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**FAITHFUL TO FASSBINDER,  
DEDICATED TO DANCE:  
LEA ANDERSON  
RECONSTRUCTING  
LOST DANCES**

Julie-Anne Long

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*Lea Anderson is a UK dancer, choreographer based in London. She graduated from the Laban Centre following earlier visual art studies at St Martins College of Arts and Design. In 1984 Anderson formed the all female dance company The Cholmondeleys (with Teresa Barker and Gaynor Coward) and in 1988 the all male dance company The Featherstonehaughs. Her work as Artistic Director of these two companies is recognised for its popular culture references in both dance and design aesthetics and the integration of live music and original scores. A notable feature of Anderson's choreographic practice is the eclectic range of varied sources from which she draws inspiration. Such diverse starting points as: the sketchbooks of Egon Schiele ("The Lost Dances of Egon Schiele" (2001)), Busby Berkley films and microscopes ("YIPPEEE!!!" (2006)), the writing practice of Fyodor Dostoyevsky ("Russian Roulette" (2008)), as well as magazine and newspaper clippings and flotsam and jetsam from everyday life.*

IN MARCH 2009 I PARTICIPATED IN "FAST WORK WORKSHOP"  
LEAD BY LEA ANDERSON AT CRITICAL PATH, SYDNEY.

The two-week "Fast Work Workshop" devised and facilitated by Lea Anderson involved a group of four local performers (Alexandra Harrison, Catherine Hourihan, Adam Synott and Julie-Anne Long). Choreographic tasks included appropriating movement from existing sources (films, photographs, graphics) with the purpose of transforming the material into a physical form, with a relatively speedy response time, limiting individual aesthetic decision-making. One exercise began with two primary sources; first, we learnt a Laurel and Hardy dance sequence from the film "Way Out West" and second, constructed duet poses in response to a series of photographic collages of human/animal figures by Hannah Hoch. The third stage in the exercise called for us to splice our interpretations of the collages into the dance sequence at arbitrary points. With four performers from different dance/movement backgrounds interpreting the found material there was opportunity for an interesting collection of choreographic responses. I found the process to be incredibly liberating as it reduced personal censorship of my aesthetic decisions and focused primarily on the task at hand - recreating what you saw as closely as possible.

Anderson's mantra was "Think of yourself as a dance historian reconstructing a lost dance". Throughout the workshop a tableau kept configuring; that of a motley group of dance historians painstakingly examining the artefact and reconstructing a physical response as close as possible to the original, despite the frequent absurdity of their task. The key artefact selected by Anderson as a starting point for this choreographic exploration was Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film "The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant" (Die Bitteren Tranen der Petra von Kant). Based on an original play by Fassbinder and released in 1972, the distinctive dramatic style of "The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant" can be attributed to the time and place it was made as well as its origin as a play. In terms of action it is a relatively static film confined to the bedroom/lounge room domestic interior of Petra von Kant a fashion designer in her 30s. The dramatic tension comes from the heightened emotional behaviour expressed in stylised gestural language by the three main female characters; Petra, the haughty designer, her young, ambitious lover Karin, and the silent omnipresent secretary/maid, Marlene. Desire, repression, hysterics, suffering and fraught emotional relationships permeate the claustrophobic atmosphere. In addition to the precisely measured performances of the lead actresses, complex camera movements contribute significantly to the prevailing mood. Deciphering the camera details of shot choices, tracking and framing of bodies helped us as dance historians to uncover what was holding each scene together and reveal the essence of this 'lost dance'.

Following the Sydney Workshop Anderson departed equipped with a supply of unanswered questions addressing how to progress with Petra and friends and with propositions such as how to organise a film sequence as a stage composition, how to 'dance' a close up and a cross fade and how to embody the camera tracking. Over the past six months she has continued developing ideas and answering questions initiated in the Sydney Workshop, this time with nine male dancers of The Featherstonehaughs playing the roles of Petra, Karin and Marlene.

IN EARLY DECEMBER I SPOKE WITH LEA ANDERSON FOLLOWING TWO PUBLIC SHOWINGS OF OUTCOMES OF HER FOUR WEEK RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECT HOSTED BY THE PLACE IN LONDON.

During the research project in London Anderson was working towards making a dance based on a film based on a play. Unlike Fassbinder who used the resources of film to expose deeper layers in his play, Anderson uses the resources of dance to open up the film into a new medium. While remaining faithful to Fassbinder she is also dedicated to dance and states: "I want it to look like a dance". Some of the issues that had arisen from the Sydney Workshop were explored and further ideas developed:

- How to embody a close up in the live space provided a challenge, with the solution to this a free hanging frame suspended in the space in a different space to the main frame.
- How best to deal with dancers entrances and exits 'on and off stage' when reconceptualizing film edits was explored. The nine nubile young men of The Featherstonehaughs dreamt up ingenious back flips to exit the space and impressive run ups to make entrances into the marked frame, quite an advance on the pedestrian slipping and sliding into the frame in the earlier workshop.
- The importance of sound and ideas for musical accompaniment were investigated with the addition of two live musicians to the work.

Anderson concentrated on the final four scenes in the film, which follow the devastating break up of Petra and Karin. This includes one of the most surprising and powerful scenes in the film where Petra and her assistant Marlene dance together. The awkward partnering and slowly revolving swaying dance provided an inspiring movement source for Anderson. She printed off each film frame from the dance sequence and presented them out of order as fragments of raw material to the dancers. The task was for the choreographer and dancers to each assemble the dance as they saw fit, constructing their own interpretation of this 'lost dance'. The movement material generated was used to create a large dance number for many bodies, sampled and morphed from the original, albeit serving a new function.

For the research and development showings the Performance Studio at The Place was cleared of seating and three performance areas were marked on the floor. The material was presented in a loop over a two-hour period with the audience able to come and go in the space as they pleased during that time, moving from one performance area to another facilitating changes of scene and offering the spectators new perspectives into the framing of the action. While this open format proved most suitable for the work in this context it may not always be possible for this show if it is to be a portable touring presentation to find spaces to accommodate this format. An alternative framing of three side-by-side spaces in a conventional proscenium arch setting has also been considered.

Permission has been granted from the Fassbinder Foundation to reframe 'The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant' as a contemporary dance work. Anderson suspects that despite numerous discussions and negotiations, representatives from The Fassbinder Foundation are still perplexed by exactly what it is she is doing. Perplexing or not, I am certainly eager to see the intriguing final outcomes of this project when it is realised to production stage in 2010.

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In 2010 Lea Anderson will tour "Dancing on Your Grave" in the UK and Australia:

- 11 February 2010 Deda [www.deda.uk.com](http://www.deda.uk.com)
- 13 February 2010 The Civic, Barnsley [www.barnsleycivic.co.uk](http://www.barnsleycivic.co.uk)
- 20 February 2010 The Albany Theatre, WA
- 22–23 February 2010 Music Box, Perth Festival
- 27 February - 04 March 2010 Festival Club, Wellington
- As part of the New Zealand International Arts Festival
- 07–08 March 2010 WOMADelaide

Official website (<http://www.thecholmondeleys.org/>)

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