

BARBARA CAMPBELL

# THE DIAMOND NECKLACE AFFAIR

by Michelle Helmrich

Before and in complete darkness, the Prologue: the mythical diamond necklace is drawn in film in sparkling mesmeric sequence, cast out ever so slowly but surely in a bejewelled fractal set. And when the heavy wooden door is pulled back from this proscenium frame, sliding like heavy brocade, she is waiting, skipping, smiling, silent. Her voice does not impede her smile, but is an aural subtitle.

The listless and ingratiating smile, even when she misses the rhythm of the skip. She merely shrugs the rope from the hem of her loose gown.

But when we think that the smile is so listless and ingratiating, its duration but affirms the trite and perfunctory expectation of our demonic nature. This incessant smile, marred only by the equally incessant gait of the skip, confirms our iniquity - not hers. We are marked her spectator, just as we marked her in the cart (as did the painter David), and saw her head fall from the guillotine. The sun of her smile, in the spotlight of her public scrutiny. The abrupt end, eventually.

The skipping endlessly on the wooden wharf slats in the evening sky. What is her instruction? Skip with a smile for as long as possible? The smile becomes an oppression, as breath becomes also. We endure for mere minutes, an audience in incarcerated darkness, watching the lightness of freedom lost, and gained. The Bastille was stormed. The Revolution did begin. Ironically, our incarcerated darkness is framed with the remnants of a sexual revolution. And is this

our oppression? We stand shoulder to shoulder and gaze at this remote and oblivious skipping figure. We absorb the change of pace, note a subtle change of rhythm, a fastening, note in our English the torrent of French perversity, note the skirt that is too precariously short, note the pale tights of insufficient opacity, note the lightness of the girlish step, even as she sprang from the cart.

And was it this implicit acknowledgement and intrigue that marks our present crisis, both as spectator and as woman. Even as our feminist critique allows our desire in an eroticized female body, does it also acknowledge our sex's failure to hold faith? In our eager grasp, how do we view her spectre? Sister? Shrew? Naïve innocent? Traitor? The Shepherdess as child of Nature? Enemy of the Revolution? Queen of France? putain autrichienne? - Austrian whore? Woman? Marie-Antoinette's public image, her myth, precludes any glimpse of the Truth. Our every reference precludes us as the unprejudiced jury. "Let them eat cake", we recall. The Diamond Necklace Affair of the 1780's, which unravelled her reputation (despite her lack of direct involvement), here becomes our affair with feminism. This endlessly revolving disk running deeper into its groove, its purpose dissipated. Can the fixed moral stance, the revolution, maintain its impregnable bastion of defense once we recognize the body as a zone of love? The Diamond Necklace Affair not only unravelled her reputation, but dislodged in time a Monarchy.

The body politic at its most invidious and consumptive strikes as the political cartoon, as gutter press, as, for Marie-Antoinette, the torrent of pornographic pamphlets published in her own name, her voice. This royal marionette, paraded in its agility, is rent asunder by a massive assault of ribald slander. And it is this cliché which is most pernicious. This is the interval of our entertainment. Woman brought down by her appetites. "It was full of fucking and fucking and cunts...", said someone. It is her voice of her account of

her sexual pursuits. "foutons, foutons à perdre haleine - let us fuck, let us fuck till we lose our breath", she declares in the Pamphlet *La Godmiché Royale - The Royal Dildo*. This is the text which chants across the interminable rhythm of the skipping.

Shoulder to shoulder in darkness we stand bemused, amused, without breath. The theatrical gesture is stunning (in the circumstances hysterical). The moral rigor of the classical performance cast as ribald farce. But only one second do we see, over and over.

Spotlighted she skips surrounded by the grand illusion of a magnificent panorama of heavenly sky. And when the 'curtain' closes once more, the projected image is now the sparkling organic realization of the diamond rivière, that 'river' of diamonds which flows very low over the décolletage, returning to its source, is here mere sparkling and fading soap bubbles shot with a 'star 6 filter'. This Epilogue is desire fulfilled, and again we are transfixed by the audacity of her honesty. Undoubtedly this is not her jouissance, her enjoyment, but her body paraded for assassination. We applaud her little death, without lessening the impact of the massacre of malicious innuendo. Are you just a cold and lonely, lovely work of art? Did you smile to tempt a lover? This fragment of a silent image returns our failure. Did we, after all, believe that she had said "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche - Let them eat cake"?

This image of the girl skipping has never been about the conditions of desire. That was but the most obvious register. Campbell does not figure the lighthearted exuberance of Fragonard (*The Swing*) or Boucher, and yet it is precisely that which falls to her scrutiny. The pernicious trace of the body, the endurance of its public enjoyment and desecration. We, even now as children of the revolution, savour the woman as victim. We perpetrate the tall poppy syndrome. We dine out on its crumbs. We kindle the lie, ever in the smallest ways. This is our failure.

"Ring-a-ring o' roses... We all fall down".

*Frames of Reference: Performances*  
Artspace at Pier 4/5 (The Wharf), Walsh Bay,  
Sydney, August 15 & 17, 1991  
& The Greater Western, West Melbourne  
November 17 & 18, 1991



Barbara Campbell in performance. Photograph by Heidrun Lohr