

Les Productions du Trésor presents



THE DANCER

A film by Stéphanie Di Giusto

Starring Soko,
Gaspard Ulliel, Mélanie Thierry, Lily-Rose Depp, François Damiens

France - Running time: 1h48 - Format: 2.39 - Sound: 5.1

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SYNOPSIS

Born in the American Midwest, nothing in her background destined farm girl Loïe Fuller to become the toast of Europe's Belle Epoque cabarets, even less to dance at the Paris Opera.

Hidden behind metres of silk, her arms extended by long wooden rods, Loïe reinvents her body on stage and enthralls her audiences a little more every night with her revolutionary Serpentine dance.

Dazzling the capital, she becomes an icon, the blazing symbol of a generation. Eminent admirers fall at her feet: Toulouse-Lautrec, the Lumière Brothers, Rodin. Even if the physical effort risks destroying her back, even if the glare of the stage lights sears her eyes, she will never falter in the quest to perfect her art. But her meeting with Isadora Duncan – a young prodigy hungry for glory – will lead to the downfall of this icon of the early 20^{th} century...

The remarkable destiny of a modern woman who revolutionized her era.

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHANIE DI GIUSTO

How did the film come about?

It all began with a black and white photograph of a dancer hidden in swirling veils and floating above ground with a caption at the bottom: "Loïe Fuller: icon of the Belle Epoque." I was curious about the woman behind the long swathes of fabric, and her story blew me away. I loved the fact that she became famous by concealing herself, her trailblazing nature. With her Serpentine Dance, Loïe Fuller literally revolutionized the stage arts at the end of the 19th century. Yet no one, or almost no one, remembers her.

What made you suddenly decide to embark on the adventure of a first feature film?

I'd been passionate about film for a long time but striving for the level of the directors I admire seemed too daunting a task. My encounter with Loïe disinhibited me in a way. The struggle of this farm girl from the American Midwest for recognition as an artist gave me the courage.

What was it about her that particularly touched you?

She didn't possess any of the ideals of beauty that were fashionable in her day. She was physically unattractive. She had the strong, sturdy build of a farm girl and felt like a prisoner in a body she'd rather forget. Yet instinctively, she invented a move that would carry her across the world. The natural grace that she was lacking, she was able to create for her show, and thereby find liberation through her art. She would reinvent her body on stage. That's a hugely important notion for me. Some people find the words to communicate. She found a gesture and took hold of her destiny. She turned her inhibitions into movement, her uneasiness into energy, a wildly defiant explosion of life. I also wanted to capture the emotion of the struggle. It's a strange blend of strength, willpower and fragility.

From the start, you show her reciting classical texts and sketching in the middle of the countryside...

She was an artist before becoming an actress. For her, art was a form of escape. Loïe doesn't like herself, but she's drawn to the beauty around her and only wishes to be an actress for the love of beautiful texts. She has no desire to display herself.

The irony of destiny: her first role is a silent one.

Yes, and from there on, she chooses to keep quiet and act. She only expresses herself in the dance movement she creates and that she constantly seeks to amplify. She takes off, literally, grabbing hold of her destiny and allowing herself to be carried by her faith in beauty and her own originality. Her passion knows no limits. It's a sort of race against time that brings her all the way to the Paris Opera. It's amazing that Loïe Fuller was able to gain recognition for her ballets. It goes to show how open the times were to creativity.

The dance she developed calls on a great number of scientific disciplines: maths, chemistry, and stagecraft...

Making her dance costume, which required 350 meters of silk, was a feat in itself. I didn't invent a thing by showing the mathematical formula used to create it. From the time of the first performance of her *Serpentine Dance* in the United States, in a cheap cotton dress, Loïe knew she'd need to find the means to illuminate and give it more volume, and that ordinary lighting effects wouldn't do the trick

Loïe Fuller learned from every book she could get her hands on and everyone she met, including Edison and Flammarion the astronomer. She studied light and perfectly mastered stage lighting—hence her insistence on the need for 25 technicians—and even invented the phosphorescent salts she applied to her costumes, setting up her own chemistry lab. She's really at the foundation of abstraction and the multimedia arts. By the time she performed at the Folies Bergère, she was practically CEO of a company.

She'd only just discovered her movement when it occurred to her to patent it.

She was also avant-garde in that respect. When she realized that patents didn't cover her field in America, her first reflex was to come to France where, she thought, her work would be recognized and protected. She was able to deposit ten patents in her name.

Paris, followed by the rest of the world, did recognize her talent, but she was supplanted by Isadora Duncan.

Isadora Duncan was the incarnation of all Loïe was not: youth, brilliance and grace. She's The Dancer. Isadora need only make an appearance whereas Loïe worked hard for hours on end and relied on a thousand artifices. I was intrigued by this form of injustice. We are all confronted by our limits, one day or another.

How did you go about writing the film?

At first, I worked on it as I would a documentary. I read a lot of books about her and met a lot of people, including Jodie Sperling, the dancer who best dances Loïe Fuller today, and whose help was decisive. Then I made her my own in order to express what it was about her that resonated with me. I wanted to get as close as possible to my heroine, to film her body, in an effort to portray the exceptional rush and energy that drove her, her faith. I wanted to try a different kind of story that unfolds through movement rather than dialogue. It demanded a lot of paring down and took me three years to do. Every move is written.

Sarah Thibau helped me finalize a first draft, and Thomas Bidegain gave me a hand later. He helped pare down the screenplay even further while breathing energy into it.

Did you take liberties with the protagonist?

Yes. I felt an intimate connection with the character. There was never question of writing a biopic. My first "betrayal" was to give her a French father. Knowing from the start that I wanted to Soko to play Loïe, I thought it was ridiculous to make her fake an American accent. So I made her father a "forty-niner", one of

the French pioneers that went to Nevada during the gold rush.

I also liked the idea that Loïe needed to escape something violent by leaving the United States. I made her relationship with her mother out to be worse than it was by turning the latter into a member of the "Mothers", a prohibitionist movement that also happened to be the first feminist movement America.

I also took the liberty of inventing the character of Louis Dorsay, played by Gaspar Ulliel. I need a masculine presence in the film, which is otherwise filled with women. Loïe Fuller was gay and it was important for me not to make that the subject of the film. Louis Dorsay is a moving character: he is the film's sacrificed man.

He is also a highly ambiguous figure...

We think he's going to hurt her where in fact he only does her good. He's an art lover. He is immediately taken with the artist he discovers on stage. He and Loïe share the same quest of the spirit and have a relationship that can't be qualified as friendship or love. There is no sexuality between them, and yet their relationship is full of sensuality. I like flirting with the idea of masculine impotence, a taboo subject in film. It was an impotence I felt like making sexy.

All of the beauty of Loïe's moves comes from her expression and that of Gabrielle, played by Mélanie Thierry.

Without them, Loïe doesn't exist, because there's no time to spend on her. I wanted her to be constantly moving forward.

None of Loïe Fuller's performances were ever filmed. How were you able to recreate her show?

That was the exciting challenge of the film. Despite the insistence of her friend Thomas Edison, Loïe Fuller always refused to immortalize her dance on film. "It is out of the question that I be shut up in a box," she would say. The videos circulating on YouTube are only a pale copy of her imitators. Jodie Sperling, whom I mentioned earlier, helped a lot with the choreography. Given the lack of materials to go on, she was never able to reproduce Loïe Fuller's stage performances exactly, but she was touched that a film was being made using the same accessories and the same number of technicians. Even so, while respecting the period, the chief set designer Carlos Conti and I knew we'd

need to use modern-day facilities, and we found artists with whom she would no doubt have worked had she still been alive, including Alexandre Le Brun, a true lighting artist whose work at the last Saint Laurent fashion shows blew me away. From there, we scrupulously followed Loïe Fuller's working methods. That took a lot of rehearsal time. And intensive training on the part of Soko.

How did Soko prepare for the part?

I wanted her to be muscular with a sturdy body. Soko worked six hours a day for a month with Jodie Sterling. The toughest part for her was keeping her balance while dancing 2.5 meters off the ground, in the dark. Soko is someone who gives 100% of herself. She's got a huge hunger for learning and she totally devoted herself to preparing. Four weeks later, she was ready. The challenge then was to make her forget the dance that Jodie Sperling had taught her. She needed to be able to give it her own interpretation. It was unthinkable for me to use a body double, we had to see it through.

Watching the film, we realize that every single show was a physical challenge...

It required a huge effort to coordinate the weightless movement. It's not just the arms that work, it's the whole body. As it happened, Loïe Fuller used to collapse after almost every show, like the scene at the Folies Bergère, where we see the heroine on a stretcher. Loïe only danced every three days. She needed to recuperate after every performance.

The more she dances, the more she uses herself up. On top of the physical effort, the stage lights damage her eyes. And she constantly works out on a machine to strengthen her arm muscles.

Every time Loïe enters the stage, it's like entering the ring. I drew a lot of inspiration for the film from boxing. I didn't film a dancer, I filmed a fighter. Even the way she collapses onto her seat at the end of a performance comes from boxing.

It makes the comparison with Isadora Duncan all the more painful.

Isadora is talented and she'd rather go drink cocktails with journalists than do bar work for hours. Her concept of dance differs radically from Loïe Fuller's: don't practice, dream, breathe deep, look at pictures of Greece for inspiration. When Loïe meets and falls in love with her, she falls first and foremost in love with a projection of herself, of that which she would love to have been and especially, that which she can never be.

We sense a sort of self-destruction and self-disdain about her...

Yes, she won't look at herself, she doesn't like herself, so she doesn't give herself a break. In this sense, The Dancer is also a film about self-esteem. I'm fascinated by the gap between the icon of femininity that she represents when she dances and the ordinary girl she returns to—and hates—in everyday life. Loïe is fully aware that without her costume, she no longer exists, and she does whatever it takes to not destroy the dream she offers her audience and the critics alike. She's afraid to disappoint, and she's right to be. Mallarmé, for instance, wrote sublime accounts of her performance, and was sorely disappointed when he met her.

And yet, she doesn't care about notoriety. In the end she's only happy when she's surrounded by people she works with or during showdowns with her technicians.

In the film, she only dares to meet her audience once, at the Opera, oddly enough when they've seen her take a fall...

At that point, she's already reached success. Thanks to Louis Dorsay, who helped her become a woman, and to Isadora Duncan, who provoked her in a telegram and pushed her to brave the stage of the Opera solo, she may at last like herself. It's Isadora who undresses her and has her accept her femininity.

It's difficult in retrospect to grasp how famous she was at the time.

Loïe Fuller was one of the world's best paid dancers. Yet, despite her having rallied both intellectuals and the general public, a lot of scholars don't consider her a dancer because she didn't pass on her knowledge. Knowing full well the inhumane, almost destructive side of her style, she taught the young girls she worked with to express something else. I had the chance to see a film

she directed where her dancers are half-naked and incredibly free, which caused a scandal—it was 1900. But it was precisely this freedom that Loïe Fuller wanted to teach them.

In a final ironic twist of fate, she is buried in Père Lachaise, only a hundred meters from Isadora Duncan. Her tomb is overgrown whereas Isadora's is magnificently well kept. The injustice continues.

There are some highly pictorial scenes in the film, like the death of her father with the blood flowing in the bathtub and the photo session where Loïe makes love for the first time in armor.

For each scene, I tried to find an idea that would express a certain movement. And each time, I asked myself, have we seen it before? DP Benoît Debie contributed a lot to the pictorial quality of the film. He's the only one with this approach. Having seen his work on Gaspar Noé's *Love*, I knew he was the one I needed. Luckily, he loved the screenplay and agreed to work on the film. I'm like Loïe Fuller with her 25 technicians: without him, without Alain Attal, my producer, without Anaïs Roman, the costume supervisor, without Carlos Conti, set designer, without all of the people who worked with me, *The Dancer* wouldn't exist.

Tell us about your own preparation.

I started location scouting even while I was writing. I needed to find the right settings to bring my characters to life, like the ruins in the park for Gabrielle's birthday dinner, the chateau's rotunda where she dances, the church where the *Mothers* live—which I found in Paris' 19th district, the theatre where she performs, and the Midwest scenes that we actually shot in the Vercors region of France. In the screenplay, there were details that took into account the places I'd chosen. I needed that to believe in it.

Did you really shoot the last dance, the Dance of Mirrors, at the Paris Opera?

Yes. But I only had one night, from 2:00 am to 8:00 am, to do it. That in itself was extraordinary.

While she's already been in a few films, Lily-Rose Depp plays her first major role as Isadora Duncan in *The Dancer*.

I'd never met her and I went to the States to do a screen test. From the very first scene, I knew I was dealing with a star. I was in awe. Lily-Rose, who is only 16, is afraid of nothing, and she is incredibly at ease in her body. While Soko had to train for weeks, Lily-Rose slipped right into character. Again, the same story of injustice.

How do you direct actors as experienced as Soko, Mélanie Thierry, Gaspard Ulliel or François Damiens, who plays Marchand, the head of the Folies Bergère?

I was like Loïe Fuller: I was on a mission. For me it wasn't Soko or Gaspard Ulliel walking through the door, it was Loïe Fuller and Louis Dorsay. I was so into my subject that I wasn't talking to actors but directly to the characters. They were all different: Soko, generous and committed, with an energy that just need channeling, Gaspard, a master of precision, Mélanie, talented and instinctive... It was hard for Mélanie Thierry to play a woman in the shadows. Given Loïe's overflowing energy, I need someone just as powerful but all in restraint. There's nothing harder to play than silence. It's a different kind of performance from Soko's, but just as difficult. I was really impressed by them all. I didn't do many takes and the actors sometimes worried. While respecting the period, my way of filming needed to be in line with my heroine's rhythm and energy, with her modernity. I like to film bodies in movement. It's something I stressed further during editing. I had the strange feeling that they were all there to support my film come what may. They all took risks. It's still a first feature; it was a gamble for them. I was really touched by their commitment.

A word about the music...

Max Richter's highly contemporary take on Vivaldi was an immediate must for me in terms of the choreography. Loïe Fuller wasn't much of a music lover and she would dance to practically anything. To co-exist with Vivaldi, I chose the work of Warren Ellis and Nick Cave, who really move me.

One can't help but see a connection between Loïe Fuller's struggle at every performance and that of a director shooting a first feature...

All directors are Loïe Fullers. It's also, in a way, a film on the birth of cinema, since it's about movement and directing. Loïe Fuller embodies this art, which is elitist and popular at the same time. She sees the bigger, more beautiful picture. All art is a way of staying free. My film is about this vital liberty.

Q&A WITH ALAIN ATTAL

Stéphanie Di Giusto's *The Dancer* was a highly ambitious project for a first-time director. What was the attraction for you?

Vincent Maraval, at Wild Bunch, was the first to arouse my interest – he said, "There are no stars attached, the girl is a first-time director, and it costs a fortune..." So I read the script forewarned, but by the time I reached the end, I was excited. Then my meeting with Stéphanie Di Giusto was key – she was so passionate about her project that she swept me off my feet.

Tell us about your meeting with her.

She knew where she was going, she had it all mapped out and her 130-page script was already well-developed and wonderfully illustrated. She'd even prepared a supporting dossier with pictures of Loïe Fuller and her specific wants in terms of production design and casting. Stéphanie answered all of my questions very precisely. I could already see her film. In terms of exciting and overflowing creativity and conversation it was probably was one of the best meetings of my professional life.

How did you react when she said she wanted to cast Soko as Loïe Fuller?

With me, the director is the boss. Now, although I'm never intrusive during the casting process, there are things I like and relate to more or less – but to tell you the truth, the choice of Soko was integral to my commitment to the project. I'd already loved her in Alice Winocour's *Augustine* and Xavier Giannoli's *In the Beginning* and even in films where she only has a minor role. I liked her being a loose cannon and I found the idea of picking one strong-headed artist to portray another one interesting.

Soko is very famous in indie rock and post-punk circles but not so much in the film industry...

I was aware that by endorsing Stéphanie's decision, I was making things even more difficult for myself – I would have trouble convincing a TV network to finance an expensive first feature with an actress who was very far from a household name. However I decided to go ahead with the project. My wife

Caroline who reads all of my projects and whose opinion I value highly – because she's totally uncompromising – supported me at every turn of this hectic production and her enthusiasm gave me strength.

You're known to work very closely with your directors. How was it with Stéphanie Di Giusto?

We talked a lot and worked a great deal on the script – the supporting characters were a bit underdeveloped and so we fleshed out Mélanie Thierry and Gaspard Ulliel's roles. Stéphanie and I sometimes argued over some scenes, all the more so since she would rewrite portions of the script every day. She must have written 50 different drafts before the final version.

It may seem odd but Stéphanie and I often brought up Rocky, a guy who dreams of becoming a world champion and who's willing to sacrifice it all to reach his goal – although he trains in a grungy boxing gym on the outskirts of Philadelphia. *The Dancer* told the same story with the same references...

She was uncompromising – she absolutely wanted DP Benoît Debie on board and she eventually won him over. She repeatedly flew to L.A., without letting anyone know, to pick the actress – Lily-Rose Depp – who would portray Isadora Duncan. She literally harassed Gaspard Ulliel into signing up for Louis Dorsay's role. And she managed to convince François Damiens to take on the role of the Folies Bergères director, although we couldn't afford him.

How did you put the film together financially? Was it a risky move for Trésor Productions?

I did take serious risks. I've never exposed my company so much – more than €1.5 million. It's huge – the film cost €8 million and I only raised a little less than 6.5 million.

You have a history of embarking on this kind of 'crazy' productions...

I did it on *Polisse* where "reasonable" decisions quickly gave way to "necessary" decisions; on *Tell No One* where no financier would back the idea of François Cluzet; and most importantly on Radu Mihaileanu's *The Concert*, which was unquestionably my wildest venture up until *The Dancer*.

In those cases, you're in a totally schizophrenic position where you want what's

best for the film while being aware that you can't afford it. You go into debt, you throw yourself headlong into the project and above all you embrace the director's decisions because you know he or she's right when he or she won't give in. Radu Mihaileanu knew exactly what he needed and, thank God, his film was successful; Stéphanie Di Giusto was just as determined – history will tell if I did the right thing in supporting her all along...

In the end, which partners did you find?

The CNC that gave an Advance on Receipts, Canal Plus, Ciné +, Wild Bunch Distribution, which also handles world sales, a coproduction with a Czech company, Serena Films, and the Dardenne Brothers. Later on, as the shoot was in progress, Orange Studio came on board for a small coproduction.

One of the key scenes – in which Loïe Fuller performs at the Opera – was challenging both choreographically and cinematically.

As Stéphanie knew, she had made sure very early on that Jodie Sterling, a choreographer who trained and rehearsed with Soko, would join us. As a result, she was able to focus on the shooting script and the filming of this dancing scene, and the one with all the student dancers in the forest.

How was it shooting at the Opera?

It's a state-run institution, so you can't do anything you like – there are many restrictions but it was great wrapping the shoot in that stately setting. Incidentally it's one of the major changes in the script that was originally supposed to take place in Vienna. The fact that the central character was ultimately aiming for the Paris Opera struck a stronger chord. It raises the bar.

You said Stéphanie Di Giusto was uncompromising. Can you give us examples?

I couldn't afford to fund the scenes where Loïe is out in the mountains in the US, and I thought that the film could begin when she gets to her mother's. Stéphanie was back at it by the end of the shoot: "Listen," she told me, "I need these scenes so we'll do them like a short film. Just take it off my wages – I'll pay for it." She was right. I couldn't imagine the film without the scenes she shot in the Vercors region.

She also made a point of having two shots of Soko crossing the Atlantic on a boat that we had to give up on. Last February, she embarked on a ferry with Soko and the producers Marie Jardillier and Emma Javaux that joined forces with me. She did her shots without any permit, just with a camera and Soko. The only restriction I imposed on her was to lose a few shooting hours towards the end – all in all something like 2 days of shooting out of 47. I had the guts to draw the line at this point as the production manager, who was exhausted, couldn't get any compromise on her part.

What was your job during the editing process?

After eight weeks of editing, Stéphanie called me up: "I'm done," she said. The version of *The Dancer* she showed me was 80 minutes long. I've produced 26 films and I've never seen anything like it! It's just the opposite of all directors that always make their films too long. But she was so afraid her film might be too contemplative and overemotional that she's made a real whirlwind. So we picked up from her original rough cut and we started from scratch – I tried to show her that the film could benefit from going slow – can you believe it? – and she went back to work on her film with a greater peace of mind.

You can feel a lot of connections between the struggle of Loïe Fuller, fighting for the recognition of an art form she came up with, the energy of the young director psyched up about seeing her film through to completion and your own involvement in the project.

I'm in no position to analyze these connections. However, I was indeed excited by bringing together the destinies of these two women – the one I was helping make her directing debut and the one of the central character of the film – and by how much they were mirroring each other.

Would you say like Édith Piaf's famous song: "I regret nothing"?

I've never felt any regret about the films I've produced and it's definitely not happening with $\it The \, Dancer...$

QUOTES FROM PERIOD CRITICS

"Something divine materializes. One thinks of visions of legends, of crossings to Eden."

Paul Adam

"Art springs forth incidentally, sovereign: life communicated to impersonal surfaces, as well as the feeling of their exaggeration, as for the onlooker: a harmonious delirium."

Mallarmé

"Her body delighted in being unfindable. She arose out of the naked air, then suddenly returned to it. She gave herself up, unveiled herself. She went, herself creating herself."

Rodenbach

"All of the cities she traveled to and Paris itself owe her for the purest of emotions, she re-awoke the splendors of antiquity."

Auguste Rodin

"Flora coming to life in human form."

Roger Marx

"There is a walking, living, palpable clarity, and what is really moving is that from all these cold flames, from this fire that doesn't burn, from between two wreaths of light, appears the head of a woman, an enigmatic smile, the head of the dancer on an elusive phosphorescent body, the lively glow of which ignites and transfigures."

Félicien de Ménil

"Is it dance, is it light projected, an evocation of some spirit? Mystery."

Jean Lorrain

CAST

Loïe Fuller Soko

Louis Gaspard Ulliel

Gabrielle Mélanie Thierry

Isadora Duncan Lily-Rose Depp

Marchand François Damiens

Armand Louis-Do de Lencquesaing

Lily Amanda Plummer

Ruben Denis Ménochet

CRFW

Directed by Stéphanie Di Giusto

Written by Stéphanie Di Giusto, Sarah Thibau

With the collaboration of Thomas Bidegain

Freely adapted from the novel

"Loïe Fuller, danseuse de la Belle Epoque"

by Giovanni Lista

Produced by Alain Attal

DP Benoît Debie

Editor Géraldine Mangenot

Production Designer Carlos Conti

Costume Designer Anaïs Romand

Sound Pierre Mertens

Thomas Desjonqueres

Fric Chevallier

Casting Director Pascale Beraud

Producers Marie Jardillier

Emma Javaux

Line Producer Xavier Amblard

Production Manager Bruno Vatin

Post-Production Supervisor Nicolas Mouchet

In co-production with Wild Bunch

Orange Studio Les Films du Fleuve Sirena Film

Voo et Be tv

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In association with Cofinova 12

A Plus Image 6

Palatine Etoile 13

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Aide aux coproductions minoritaires tchèques Tax Shelter du Gouvernement Fédéral belge







































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