

Sublime or Ridiculous?: Some Thoughts on Marie Leyton's Electrical Serpentine Dance of the 1890s

by Jody Sperling

There was a time when the phrase "danseuse électrique" denoted a young woman whose terpsichorean efforts were supposed to have an electric or magnetic effect upon the spectators. Now it has a distinctly practical significance. An electric dancer is really an electric dancer—one who carries about her person volts, amperes, Watts, ohms and other things, all of which are familiar to the electrician, but rather mystifying to the general public.¹

When Loie Fuller fashioned the "Serpentine Dance" in late 1891—adjusting the popular music-hall skirt dance by adding more fabric to her costume and swirling its folds to catch colorful displays of light—she inspired scores of imitators. Serpentine dancing became as much a staple of music hall stage performance in the 1890s, as skirt dancing had been the decade before. The "electrical serpentine" was a special, short-lived variation of the Fuller-inspired genre. The novelty was two-fold: first, that the dancer *triggered* the illumination of lights with her own movements; and secondly, that these lamps were placed *on her person* within her costume. The result was that the dancer herself became blindingly radiant. And, also, that she illuminated, at close contact and at her own will, selected parts of her body. *The New York Times* described the performance in the following way:

a startling effect produced by the bursting into a blaze of many colored electric lights, which shine through the blue gauze covering the breast, arms, and limbs of the dancer.²

Interestingly, the techniques of the "electric" dancer, as hinted at above, anticipated the inter-active methods employed by avant-garde performance artists a century later. In every era, the introduction of new technologies creates new possibilities for performance. While there has been a fair amount of recognition given, say, to the use of computerized digital imaging in the 21st century, or to the use magnetic tape for experimental music in the 1960s, relatively little notice

has been taken of certain far-out uses of the stage-electricity, a new technology in the 1890s.

For the purposes of this essay, I'm going to concentrate two very different responses to the particular performances of a Miss Marie Leyton at the Tivoli Music Hall in London in late 1892, one published in *The New York World*, and the other in the British *Pick-Me-Up*, a men's leisure magazine.³

The New York World review quoted earlier is quite extensive and puts Leyton's performance into a context of continued experimentation. It offers a conjectural summary of various methods that performers have used to control their own illumination. Here is the basic principle it describes:

if two metal plates are put on a stage and connected by separate wires with the electric lighting system of the theatre, and if the dancer wears shoes with metal heels and these heels are connected by insulated wires with electric lamps arranged artistically about the body, it is easy enough to understand that if one stands upon the plates the lamps will burn.⁴

Well, it's not exactly easy to understand, but here's what the text seems to be saying: that the performer wore metal taps on her shoes and somehow formed a bridge for the current between two metal conductive plates on the floor *with her body*. Presumably, she had wires running up her tights which were connected to the instruments in her costume. The danger inherent in this procedure is invoked, and lightly mocked:

Few persons who have seen such a dancer realize just how the electric effect is brought about or exactly what risks the dancer runs . . . If ten or twenty lamps were placed about the dancer's person, a big flash of electricity would come from under her feet every time the contact was made or broken. Then, if there were any electricians in the audience, they would realize that twenty lamps needed fully two horsepower of electric current to make them burn, and they would applaud loudly in admiration of a woman who would suffer such an

amount of current to be conducted about her body.⁵

So here we see that, for a woman, simply serving as a conduit for electricity is a performance in-and-of-itself—and that this performance is worthy of applause. Certainly, there are many ramifications (to be probed in more depth in a fuller version of this paper) with regard to performance of hypnosis and hysteria, electric and magnetic treatments, and contemporary infatuations with the occult. The idea of the electric woman is also one that has tremendous currency at this time, with electrified stage femmes playing starring roles in contemporary novels, including Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Eve future* and Jules Verne's *Le Chateau des Carpathes*.⁶

The real-life electric dancer who tried the metal plate and shoe-tap method described by *The World* encountered some technical limitations that the fictionalized characters did not:

Its chief drawback lay in the difficulty of dancing with both feet constantly on the floor. The moment the dancer raised her foot the current was cut off and the lights extinguished. Nothing but posing could be indulged in when the lamps were aglow.⁷

So basically the dancer was stuck with her feet on the ground and could only wave her arms around. For a serpentine dancer this wasn't a total loss, since the dance involved the manipulation of draperies with the upper body and de-emphasized fancy footwork and leg-kicking.

According to *The World* this idea had been "tried out" in Paris the year before and in New York the previous summer. It's quite likely that the writer refers to the appearances of a Mlle. Nada Reyval, known as "la Chanteuse electrique" who performed at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in July of 1892. A singer may have had an easier time than a dancer keeping both feet on the ground and limiting her movement to mere posing. The *Times* reports that "as [Reyval] sang the lights went out and suddenly a hundred little electric bulbs scattered all over her dress glowed brightly in various colors."⁸ From this description one conjures up an image of the "chanteuse" as something like a singing Christmas tree.

The World article continues by detailing how some performers tried to address the problem of lack of mobility. An American, it says, devised the idea of creating portable storage battery that could be hidden

in a dancer's bustle. This was turned out not to be a great solution, however:

[It] worked fairly well for giving headlights to fairy queens and top rigging to Amazonian spears, bustles are not always in style. Moreover, a storage battery powerful enough to light twenty good-sized lamps needs several cubic feet of space and weighs a few hundred pounds. Therefore unless some museum giantess could be engaged to do the dance this rig could only be used for small effects.⁹

Interestingly, we know that Reyval wore a large headdress for her Koster and Bial's performances. *The New York Times* described its appearance as "like the gauze-wire sails of a fly windmill arranged fan-wise upon her head."¹⁰ Clearly, this head-gear was rather cumbersome and possibly it housed a battery device of some sort.

Throughout *The World* article humor is employed to convey the sense of awkwardness in adapting technology to do things that it can't really do yet. There's an odd disconnect between the luminous, weightless effects being aspired to and the downright clunkiness of the mechanisms available to produce them—how can a dancer move gracefully when she can't lift her feet or has to carry a huge battery on her head. *The World* writer creates a narrative emphasizing the unfailing ingenuity, the plucky adventurous spirit, of these would-be fairies. From a historical perspective it's interesting to notice how often the technology ends up advancing in order to suit the whimsy of the artist. Clearly, here, the engineering is inadequate to the task, but with each successive try the mechanisms become more refined.

All of this until now in *The World* article is by way of setting up for the novelty and finesse of Leyton's London performances. Here is a description of what could be considered the "climax" of the *danse electrique*:

A girl, and a very pretty one, ran upon the stage dressed in a costume somewhat like that worn in the serpentine dance, and about her dress and among the folds of her skirts flashed sparks and lights of all colors. She danced and kicked, twisted and turned, while the lights continued to flash. Revolving wheels, fountains and prisms of light played about her, appearing and disappearing, and changing with every smile and step. Imagine a

handsome woman dancing in a rainbow while it turns about her, casting its different colors alternately upon her face and figure, and vivid flashes like miniature lightning playing about all.¹¹

Clearly, the writer was impressed by the spectacle. The description makes Leyton's performance seem like a human fire-works display, something truly mesmerizing. It's worth pausing here to remind ourselves of the purported genesis of Loie Fuller's original "Serpentine Dance." As Fuller recalls in her autobiography, the serpentine began as a hypnotized act in a play called *Quack, M.D.*. By waving her gauzy skirts around, Fuller endeavored to make herself "as light as possible" and to indicate that she was subject to the doctor's every command.¹² It was the illumination of her skirts with colored lights that made the work "hypnotic." While Fuller may have begun her art portraying the hypnotized subject, it was audiences who became "hypnotized" by Fuller's light-and-motion spectacles.

Felicia McCarren discusses this duplicity and inversion of hypnotic roles in her essay, "The Symptomatic Act circa 1900: Hysteria, Hypnosis, Electricity, Dance." So although Fuller assumed the aspect of the hypnotized subject or patient in this performance—and may have seemed entranced—it was through the "agency of technology" that she assumed, in another sense, the role of hypnotist or doctor. In McCarren's words:

Fuller's electric spectacle established her as, not only a hypnotic performer, but also as a technical wizard, as the operator within or behind her performance. Fuller's use of electricity . . . allows her to control the production of her own image.¹³

Marie Leyton, and the other electric performers, took Fuller's work to a literal extreme. Leyton *literally* controlled in what light she was seen. Through her motions, she could focus the illumination on various parts of the body. The rainbows that appeared about her body changed "with every smile and step." Leyton also created the impression of an effulgent body—one that didn't merely reflect, but actually emanated light. Interestingly, McCarren explicitly attributes part Fuller's agency to the fact that, unlike the hysteric patients in Charcot's Salpêtrière, electricity never actually contacted her body directly.¹⁴ So while Fuller's costumes reflected electric beams angled from all around, and under, the stage into incandescent

imagery, she herself is never penetrated by the subtle fluid.

The body of the "electric serpentine" dancer, in contrast, becomes fully conductive—Leyton is a live wire, a kind of human lightning bug. While Fuller's costumes create a moving screen for the luminous projections, but she refrained from becoming herself the source of illumination—although she created that illusion. Fuller's art consisted, in the words of one contemporary writer, the "transformations of tissues of living light."¹⁵ That lovely phrase encapsulates the visceral, diaphanous and morphic quality of her presence.

There is an analogy here between Fuller and Leyton's work and the difference between film and video. Visual illusion in film (and Fuller's dances) depends on the patterned projection of light rays onto a white surface (i.e. a static film screen or Fuller's moving silks). Video, and Leyton's performances, on the other hand, produce a visual sensation with light-emitting technologies.

The fact that Fuller favored light-reflection over light-emission in performance makes complete sense on both an aesthetic and technical level. Given the era's technological limitations, "reflected" light offered infinitely more sophisticated and iridescent possibilities, while posing none of the inherent awkwardness involved with trying to carry bulky electrical equipment and dance at the same time in a graceful and fairy-like manner. *The World* surmises that Leyton must have performed with vacuum tubes fastened inside her costume:

These [tubes] were fed by an induction coil giving a long spark, which when discharged through the vacuums gave out the intense and varying lights at will. The tubes were made in various forms, and the dancer wore an India rubber dress to protect her from the discharges.¹⁶

So the rubber garment insulates Leyton's body from electric shocks. It enables her to kick, twist and turn her way through a veritable lightning storm. Mentioning this protective layer is like revealing the magician's sleight of hand. It shields her, and us, from the impression that she might be a genuinely electrified being, or for that matter a genuine hysteric in need of electrical stimulation.

Although certain questions as to her methods are left unanswered—for instance, how and where the wires were placed on her body—*The World* does

manage to paint an amazingly detailed picture of Leyton's act, which was perceived quite differently in the *Pick-Me-Up*. Here's the other viewpoint:

Miss Leyton interrupted her graceful dancing every now and then while she quietly placed her foot on a battery arrangement in the floor. As a consequence, about fifty little arc lamps broke out in a blaze all over her. She had them on her head and body, and they were visible through her diaphanous robe all the way along her shapely limbs. The effect was meant to be impressively sublime, no doubt, but I really haven't seen anything so superlatively ridiculous for a long while. It was positively funny.¹⁷

So for the *Pick-Me-Up* the mechanics are too obvious and disruptive. Note, the graceful dancing is "interrupted" by movements of the feet controlling the current, a fact which *The World* review either ignores or belies referring to the dancer's kicking among other movements. The writer concludes with a condemnation—instead of sublime (as *The World* sees it), the performance is derided as "ridiculous" and "positively funny." He (and the writer is almost certainly a man) believed that Leyton failed—the contrast between the ethereal effects sought and her labored efforts produced comic results.

However, aside from what might have been valid criticisms, the author does reveal his prejudices. In a previous article, the *Pick-Me-Up* (and it is clearly the same writer) expresses two gripes with the serpentine dance of a Miss Estrella Sylvia: one, it relies too much on lighting and not enough on dancing for its success; and two, the costume is not sufficiently revealing. He says,

The Serpentine Skirt Dance is pretty and effective enough, but I fancy there's a good deal of limelight and gas—especially the later—in the secret of its success.¹⁸

Substitute electricity and you have his views on Leyton. But the writer's real grip with the "old" serpentine is the lack of leg, which he takes the liberty of expressing in verse:

I've always been told that the
masher who goes
To a hall likes it best when
he sees

The girls—not with dresses
that reach to their toes.
But with those that stop
short at the knees.
He favours the dancer who's
pretty and pert,
And if he for a novelty
begs,
It's mostly for less of the
Serpentine Skirt
And for more of the Ser-
pentine -----
[leave blank space here please, Mr. Printer.]¹⁹

The *Pick-Me-Up* writer may have complained about the lack of leg in the "old" serpentine, but he can't really condemn the "new" serpentine for its lack of suggestiveness. Leyton's performance was, without doubt, sexually charged. Her "shapely" limbs are specially illuminated and visible through her transparent garments. Flashes and sparks exposed tantalizing glimpses of flesh beneath the drapery. *The New York Times* remarked that Leyton's act "proved a great attraction to masherdom" and that Tivoli was "filled nightly with *fin de siècle* youths."²⁰ I think we can understand the author's derisive reaction to the performance as partly defensive, as arising from a discomfiture with a kind of "electrified" eroticism in which the woman controls the means of her exposure. Again, we could consider that Leyton, after Fuller, through the medium of electricity, assumed the dual roles of hypnotist and hypnotized subject, and that she did so to an uncomfortably literal, perhaps unbearably comic, extreme. By controlling the lights "at will," it's almost as if she self-administers hypno-electric treatment. At the same time, she uses flashes of light and exposure of limbs, to disorient and enthrall the audience. Her body becomes integrated with a dazzling incandescent spectacle, but also remains material.

The way that Leyton flashed the lights on and off her body may have created illusory freeze-frame or strobic effects. It makes one think of the photographic experiments being done at the time, by Muybridge and others, that led to early cinema. There are some very close connections between Loie Fuller and serpentine dancing to the development of motion pictures. Annabelle Moore, a Fuller imitator, was one of Edison's first subjects. Moreover, Fuller's work, and that of her imitators, was in-and-of-itself "proto-cinematic"—that is her huge costumes served as

mobile screens, catching illumination and projections to form "moving pictures."

While the serpentine dancers—electric and otherwise—aspired to, and often achieved, a pre-filmic phantom quality, the projected movie image itself was inherently even more immaterial. The first public exhibit of the vitascope in Los Angeles in 1896 included both a real-life serpentine dance, performed by Papinta, and also a screening of Annabelle's serpentine "sun" dance. What is fascinating is that one contemporary account describes the film as reproducing, with "startling reality" all of the floating qualities of the dance "except that now and then one could see swift electric sparks."²¹ Now, clearly, what the writer perceives as sparks must have been flashes of light caused by scratches in the negative, or blips in the projection process itself. But it's interesting that these flashes were perceived as static-electric shocks that "broke" the reality of the film.

The sparks that Leyton produced in live performances created a similar rupture in perception. While *The New York World* read these sparks as novel, and their production the result of ingenuity, the *Pick-Me-Up* viewed them as "shocks" disruptive to the flow of dancing, and to the easy enjoyment of feminine grace and form. Leyton's performance itself was a brief spark that fizzled after its initial attraction and has been rarely imitated or even remembered.

In moments of micro-history like these, one can clearly see cultural currents at play. Like a lightning-flash, the electric serpentine coalesced certain filaments in the ether into an immediate and unpredictable organization. We can read into Leyton's act, charged formations of the "electric" woman, the hypnotized performer, the hysteric hypnotist, Fuller's serpentine dancing, and pre-cinematic photography. And if "electric" dancing didn't catch on, there was curiosity about what its future be. *The World* speculates:

This seems like the climax of the "danse électrique," but even more clever schemes may be forthcoming. The future fairy of the spectacular performance may be transformed by the subtle current into something altogether too brilliant to look upon without colored glasses.²²

¹ "Real Electric Dancers," *The New York World*, January 1, 1893.

² "Fun for Christmas," *The New York Times*, December 4, 1892.

³ Although *The World* article doesn't specifically name Leyton, I have concluded—through careful comparisons with accounts in the *Pick-Me-Up* and *The New York Times*—that it must indeed be a description of her act.

⁴ Op. cit. 1

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Rhonda Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) for a lengthy discussion of Villier's *L'Eve future*. Also, Nancy Mowl Mathews' essay "The Body in Motion" in her edited volume *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film 1880-1910* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press in association with Williams College Museum of Art, 2005) touches on the theme of the "electric" woman in fiction. For the English translation of *L'Eve future*, see Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (transl. Robert Martin Adams), *Tomorrow's Eve* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2001).

⁷ Op. cit. 1

⁸ "Nada Reyval's New Dance," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1892.

⁹ Op. cit. 1

¹⁰ Op. cit. 8

¹¹ Op. cit. 1

¹² Fuller, Loie, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1913), p31.

¹³ McCarren, Felicia, "The 'Symptomatic Act' Circa 1900: Hysteria, Hypnosis, Electricity, Dance," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1995).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Story of the Dance" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 28, 1898.

¹⁶ Op. cit. 1

¹⁷ *Pick-Me-Up*, January 21, 1893.

¹⁸ *Pick-Me-Up*, September 17, 1892.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Op. cit. 2

²¹ "At the Playhouses," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1896.

²² Op. cit. 1