantic ballet at the Opera Garnier. What might have attracted Renzini's graphically exuberant take on Hoffman's tale of the double is the underlying theme of uncanny ambiguity between the human and the mechanical, between desire and (fearful) make-belief contained in the idea of the doppelgänger.

La Bambola di Carne convincingly translates the old medium of film into contemporary digital performance, with layerings of graphic and video scenes achieving a dizzying mix of visual motion that to some extent overshadows what Gionavanni can do in the real flesh. Her presence, not surprisingly, lacks the intensity of the visual media against which she is called upon to perform a silent incarnation of Ossi (as Lubitsch's heroine is called), a real double of the much more evocative film actress who plays woman and doll, confounding object of desire to the young Lancelot who prefers the doll over the girl after having fled to a monastery. The original film's humor is unmistakingly affective, and the odd intertitles add a particular charm to the narrative development of the plot, especially as Renzini's live electronic sound gains a very powerful and dark dimension, immersing her audience at times into a cauldron of sound as we watch the frenzied (sped up) motion repetitions of the mechanical doll.


Dancer Marina Giovannini in front of animation. Photo courtesy of Letizia Renzini

There is one fine sequence of graphic stills which look like pencil drawings creating cartoon tableaux of a room (e.g. an easy chair and two small drawings on the left screen), and once again Giovannini enters the (screen) room in black silhouette almost as if she were in one of Kara Walker's macabre cut-out landscapes of 19th century American minstrelsy. The black figure is animate, then still, and then the tableaux begin to move and stills become moving images, as if the theme of the "double" and the illusion of identity is conceptually applied to the convergence of cinematographic and animated film languages, here made to dance in front of our eyes like wild Japanese manga. The strongest sequences occur in the final sections, after Renzini has

moved her turn tables downstage center, and the box-like scaffold is suddenly framed by thin blue neon strips while a row of orange lights comes on upstage, bathing the space into a warm glow to Sabina Meyer's distorted blues song aching with melancholic desire, underscored by a wailing saxophone. Just prior to this scene, Giovannini had performed a quiet solo with a rectangular piece of red plexiglass, its pliable reflective material shape spotted by lights creating beautiful visual echos on her body as well as a translucent armature behind which the dancer positions her arms and legs, almost as if to comment on the doll maker's construction of the female automaton.
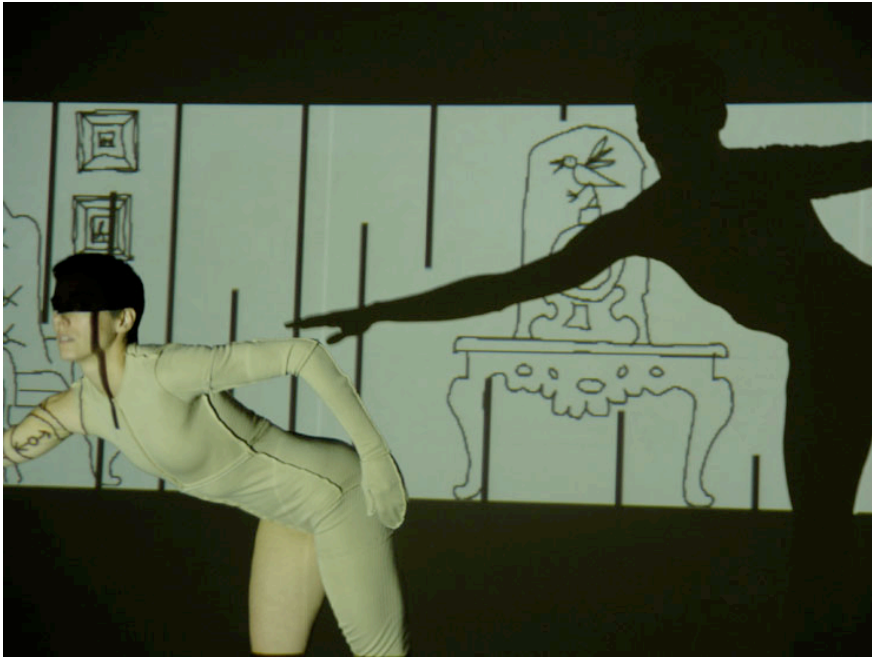
La Bambola di Carne, with Marina Giovannini. Photo courtesy of Letizia Renzini
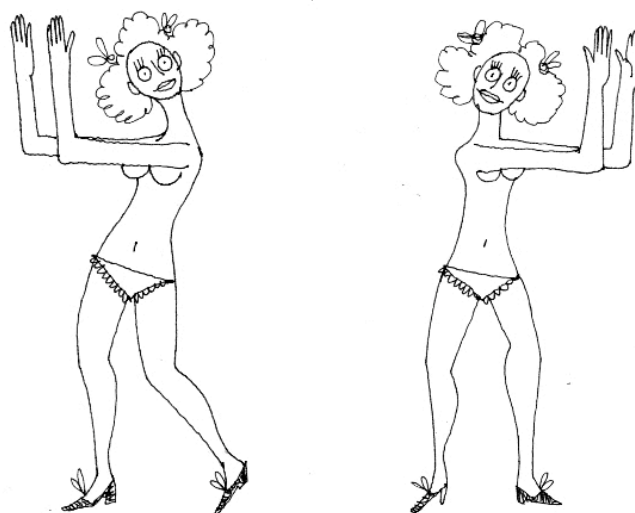
"Paperdolls" drawings by Paolo Fiumi for *La Bambola di Carne.* Photo courtesu of Paolo Fiumi.

The doll maker creates a replica in the movie, and Renzini and her team (the motion graphics/animation artists Raffaele Cafarelli and Gregory Pétitqueux, the drawings are made by Paolo Fiumi) refract this motif of uncanny appearance in manifold ways, finally translating the climactic Lubitsch scenes of the wedding ball into a frenzy of kaleidoscopic "game" enviroments – moving, tilting, and collapsing 3D halls of mirrors projected as if stacked against each other on all three screens, unaligned and oblique, with distorted "expressionist" geometries holding a female figure (the girl/doll) in a POV that zooms in and out, as if we were invited to become first person shooters hunting down a fantasized figment of the imagination. Renzini's software uses game engines to achieve this dynamic POV, and one wouldn't be too far off to think of this aesthetic as influenced by contemporary machinima.

Near the end, a blue animated figure is dancing on screen while Giovanni echoes the dance on stage, then both female performers climb into the turn table box and disappear. We now see them only on live video camera feed, as they undress/dress into ballet tutus, contemporary female tricksters who seem to play games with the old movie and the Lancelot character ("What a pity you are only a doll," the intertitles translate him, and then "I can't believe you are real"). The frame rates, at this point near the end of the performance, seem to have been sped up through reprocessing, and the silent film gains a superb slapstick quality clearly reminiscent of the extraordinary Buster Keaton-like mania of a body getting caught in different rates of speed or the burlesque trompe l'oeil effects of distorted geometries.

The "wedding scene" near the end. Photo courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

Renzini's art is a new choreography of digital transformation and layering (2d/3D), using camera techniques and editing, animation and color effects to build a powerful, and often humorous drama of strange tautologies, animated Magritte landscapes filled with a subversive feminist sarcasm that is understated and yet gripping. We are shown a work that joyfully excavates an early modern treatment of the uncanny, poking fun at male fantasies (as they also played out in bizarre fashion in the dolls

created by surrealist artist Hans Bellmer, especially his photographs and sculpture-objects of *Les Jeux de la Poupée*), and transposing Lubitsch's movie into a contemporay multi-media performance that takes its cues from a musical aesthetic – DJing, or what Paul Miller aka DJ Spooky has called the "rhythm science" of mixing. It is a hybrid aesthetic that recomposes historical and psychological layers of meaning into a complex cultural collage of identity confusion, the virtual becoming real and the real disapperaring behind a veil of animated signs, with the little insects resembling the early Pacman game and thus another layer of the more recent history of gaming and navigating in 3D worlds. *La Bambola di Carne* is more convincing and effective as a media performance, in the end, since Giovannini's physical performance skill is outplayed by Renzini's reprocessing and mixing; in this sense, the media apparatus on stage cannot incarnate or give life to the "real" woman. Rather, the choreographic embodiment of the "puppet" remains merely an anagram of the projected superimpositions. The anatomies of the unconscious, the doubled dolls, are extruded into the plasticity of Renzini's digital medium.

Further Reference: http://www.letiziarenzini.com/