

*Coup de foudre*: A Collaborative Masterpiece of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Based on the film *Blood of a Poet* by Jean Cocteau

*L. Brandon Krall scribit*

...How much blood, how many tears in exchange for those axes, those muzzles, those unicorns, those torches, those towers, those little hammers, seedlings of stars and those fields of blue. Free to choose the faces, the shapes, the movements, the tones, the acts, the places that please him, he composes with them a realistic documentary of unreal events. The musician underlines the noises and the silences...

Jean Cocteau, *Le sang d'un poete*, 1929

*Coup de Foudre* is a French expression meaning, a lightening strike or the shock of falling in love, and it is the title of the forceful and intensive intervention, conceived by Paul Miller as a remix of Cocteau's film, *The Blood of a Poet*. *Coup de Foudre* balances three elements simultaneously; a beautiful musical composition by Paul Miller, involving the recomposed soundtrack with live performances of overlaid electronics, violin and cello; updated slang in spoken word by writer-filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles from the French poetry of Cocteau; harmonized with the penetratingly intelligent choreographic forms invented by Corey Baker, and thus *Coup de Foudre* achieves a new kind of perfection. The initiating invitation and creative contributions of Charles Fabius in developing and producing *Coup de Foudre*, add inestimably to its exceptional level of accomplishment.

First of all, it was rash and daring in the best sense to have undertaken an intervention with such a great classic; the first film made by Jean Cocteau. In *Blood of a Poet*, Cocteau began to develop an original cinematic language which he believed distinctive, and apart from the work of the Surrealists with which it is widely classified; in part because in 1927 Buñuel and Dali released *Un Chien Andalou*, and also because it was made possible by the patronage of the Count and Countess De Noailles who also paid for notable films by Man Ray. Of the film Cocteau wrote, "...I know many films that put me to shame. I do not know of one that is less slave to the methods of an art "that is the same age as I" and that therefore never forced me to burden myself with examples..." He underscores the fact that, this was one of the first French films of the sound era, and that he was discovering how to use the cinematic medium as he worked.

The dancer, Corey Baker was dressed in the same costume as the principal actor, shirtless with rolled cuffs on his belted khakis. Baker's interactions with the black and white film, perfectly projected onto a screen that is flanked by a mirror, a door with illuminated keyhole and a simple wooden chair were phenomenal in the use of scale, motifs of hands and "beautiful movements" gestures made in silhouette onto the projection. Baker was mostly in the central area of the stage, but he used the areas below and above the stage as well breaking the box of the middle ground. To the right, Van Peebles appeared and disappeared in a soft circle of light speaking phrases of poetry which he had re-imagined for contemporary audiences and opposite were the Telos Ensemble and Miller performing live with the musical score.

Commissioned on the occasion of *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936*, as part of the Works & Process series, and undertaken with the permission of the

Cocteau estate run by Pierre Bergé, *Coup de foudre* stands apart from the exhibition's context as a contemporary and a living masterpiece of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the outset of a panel following the performance, moderator Christoph Cox of Hampshire College and the 3 principals agreed that Cocteau's film remains a self-perpetuating mystery, and while Cocteau does write about the four "episodes" in which it is composed, and where they came from in his life experiences, it is interesting to venture a few thoughts relating central themes that emerged from the film, to the post World War I period in which it was made.

Called the Roaring Twenties, this period was also known as the Jazz Age and it was a time of extraordinary blossoming in Black Culture both in New York and in Paris where black Americans and black Africans created a rich cultural body of works. Josephine Baker, later a heroine of the Second World War working for the French underground, Count Basie and Féral Benga were all active and socially prominent in Paris when Cocteau's film was made. In the twenties the issues and social ethics of women's liberation were also foremost in public awareness. A widespread fascination with androgyny had taken the spotlight and liberated women like Lee Miller who became a sought-after fashion model, at the time was apprenticed as a photographer to Man Ray and later became an important WWII photo journalist. Lee Miller's boyish haircut, slim figure and direct manner were part of the androgynous *mode* which is expressed very amusingly in the androgyne sequences in Cocteau's film. While it may be obvious today, the gay communities of Paris and New York were also blooming in the 20s; a cameo appearance of a sensationally popular transvestite Barquette is also in this film, (s)he wears a sequined gown.

The "Black Angel" in the film was played by the popular Senegalese cabaret dancer François Benga, who took the stage name Féral Benga. His character in the film is deeply moving and redemptive; he takes back the ace of hearts that was stolen from a dead schoolboy at a decisive junction. The dead boy is seen lying beneath an elegant card table on the snow, the poet in evening attire across the length from the white statue come to life, she wears long black gloves to the point where before her arms had been missing. Is she the muse of history, beauty, poetry or of time we cannot know, but she is portrayed by Lee Miller and the game of cards with the poet is of critical importance to the poet who stole the ace of hearts, at first to save himself from suicide. The rich meanings that reside in Cocteau's film were influential on the aesthetics of a *return to order* in the wider cultural milieu, and are evidenced in the remaining films of *The Orphic Trilogy* in their manner of addressing ancient human ideals. The enigmas remain intact and are augmented by this inspired intervention by Miller, Van Peebles and Baker.

Asked to comment on his work in this collaboration, performer Corey Baker, who is co-founder of the Ballet Noir and principal in, *Fela!* currently on Broadway wrote:

*In my work on Coupe de Foudre, I wanted to expand Cocteau's use of movement into condensed vignettes of dramatic expression. Poking fun at post-modern images allowed me to go to a physical place that I never explored. Before the Stanislavski method was created, actors communicated in highly animated physical gestures. The decision to take an actor's approach was inevitable. As a choreographer my goal was to find the perfect marriage of things that exist in the film. I also wanted to rethink my own approach to*

*kinesis for the piece. I usually poke fun at classical and contemporary work bending the form with hip hop and African movement, etc. But this time I wanted to use post-modern movement as a voice incorporating elements of Butoh, locking, voguing, and contemporary movement. These silhouettes allowed me to go inside of the film and very deliberately bend the images that Cocteau created. The experience of collaborating with DJ Spooky and Melvin Van Peebles was priceless. Historically, Cocteau collaborated with artists like Coco Chanel, Picasso, Diaghilev: people who were considered to be luminaries and trailblazers. It sort of felt that way - I'm truly in the court of kings here. Every aspect of the work was a pathway to ancestral wisdom, out of the box intellectual sparring and creative revelations that only happens with incredible chemistry and synergy.*

It took approximately 5 months for the principal collaborators, with Telos Ensemble violinist Heidi Schaul-Yodir, and cellist Sofia Nowik, and set designer Michael Lavin, whose well arranged elements seemed a perfect fit, to create and rehearse the piece for its Premiere performances on the 9th and 10th of October in the theatre at the museum; a most elegant and wonderfully intimate space. For a member of the audience, seeing Baker, Van Peebles and Miller's *Coup de foudre*, was like being struck by lightning or falling in love at first sight, and in the illumination of their shocking and marvelous achievement it is certain that Monsieur Cocteau would be enormously pleased and gratified to find that his film has been embraced and reborn into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a multidimensional reality of such rare and high quality.

*Above all, what really marks "The Blood of a Poet" is, I think, a complete indifference to what the world finds "poetic," the care taken, on the contrary, to create a vehicle for poetry—whether it is used as such or not...*

Jean Cocteau, Preface 1946

## LINKS

Jean Cocteau, Official Web Presence  
<http://www.jeancocteau.net>

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936  
October 1, 2010–January 9, 2011  
<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions>

Ballet Noir  
Paul Miller aka DJ Spooky

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Excerpted from, *Sketch for a poetic art*, by Jean Cocteau.  
Source of Melvin Van Peebles spoken word improvisation in *Coup de foudre*.

I.

Unglue ourselves from our dreams

A grain of rye  
free of the babbling grass  
and far from the lecturing trees

I  
plant  
it  
it will grow  
but renounce the rustic wedding

That explosive verb falls, without causing harm,  
traveling eternally  
through dense generations  
and except for you

nothing  
no impact  
with its sweet smelling dynamite

II.

I reject eloquence  
the empty sail  
and the full sail  
that forces the vessel to tack

My ink scratches paper  
and there

and there

and there

and  
there

sleeps the profound poetry

III.

The mirror-paneled wardrobe riding flowing waves  
the little Eskimo girl  
in a ball dreaming  
of sweaty negroes  
her nose pressed  
flat  
against the window pane of cheerless Christmases

III.

A polar bear  
adorned with chromatic icicles  
dries in the midnight sun

Ocean liners

enormous luxury things  
slowly going under  
with all lights aglow

So it goes  
the festivities fading  
in the thousand mirrors of the palace

V.

And now  
it's me  
skinny Columbus of phenomena  
alone  
in front of the closet mirror  
filled with linens  
locked away with a key

The tenacious miner  
of the void  
exploits  
his fertile mind

rugged potential  
glitters in there somewhere  
mingled with the white rock

VI.

Oh  
princess of the mad sleep  
listen to my horn  
    and my pack of hounds

I deliver you  
from the forest  
where we were enchanted by the spell

VII.

Here we are  
by the pen  
one with the other  
wedded  
on the page

Islands   sobs of Ariane

the Arianes

    dragging along

the Arianes   the sea-lions

yes I betray you, my fair stanzas  
to  
awakened run  
elsewhere

VIII.

I use no blueprint nothing is  
premeditated

simply  
deaf  
like you Beethoven

blind like you Homer  
immeasurable ancient one

born everywhere

I create  
in the meadows of inner  
silence

IX.

And the work of the mission  
and the poem of the work  
and the stanza of the poem  
and the group of the stanza  
and the words of the group  
and the letters of the word  
and the slightest  
curve of the letters

X.

It is your foot  
wrapped in satin  
tight rope walker  
I position on the cord  
of pink

Swallowed by the void

left right  
god gives a shake

and I move  
towards the other bank  
with infinite precaution