

L'Optimisme was a performance-presentation for DANscienCE Week, CSIRO Discovery Lecture Theatre, August 10 2013. It was originally created for the National Gallery of Australia 'City of Lights' Promenade, March 2013.

This essay on the life of the dancer Jane Avril touches on the history of the asylum and the treatment of neurological disorders in the late C19th.

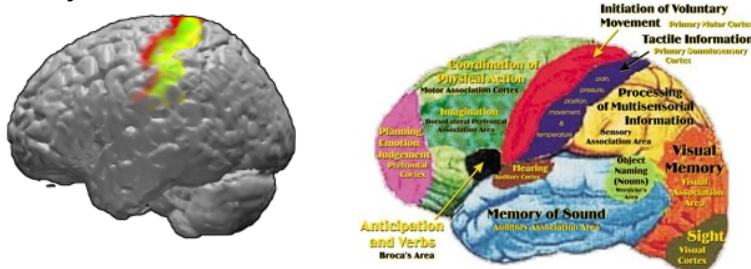
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Summary:

Jane Avril was incarcerated in Salpêtrière asylum as a teenager because of a movement disorder that she claimed was 'cured by dancing'. She became one of the favoured dancers at the Moulin Rouge, and a good friend, supporter and muse to Toulouse-Lautrec. Her physical oddness was celebrated by poets and artists of the period. Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions were of a woman whose dance was irregular and a little uncontrolled. This essay touches on the way both art and science can understand and document--perhaps even heal--the human condition, but via very different means.

Jane Avril [born Jeanne Beaudon in 1868] was the daughter of a courtesan and an aristocrat who disappeared. Her early life was impoverished and brutal, her mother subjecting her to regular beatings. She ran away from home at the age of 13 and was eventually admitted to Salpêtrière hospital, under the ministrations of neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, for a movement disorder known as "St Vitus' Dance" [now termed Sydenham's Chorea].

The incidence of paediatric chorea in Europe rapidly increased in the period 1860-1900. This is probably due to a high incidence of rheumatic fever caused by streptococcus outbreaks. Chorea can also be induced by trauma, particularly if applied to the primary motor cortex of the brain.



[illus.] it is quite possible that the beatings Jane suffered as a child induced her symptoms.

In a sense, C19th mental hospitals were both asylums for the poor and places to protect the destitute. There is evidence that Prof Charcot's inmates—whom he induced to 'perform' their illness to an invited public at his Tuesday lectures—knew very well that their incarceration played the fine line of conforming to provide the evidence he

wanted, *versus* turning them over into the bedlam of the street or even amongst the truly insane in other parts of the hospital.



[illus.—stages of hysteria]

Charcot's hysterics were asked to 'perform' their hysteria in public lectures. They could indeed demonstrate the several 'stages' of their illness—suggesting that they were controlling, presenting or performing their manifestation

Some people call Charcot the 'father of French neurology': revisionists call him manipulative and self-serving. As C19th asylums did provide some protection for their inmates, perhaps he was both [in the way that many of his inmates were both truly ill, and also able to 'perform' their illness on command]. Indeed, Charcot was thoughtful, or is that progressive, or is that *audacious* enough to initiate a *bal des folles*--a 'ball for the insane'. Poignant photographs from the *Hopitaux de Paris Archives* show 30 women, some clearly unwell, in elaborate costumes and feathers. Were the public there to view and mock madness? to feel compassion for the inmates' condition ['but for the grace of god, there go I']? or as performing seals for Charcot? Again, possibly a combination of all of these.

One thing is certain: it is where Jane Avril found her calling. Comments abound about how mesmerising she was. The whole room stopped to watch her enigmatic, elegant dance. One writer later described her dance as like "an orchid in a frenzy".¹

Jane stated that 'dancing cured her'—a very real possibility, considering the correlation between movement and brain re-patterning that is now accepted as a core practice in various contemporary therapies [such as biofeedback, mind-body and physio-therapies] and also most recently in philosophy [theories of embodied cognition]. The story is possibly apocryphal or exaggerated [Jane left the asylum 4 months after the *bal*] but nonetheless she had found her calling. Taking up day jobs of various sorts, she began to

¹ "Pale elegant whimsical, anaemic and determined." Arsene Alexandre, supplement to *L'Art Francais*, 29 July 1893]

perform in Paris nightclubs by night, and eventually became one of the most popular and respected of the dancers at the Moulin Rouge. Also, unlike many of her female peers, she became an astute businesswoman who managed her own affairs and did not have to rely on the 'patronage' of wealthy men who demanded favours beyond the performance.



It seems that Jane never quite lost her oddness, yet this is quite possibly the very characteristic that established her as an enigma and star of the nightclub.

In the midst of the crowd, there was a stir, and a line of people started to form. Jane Avril was dancing, twirling, gracefully, lightly, a little madly; pale, skinny, thoroughbred, she twirled and reversed weightless, fed on flowers: Lautrec was shouting out his admiration.” Paul Leclerc

Her ability to *perform herself* as an elegant and slightly unpredictable oddity is possibly also a key. She had learnt well some of the lessons of the asylum.

There is no evidence of sexual relations between Avril and Toulouse-Lautrec, but it seems they had a great compassion for and understanding of each other. Jane championed his work, commissioning posters and remaining a loyal friend right up to Henri's death. Whilst a photograph of Henri dressed in Jane's furs and hat [reproduced in Nancy Ireson's wonderful book²] shows the depth of their friendship, it is Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions of Jane through his art that show just how closely he understood her.

What we can see in Henri's paintings is an extraordinary equanimity about her dancing style. In the following painting, for example, three dancers perform the can-can whilst Jane's body [at left] does it in the only way she can. His brush strokes depict her with as much clear-eyed delicacy and sense of grace as the other dancers. She is equivalent to

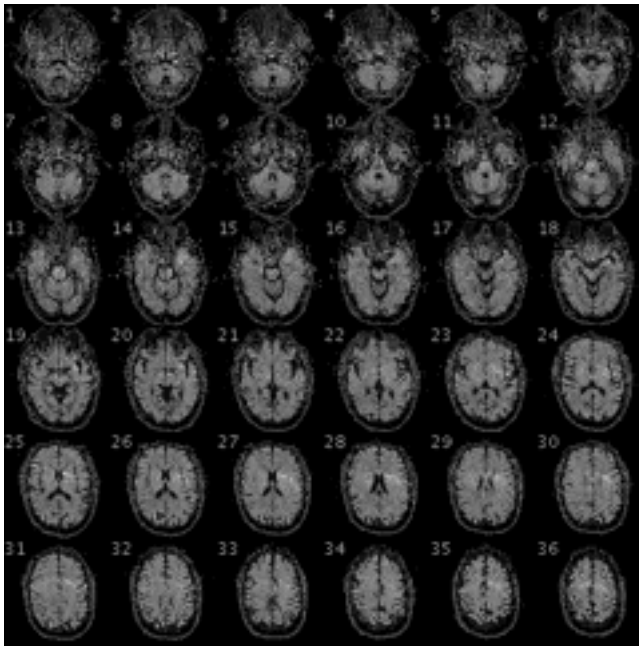
them all. Perhaps *an accepting gaze* is as healing [socially and psychologically] as neurological intervention.



Whereas Charcot's early treatment experiments included shock therapies [which Jane somehow, or rather cannily, managed to avoid]³, working with an electro-mechanical model of mind and behaviour which paved the way for current methodologies such as EST, and later MRI and fMRI⁴ brain scanning, his *bal des folles* was nonetheless a way of exploring mind-body correlations and showed some understanding of the interconnectedness of symptoms within a whole body schema. It also could be argued that Charcot, in requiring some of his inmates to perform their hysteria, was also concerned with validating a very real condition, and, coupled with the advent of photography, was doing this in the best way he knew how. The attempt to 'prove' the illness paved the way for treatment and opened a pathway to investigating something that hitherto was easy to lock away, mock or condemn.

³ She seems to have lived with a sharp awareness of what was going on around her. Jane is reputed to have held herself above many of the Salpêtrière inmates, claiming many of them were 'making up' their illnesses.

⁴ fMRI models have evolved as a way of countering a reductionist approach to labelling certain sectors of the brain as isolated in their function from other parts. the fMRI is an attempt to picture systemic correlations between areas.



His methods, however, are still examples of isolating and *measuring* symptoms [which is still a strong part of neurology today]. More recent fMRI scanning methods, however—which are beginning to supercede the MRI-- acknowledge that previous attempts to isolate functions of the brain to specific locations do not take into account the interrelatedness of the body system, and the plasticity [essentially, the job-sharing capacity] of the brain.

What is intriguing is how accurately Toulouse-Lautrec's drawings also capture Jane's syndrome, with very specific identification of her qualities of gesture and movement capacity. Not only would it be interesting to have been able to get an fMRI reading of T-L's brain *as he drew*⁵, but even without this, his lines reveal both an accuracy and *acceptance* of her condition that to my mind equals that of the observation of any scientist.

Art such as Toulouse-Lautrec's is perhaps a social healing in a world of hierarchies and oppositions. Ironically, one of the differences between scientific and artistic process is that one is an external form of documenting whereas the other is an act of imagining and cognising almost from *within* the movement or form of another [much as an actor or dancer does in creating character]. Significantly, both processes require interpretation. The question pertinent to this article is not, which is better, but which process heals? Maybe the answer is: an interplay of both.

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⁵ as have been done with Buddhist monks, for example.

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