

Time travel at Le Boudoir

Le Boudoir was driven by my desire to experience an unusual, joyful, subversive and sensual queer performance event. This desire was entangled with beloved cultural references I grew up with including fairy tales, the Wizard of Oz, silent movies and Busby Berkley's kaleidoscopic dance numbers. In addition to being the producer of Le Boudoir, I was also a contributing artist: I performed in one of the plays, regularly danced in what was to become a traditional closing act (La Flor de la Canela) and frequently appeared as my alter ego Fannie Nipplebottom.

Fannie the time traveller

Fannie Nipplebottom was a recurring persona at Le Boudoir, through which I expressed embarrassing longings. By casting her as an adorable failure of sorts, I emboldened myself to incarnate multiple personal fantasies on stage and on screen, for hundreds of overheated lesbians. Always charming, Fannie was a mediocre tap dancer, a failed circus performer, a reverse stripper, a poor artist, a downtrodden singer, and a time traveller.

Although often a brunette on stage, in her monochrome films, Fannie's skin, hair and clothes (and dog!) are white. Her exaggerated modesty and innocence signal purity. In *Fannie dans le temps*, she visits the future (2004) where she is frightened and overwhelmed by the characters she meets: a busy executive, an extroverted punk and a flirtatious biker. At the tam-tams, a freewheeling stoner smokes her up and she bad trips. She is later comforted by a dapper dandy who helps her locate her time machine and accompanies her back to the cozy 1920s. All the characters are White except for the biker (Black) and the pothead (Latinx). This was coincidental, and yet...

I am tasting and digesting my discomfort. If I'm being honest, *Fannie dans le temps* is my favourite of my films. Like Fannie, I too feel overwhelmed by contemporary urban life—too noisy, too busy, too brash. But by peddling queer nostalgia for an imagined simpler time and place, I unwittingly reinforced the association of Whiteness with virtue. Ewww! Can I hold onto some bits of my nostalgia and reject the parts I don't like? Does it work that way?

La Flor de la Canela

La Flor de la Canela was Le Boudoir's DIY showgirl-style closing act named after the first joyous song they performed to, from a cassette I had by Chilean sisters Sonia y Myriam. In subsequent years, La Flor danced to songs by the Peruvian legend Yma Sumac, who was promoted as an "Inca goddess" and whose genre was called "exotica" in the 1950s. Like the Mambo Drag Kings who opened the event, this mainstay act performed group choreographies to festive, expressive retro music and had a Latin American inspired name, but no Latinx members. Interestingly, at the time, Café Esperanza and a feminist shop called elle corazon served as Le Boudoir ticket outlets. Language politics were highly sensitive in the 1990s in Montreal, and by circumventing the franco-anglo divide, Latin names could be interpreted as both "neutral" and "exotic".

I performed in La Flor de la Canela's saucy dance numbers in the 1990s. As the troupe's choreographer from 2000 to 2005, I created elaborate pantomimes set "once upon a time" in faraway lands, featuring a predominantly White cast. A recurring narrative featured three prudish women being corrupted/liberated/bewitched by: mischievous fairies who cast a spell on them while they napped after a picnic (2002); underwater sirens (including a very pregnant mermaid) who capsizes their gondola in Venice (2003); and statues of Greek goddesses come to life

during a visit to a museum (animated by traditional music loaned by my Cretan friend in 2004 as well as original compositions by Annabelle Chvostek).

Innocence and clichés

Like Fannie Nipplebottom, the three Flor de la Canela protagonists were "innocents" who found themselves in "accidental" situations rife with clichés, innuendo and fairy tale imagery. While Fannie was a cash-strapped sweet soul trying to thrive in a harsh world, the Flor ladies were upper class, sexually repressed and oblivious to the undercurrents of the world around them. They became Le Boudoir archetypes, whose prudishness was constantly undermined.

I'm not sure why I kept telling this same story, but I think it has something to do with my thirst for magic, transformation, and possibility. It may also have been a response to the growing sex-positive movement of the 90s (and my mixed experience of it? I supported it politically but didn't always find it sexy). In addition, I think I wanted to insinuate lesbian history into the fabric of canonic mainstream references, and stake a claim for ourselves. Similarly, La Flor (and Le Boudoir) put novices and seasoned performers alike, on a beautifully lit stage, in a glamorous venue, in front of a sizzling audience, and in doing so, made multiple criss-crossing inaccessible worlds "ours".

Thoughts looking back

I want to share these joyful memories with you. I want to give you a sense of the exuberance of being on the Boudoir stage: the thrill of freedom and transgression and resistance; the pleasure of indulging an anachronistic imagination. But I am embarrassed. Because I centred Whiteness and played with cultural stereotypes. Because I'm afraid of sounding stupid, of exposing not only my past naiveté, but also my current ignorance. Because I'm afraid that my motifs of failure, serendipity, and innocence reveal an inherent lack of accountability. Because my analysis is limited.

Looking back and explaining past choices is problematic and prone to unconscious fictionalisation—how to navigate this? I feel tempted to self-flagellate and perform virtue; or alternately to abdicate responsibility and say I did the best I could under the circumstances. Instead, I will try to share my thoughts authentically, and open them to your scrutiny. The artistic choices I made at Le Boudoir were both deliberate and unconscious, both subversive and oppressive. And at the time, I believe I was simultaneously oblivious to, and aware of this contradiction.

The End

I believe that my inability to address my internal conflicts contributed to the demise of Le Boudoir, though there is much more to it of course, as endings tend to be complex affairs. My embodied experience of the event was changing, and I was less able to access the joy. A latent awareness was unfurling inside me, but at the time, I wasn't able to fully process nor act on it effectively. Today, I feel the possibility of resolving these doubts and conflicts, thanks to this online exhibit and Itza's external, kind and critical eye. I am learning to sit with discomfort for as long as it takes to summon a bit of insight and enough courage to share it.

I am really excited about this current artistic archival time-travel adventure. It is a way to honour, critically, an important moment (for me) and a significant shared experience (for Boudoir participants). A way to archive, while preserving a certain aliveness. It feels intentional, wide-angled and healthily trepidatious.

Miriam Ginestier (with Itza's nudging), 2021