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Some Historic/Some Hysteri

By Yvonne Hespos

Since neuropsychology was founded just before the Victorian era, it has undergone a century and a half of growing pains, none of which was more theatrical than the "Hysteria Shows," or clinical demonstrations, of Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot of Paris during the 1870s and 1880s. He is known today as the founder of modern neurology, who as one of a select group of physicians, made the Salpetriere hospital in Paris a world medical center in the 19th century. His lecture-demonstrations on a floodlit stage were open to the lay public, attracting the famous, the fashionable, and the aristocratic. They are inspiration for "Some Historic/Some Hysteri," a multimedia theater piece directed for the New Stage Theatre Company (www.newstagetheatre.org) by Ildiko Lujza Nemeth, which returns November 10 to December 10, 2006 to the Clemente Soto Velez Center's Flamboyant Theatre, where it had a successful workshop in 2004.



Ensemble of "Some Historic/Some Hysteri" in 2004 workshop production. Photo by Markus Hirnigel.

At the apex of Dr. Charcot's career, he was known as the "Caesar of the Salpetriere." Among his students were Pierre Marie, Joseph Jules Babinski, Wladimir Michailowich Bekhterev, Desiré-Magloire Bourneville, and George Albert Edouard Brutus Gilles de la Tourette. In 1885 one of his students was Sigmund Freud. Charcot's use of hypnosis to seek out an organic basis for hysteria stimulated Freud's interest in the psychological origins of neurosis.

Charcot was particularly interested in the physical manifestations of hysteria. He had his associates draw the postures, gestures and expressions of patients while they experienced dramatic fits. He established a photographic studio where patients were documented during "normal" and "hysterical" states. Public presentations of clinical cases were held each Tuesday, which resembled theatrical performances in which the erotics of display permeated and finally trumped the positivist principles of observation.

These images created at Salpetriere were far from simply objective documentation. The subjects were required to portray their hysterical "type"--they performed their own hysteria. Bribed by the special status they enjoyed in the purgatory of experimentation and threatened with transfer back to the inferno of the incurables, the women patiently posed for the photographs and submitted to presentations of hysterical attacks before the crowds that gathered for Charcot's "Tuesday Lectures." Literature of New Stage Theatre Company refers to this as "the first site-specific experimental performance group in an unlikely place" and Charcot's lectures were indeed referred to in their time as "theatrical." The exact meaning of that has been interpreted in modern times:

Although hysterics were popular novelistic and dramatic subjects throughout the fin de siecle period, hysterical theatricalism involved more than the adherence to a series of implicitly literary characterological tropes and psychological states. It referred to a fully embodied performative, medical condition; a three-dimensional, temporal manifestation of excess and chaotic superfluity. Hysteria was, in this sense, a pathological dance; a choreography of identifiable poses, forms of execution, dramaturgical meanings, and sequential arrangements. Sexuality remained embedded within the hysterical performer's actions, even as Charcot and his peers sought to reduce such gestures to the sexually indifferent products of nervous tissue and musculature. Charcot's own approach to hysteria constituted in this sense a theatrical critique in which an alternative model of the theatre was offered. [Jonathan Marshall, "Keeping the Bacchae at Bay: Hysterical performativity and the Salpetriere school of Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot, 1872-1893"(2005)]

For the record, Charcot thought he had discovered a new disease he called "hystero-epilepsy," a disorder of mind and brain combining features of hysteria and epilepsy. The patients displayed a variety of symptoms, including convulsions, contortions, fainting, and transient impairment of consciousness. But Joseph Babinski, his student, decided that Charcot had invented rather than discovered hystero-epilepsy. The patients had come to the hospital with vague complaints of distress and demoralization. Charcot's interest in their problems, the encouragement of attendants, and the example of epileptics on the same ward prompted patients to accept Charcot's view of them and eventually to display the

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expected symptoms. Babinski eventually won the argument, persuading Charcot that doctors can induce a variety of physical and mental disorders, especially in young, inexperienced, emotionally troubled women. With this understanding, Charcot and Babinski devised an alternate, two-stage treatment consisting of isolation and counter suggestion.

"Some Historic/Some Hysteria" exposes the father of neurology's contributions to vaudeville and art by rendering the doctor's salon style of publicly performed lectures. The multi-media theater piece confronts the ambiguities between performed and real behaviors, and examines the role of audience/observer in the developments of personal identity. Productions of New Stage Theatre Company employ elaborate costuming, striking visual images and gorgeous visual design. In this one, a stark black and white set enhances the claustrophobia of emotional distress and brief flourishes of red costume pulse through the tableaux. A woman cries from the podium of a giant high-heeled show as a patient gesticulates silently from a spinning bed; a parade of characters including Freud and Saint Francis of Assisi appears, larger than life on video, reacting to the performance below them. Music includes live piano, classical music and improvisation.

The play is inspired by the book, "Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpetriere" by Georges Didi Huberman and uses it as a point of departure. Some of the play's texts derive from direct transcripts of Dr. Charcot's Tuesday lectures, Freud's quotations and the 16-volume work, "The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant," which provides detailed information on the lives of working-class Victorian servant women. Other texts are written by Jessica Sofia Mitrani, who co-conceived the piece with director Ildiko Lujza Nemeth.

The New Stage Theatre Company (www.newstage theatre.org), founded by Hungarian-born Ildiko Lujza Nemeth in 2002, brings international talent together to develop works which embrace their diverse cultural and artistic traditions to create a powerful and exciting foundation for vibrant theater. The company is committed to take artistic risks to achieve a theatrical expression that overcomes the limitation of language, custom and convention. Other productions have included "First Ladies" by Werner Schwab (ATA, 2002), "Dial-a-Mom" by Argentine exile playwright Diana Raznovich (Flatiron Playhouse, 2003) and two original dramatics followed by Beckett's "Come & Go" (Walkerspace, 2003).

Ildiko Lujza Nemeth (director), founder of The New Stage Theatre Company, is an actor from Budapest, Hungary. She is a veteran of Eastern European experimental theater. Her desire to bring this form of theatrical expression into stronger focus for American audiences led her to form The New Stage Theatre Company in 2002. In Hungary, Nemeth garnered numerous prizes for acting, such as the Guardian Critics' Choice Award at the Scotland Fringe Festival in Edinburgh and the Best Performance Award at the International Gombrowicz Festival in Poland. She moved to the U.S. in 1998 and founded NSTC after graduating with a Master's Degree from the Actors Studio Drama School in 2002. At the Actors Studio, several of Nemeth's peers were inspired by her unique vision of bridging geographical and cultural gaps by collaborating with international artists. This group became the original NSTC. Since then, the group of New Stage collaborators has included numerous talents, including a Guggenheim fellowship recipient and artists trained at the Julliard School.

Jessica Sofia Mitrani (co-creator) was a member of Bore, a dance theater company, where she collaborated as a writer and director on several projects. She participated as co-writer and artistic consultant on "Juana," a feature film by Colombian filmmaker Pacho Bottia. Her short stories have appeared in several publications since 1990. She received her Law degree in 1994. In 2000, with a grant by the Colombian Ministry of Culture, she wrote, directed and produced her first short film, "Rita Goes to the Supermarket." Since its premier in NYC at the NYLIFF and BAM, the film has been touring festivals around the world including in Brazil, Peru, France, England and is currently being broadcaster by WDR-ARTE in Germany and France and by SBS in Australia. Mitrani's NYC stage directing credits include "Dial a Mom," "Mr. Sandman," "The Baby Dance " and "The Conduct of Life" at the ASDS theatre in Greenwich Village. She received her M.F.A in directing from the Actor's Studio in spring 2002.

The work is conceived by Ildiko Lujza Nemeth and Jessica Sofia Mitrani and directed by Ildiko Lujza Nemeth. Movement Director is Lisa Giobbi. Script Consultant is Mark Altman. Pianist is Galina Zisk. Costume Design is by Jessica Sofia Mitrani and Ildiko Lujza Nemeth. Set Design is by Ildiko Lujza Nemeth, Jessica Sofia Mitrani and Goran Medak. Lighting Design is by Federico Restrepo. Video Artists are Victor Morales, Laia Cabrera and Maria Litvan. Production Manager is Florencia Minniti. The actors are Catherine Correa, Kayleen Lee Clinton, Tino del Casar, Nicole Hafner, Markus Hirnigel, Denice Kondik, Sarah Lemp, Florencia Minniti, Charlott Reinhold, Monica Risi, Paula Roman, Gaby Schafer, Jeanne Lauren Smith and Jose Cavazos.

The show runs from November 10 to December 10, 2006 at Clemente Soto Velez (CSV), 107 Suffolk Street, NYC (between Rivington and Delancy). It is presented by New Stage Theatre Company, Artistic Director Ildiko Lujza Nemeth. The performance dates are: 11/10-11 at 8PM, 11/12 @ 5PM, 11/14-18 @ 8PM, 11/19 @ 5 PM, 11/29-30 @ 8 PM, 12/1-2 @ 8 PM, 12/3 @ 5 PM, 12/6-9 @ 8 PM, 12/10 @ 3pm.

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