



Their ball

Their ball

128

Farid Chenaune





Their ball

The arrival, the ordeal of climbing the steps

**Charles-Etienne,
Le Bal des Folles, 1930**

Thursday, 27 March. – Rue de l'Université is only lively at the spot where the car stops. The footpath is shining from the recent rain, at the foot of a steep stairway, which is violently lit up... Bizarre, swathed masks climb before us up the steps of the temple where girls from Lesbos and people from Sodom celebrate their twice-yearly Saturnalia.

Under the belted raincoats, billowing trains swell, unbelievable panaches standing erect on wig-adorned heads, with necks protected by a scarf. Part of the opposite footpath where the hostile, heckling crowd is contained by the police agents, a volley of whistles salutes each descent from a car, and each ascension of the steep steps. The show is not just inside, the street is also enjoying a tasty specimen... It's a bit like the display of an exceptional fairground where the indulgent onlookers have given way to a sneering pack, throwing lies and distributing boos. You can hear things like:

"Into the rubbish!" – "The paddy wagon is waiting for you, bunch of dikes!" – "Take him out" – "Off to Saint-Louis, with your gristle!" – "She hasn't croaked yet, that one?" – "Get out!" – "Fuck, you didn't pay for your gladrags!" – "Off to the slammer, you fairies!" Such gracious outbursts were the baptism of fire. Uproar... A certain 'brazen hussy,' with an oakum head-dress, white iron tiara and a green velvet curtain as a coat and a cherry-red wool shawl on her back, confronts a police officer. In the middle of laughs, she yelps: "Come on, let me through! I'm pregnant!"

**Marcel Montarron,
"Corydon conduit le bal",
Voilà, n° 102, 4 March 1933**

It is only 10 o'clock at night. But the footpath in front of the lit up façade of Magic-City has already had to be cleared. [...]

The laughs, the cries intensify and go up to the sky like rockets. You can hear them mingle with the coming and going of the cars, the slamming of car doors, the whistles of the peace officers? The line of cars constantly grows longer. The transvestites arrive in small groups. Each time, their giggles and high-pitched laughs arouse the taunts and the boos of the cap-wearing street urchins.

There is something mischievous and perverse in the air that is hard to describe, that contrasts with the quiet and bourgeois nature of the district.

"You could have shaved to look good, right! Big beanpole."

The 'big beanpole' plays with his lorgnette, puts on airs under his violet and finally, lifting up his skirt, shows two huge fairground wrestler's calves, on which some loose silk stockings are puckered.

"Have you seen that one over there? She's got nice arms but dirty hands. You can see that she did the washing up this evening."

Everybody is bent over laughing and the police agents, overcome by the mirth, forget to direct the cars, the flow of which is growing every minute and threatens to flood the place.







Their ball





Alexandre,
"The Magic-City ball. The great display of 'Décro-
chez-moi ça' ('grab what you can')", *Candide*,
11 March 1937

The young employee distributing the tickets blushed behind the ticket counter because of the way in which these clients who, throwing their silk coats rented from a rag-and-bone shop, handed over their money in their big fist and sighed:

"So, there's no reduction for the female dance partners?"

The entrance hall, the ticket counter, the cloakroom, the stairway, the banister

Charles-Etienne,
***Le Bal des Folles*, 1930**

My ravishing cicerone, half-naked fisherman, draped in a transparent net of pearls, turns left and slowly climbs the steps of a blue carpet, between the double row of 'voyeurs'... All along the handrail, like human bunches, scrambling, packed almost to the point of suffocation, piled high to jeer, are two hundred heads with gleaming eyes and invective mouths [...].

"Hey, Priestess!" "Is it you, my beauty? You've grown since last year..."

"Here are the Queens! Hey! 'La Civa-Rita' disguised as Sorel!... Big pussy, c'mon!... And the two 'Récamier' dressed in white, with green gloves! The maggots are getting down to business! Off to Père-Lachaise cemetery with you, what horrors!... And 'Miss Dolly' who took her bedspread as an imperial train!"

A gale of laughter unfurls:

"Marie-Rose: Bravo!... Here's Marie-Rose!... Side-splitting!... Round of applause for Marie-Rose!"

The lady thus summoned measures 1m 80 and majestically wears two 'Gretchen'* style braids with a flouncy dress...

"Here's 'Shiver' in pink and silver. Hurray for the President!... And 'Toto', with 'Titine', the pock-marked seamstress!... Half a pound of pins on her mop!"

"Get a load of 'Tintin' with her flower train and 'La Pauline', dressed as La Belle Hélène! Hey, 'Marceline', the old antique dealer! Hi there, you nasty pest! My dears, that's the 'ridiculous grime ball!'"





In the hall, between 11 o'clock and midnight

Charles-Etienne,

Le Bal des Folles, 1930

It is midnight and you can hardly move, the crowd is so dense. The men are dancing with each other. Same thing for the women. For once, you can enjoy this luxury in public.

See, over there, if Lilian is getting in the way of the tall brunette with huge eyes, dressed as a faun?... Nice legs, the stranger...

Despite the make-up and the gladrags, the middle-aged prevail over those whose age is uncertain... Those pot-bellied ones with varicose veins and triple chins win the day! The young and really handsome ones.... arrogantly show off, but they are in the minority. The majority rules in the faction of the pathetic stillborns and losers. Knock-kneed, skinny-legged, with twisted shoulders and stunted faces...

Dressed as a butcher's wife: white apron, bursting bosom and wine corks swaying at her cheeks, an enormous man tries to drag her away: "She's an idiot."

"Watch yourself, 'Césarine'; he'll drive you wild!"

"My God, my god! exclaimed one, putting on airs in a brown taffeta dress, very 1865-ish, carrying a genuine fringed parasol above a high-rise hairstyle. Another one, older, elegantly dressed from the time of Sadi-Carnot, jostles her. Adorned with yellowing, dangling feathers, accumulated over the years, her beret-style hat is poetry in motion.

"Hey you tart, could you be more careful?!"

"Has the Gyraldose antiseptic and blackcurrant gone to your head, you vulgar cow? Good-for-nothing, did I ask you if your mother gave birth to a monkey?"

"Flouncy bitch, was it in the public urinals that you picked the watercress that's growing on your trap?"

Mellor,

"Leur bal", Candide, 10 March 1932

The stars of today are obviously these solid and lusty men of five feet six inches who, scorning the vulgar carnival costumes, make their entrance, one by one, around 11 o'clock, in outfits with the most exquisite taste and the most perfect cut.

Long skirts, very fitted at the hips, in pale-coloured satin, with a bodice that is high in front and very low-cut at the back, as appropriate, white gloves up to the elbow, a small bunch of bright flowers pinned to the left breast, in the most select cabarets and the private rooms of the high society rarely will you meet more distinguished and more elegant female figures.

Of course with this came the end of hideous, glaring and totally off-the-mark wigs that would just about do the job for theatre. Natural hair, cut with such art, worthy of an Antoine or his emulators! Some of these lady-men, to accentuate the illusion, are styled not with a boy-cut but like boys, tightly cropped and with such a masculine air, to say the least, one might wonder if the conquests they have in their sights do not belong to the fair sex.

Most of them, when all is said and done, are very pretty. This one looks strikingly like Madame Geneviève Vix, that one looks like one of the Dolly Sisters, and that one like Mademoiselle Marquet.

... on the threshold I pass the last one to arrive, a tall, seductive brunette with a delectable pink outfit, altogether in the style of Marie Dubas...



Their ball



140

Farid Chenaune





Their ball

1.4.2

Farid Chenoune





The transvestite bridge

Marcel Montarron,
"Corydon conduit le bal",
Voilà, no. 102, 4 March 1933

The costume parade begins, however. On the rostrum and around the walkway where they parade under a shower of roses, the crowd is so dense that you couldn't bend down to pick up a brassiere.

The Paris Smart Set has come to see. Over there is Raimu, morose and sulky, Michel Simon, more bleached than ever, and Josephine Baker. And Damia who, for fun, pulls the beard of an old man dressed up in tatty garb. And Jean Weber at last, powdered and fresh, beset by young and lively admirers."

Charles-Etienne,
Le Bal des Folles, 1930

Among the ovations of an upright crowd, nudging hands outstretched, all along the walkway that had just been endured, the parade of the asexual and the androgynous, of all the defenders of outlawed love, begins...

Emaciated, frantic fervor, Mortuary pallor with swooning grimaces, cemetery and ultra-revue beauties, sparkling and made up poof-ter-ghosts, here is crime and finery, the Vice of Paris goes by!

Their ball



Farid Chenoune





Their ball

145

Farid Chenoune

Awards and prizes

Charles-Etienne,

Le Bal des Folles, 1930

The award goes to the couple 'Albert' and 'Robert'. The innate elegance of one harmonises with the faithfully copied gestures of the other. Vertiginously adorned with black ostrich feathers, covered in Chantilly lace, letting the snowy gush of undergarments show through, the duo personifies cranes, 1900-style, return of the Drags*. Following "these ladies" comes a chamber maid with a tiny waist, overflowing bosom and a varnished boater hat, carrying a white poodle beribboned in fiery red." As for the second prize, it goes to "La Miss", a tall, incredibly thin boy. Fire in his eyes, a tormented mouth, sky-scraper hairstyle, a magical train, with pink silk flounces, carried by three boys wearing the same colour.

Alexandre, "The Magic-City ball. The great parade of "Décrochez-moi ça" ('grab what you can')", *Candide*, 11 March 1937

The speaker declared 'La Marlene' had won first prize. It appears that in certain establishments today, they give the name of cinema celebrities to the strange regulars. 'La Greta Garbo', even though she had gotten up to all sorts of eccentricities to attract attention, only received second prize; 'La Marlene' came back again on stage, in his black dress with impeccable taste. He took himself seriously, almost cried with emotion, acknowledged the audience, he was slim with a little sharp head, whereas the bitter 'Mae West' remained tearful and jealous in the middle of the stage.





Their ball

Their ball

148

Farid Chenoune





End of the ball

**Marcel Montarron,
"Corydon conduit le bal",**

Voilà, no. 102, 4 March 1933

Two o'clock in the morning... Soon the only ones left in the hall will be the real amateurs... "Alone at last, my kid," said Lulu. "Come on, let's have a dance."

On the empty dance floor, the dancers, tightly embraced, move around with ease...

The last transvestites leave the ball. The over-excitement has died down. It's time for memories, the insidious time of regrets.

Two taxi drivers insult each other and come to blows. One gets up, blood on his face and finally turns his anger to the last clients of Magic-City.

"What do you believe," says Lulu, "we sleep in our mother's." Then, melancholic at the thought of having to fold up his dress and put on his business suit once again and take his place behind a counter, he says:

"You see, I told you that the ball is a pleasure that starts well and ends badly."

**Marcel Montarron, "Bal de folles",
Marianne, 29 March 1933**

Five o'clock in the morning.

The last transvestites have left the ball. They all head up now towards Montmartre, third-rate extras from special clubs, professionals of impure love, unbalanced persons of all types... Place Blanche, where the lights are growing dim, is still holding on to them in its bars.

Alexandre, "The Magic-City ball. The great parade of 'Décrochez-moi ça' ('grab what you can')", Candide, 11 March 1937

Chased by the distress of the place, the transvestites leave the hall one by one. Some of them rush into cars, with a forceful rustle and some cries, but other head off alone, on foot, with clumsy and painful steps, shivering under their thin silk coat in the rainy night, to the taunts of some passers-by, to whom they no longer have the courage to smile or reply.

LA RAMPE

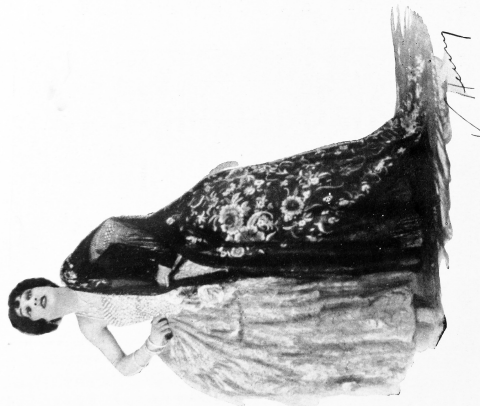
Lorsque ces Messieurs *adames* sont « de sortie »

Le Bal de Magic

...un soir

de Mi-Carême

par Jean Laurent



Carnescita. (Monsieur Maurice B.)

Depuis dix heures, le chœur antique est à son poste, en face du grand escalier de Magic-City. Les agents l'ont parké sur le trottoir. Ils le surveillent d'un air soupçonneux, tandis qu'ils sourient avec indulgence aux « folles », qui leur envoient des baisers. Le chœur antique ne semble pas s'en apercevoir. Il sait que demain rétablira les choses, et que ces jolis garçons maquillés, emplanés et emperlés, qu'il applaudit aujourd'hui, seront bientôt pourchassés, traqués, ridiculisés par une foule vulgaire, cruelle et ignorante.

Pour l'instant le chœur antique ne fait pas un mouvement. Il attend dans le froid et le noir la descente des voitures.

Un taxi s'arrête. La portière s'ouvre...

Le *chœur antique*. — Bon ! Bon ! Oh celle-là !... Et l'autre donc ! Regarde celle-ci qui fait sa dédigneuse... Mais je la reconnais, c'est le garçon coiffeur de la rue de Valenciennes. Et ce qu'elle est laide !

Deux, trois taxis stoppent...

Le *chœur antique*. — Mon Dieu celle-ci qui ne peut plus sortir ses plumes du taxi !... Eh ! j'égare moi le costume s'il est bath ! Et les parades ! Et les strass !... Mais celle de

LA RAMPE



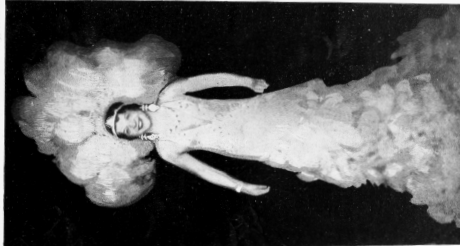
soir par un maître de maison invisible, heureux de retrouver, ici, tant d'êtres pareils à eux-mêmes, rayonnants cette nuit dans le déploiement merveilleux de leur instinct déchaîné.

Immoral, dites-vous ? Mais vous en trouverez, soyez-en persuadés, pour soutenir qu'un tel spectacle est pur comme un vers de Virgile, comme un ange de Fra Angelico, comme un livre de Jean Desbordes, que par sa nudité même ce spectacle est chaste, que cette parade de foire, ces costumes horribles de music-hall de province, cet orchestre de bal musette révoltent par leur naïveté même une fraîcheur singulière et une absence de vice qui purifient cette salle de toute sa laideur et de toute sa vulgarité !!!

Cette nuit, tous les petits-fils de Solome clairessemés dans le monde, toutes ces « ombres errantes » aux amours stériles semblent avoir reconstruit pour un soir leur ville maudite. La présence d'un si grand nombre de leurs pareils leur fait oublier leur anomalie. Pour un peu ils trouveraient les amours de Roméo et Juliette monstrueuses.

Où bien il vous raconteraient que du temps de Shakespeare

Cette marquise qui se savonne de Traverson, que fait-elle dans le civil ?



Un qui se souvient d'une Venise de Music-hall]

Glossary and index

Glossary

Bath. Good, pretty, pleasant.

Bijoux. See La Môme Bijou, further down.

Drags. Initiated in 1883, 'drag day' consisted of a parade in horse-drawn carriages, from Place de la Concorde to the racetrack in Auteuil where they then took part in the races. This 'drag parade', a great society event of the season, was the occasion of sumptuous demonstrations of haute couture elegance.

Gretchen. Like Greta, short for Margarete. In German culture, the pure, young girl. In France, in the anti-Germanic context of the 1870s to 1920s, the ungainly German girl, a little bit stupid and lacking in elegance, the female version of the 'Boche'.

Truc (Thing). Prostitution.

Index of proper names Characters

La Baker, Joséphine (1906-1975). Music-hall artist, revealed in Paris in *La Revue nègre* in 1925.

La Cardinal, Madame. Character from the Parisian petty bourgeoisie, pretentious and insular, created and ridiculed by Ludovic Halévy in his book *Madame Cardinal* in 1870, and represented by Degas in his painting *Pendant la classe de danse*.

La Crawford, Joan. American actress (1905-1977). From 1929 onwards, on screen and in town she was dressed by the Hollywood couturier Adrian, who contributed to her aura of a glamorous and sexy actress.

La Damia, Maryse. Realist actress and singer, nicknamed "the Tragedian of French Song," she gave her iconic class to the black stage dress (1889-1978).

La Dubas, Marie. Popular singer with an extensive repertoire, talented for the stage, "an actress of song" (1894-1972).

La Garbo, Greta. Swedish actress, 1905-1990. One of the most influential Hollywood stars for women during the inter-war period. In April 1933, *Vogue* devoted an article to the imitation phenomenon that she caused, known as 'Garbo-ism'.

La MacDonald, Jeannette. American singer and actress, famous for her roles in musicals, in particular *The Merry Widow*, d'Ernst Lubitsch, with Maurice Chevalier (1903-1965).

La Mae West. American actress, famous for her generous bosom and her saucy humour (1893-1980).

La Marlene, Marlène Dietrich. Along with Greta Garbo, the other great female model of Hollywood glamour, just as prevalent (1901-1992).

La Marquet, Marie. Actress with a strong personality, devoted to theatre in *L'Aiglon* by Edmond Rostand, then cinema in *Sappho* by Léonce Perret, 1895-1979.

La Môme Bijou. Mythical character of Montmartre night life, survivor of the Belle époque, legendary for her rags from another century and her abundance of make up, rings, diamantes, false pearls and false gemstones. Brassai devoted a chapter of his book *Le Paris secret des années 30* to her.

La Moreno, Marguerite. Actress, known for her lack of beauty, recognised for her abundance of talent (1871-1948).

La Récamier, Juliette, known as Madame Récamier. Famous woman from Parisian society of the early 19th century (1777-1849). Her portrait by David around 1800 has become one of the reference illustrations of fashion under the French Directory period and the First Empire.

The Dolly Sisters. Twin sisters, stars of the American music hall in the 1920s.

People

Antoine. Hair stylist for the Paris Smart Set (1884-1976).

de Bremond d'Ars, Yvonne. Famous antique dealer and verbose diarist, figure of Parisian lesbian society (1894-1976).

Doumergue, Gaston. French politician, President of the Council from 1913 to 1914 and President of the French Republic from 1924 to 1931 (1863-1937). Here, synonym of unfashionable, outdated.

Raimu. Actor, famous for his roles in Marseille-based and Provençal films by Marcel Pagnol: *Marius*, *Fanny*, *César* and *La Femme du boulanger* (1883-1946).

Rostand, Maurice. Journalist, writer and poet, known for his homosexuality (1891-1968).

Simon, Michel. French actor, one of the most popular of the inter-war period, collector of pornography and connoisseur of night-time Paris (1895-1975).

Weber, Jean. Actor and member of the Comédie-Française (1906-1995).

← The three portraits of transvestites, in painted form, are almost identical duplicates of three photos belonging to the Fréjaville fund. *La Rampe*, 1 April 1931. Bibliothèque d'Etude et du Patrimoine de Toulouse de Toulouse (P 3069).