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THE CURRENT CINEMA

FLESH AND FANTASY

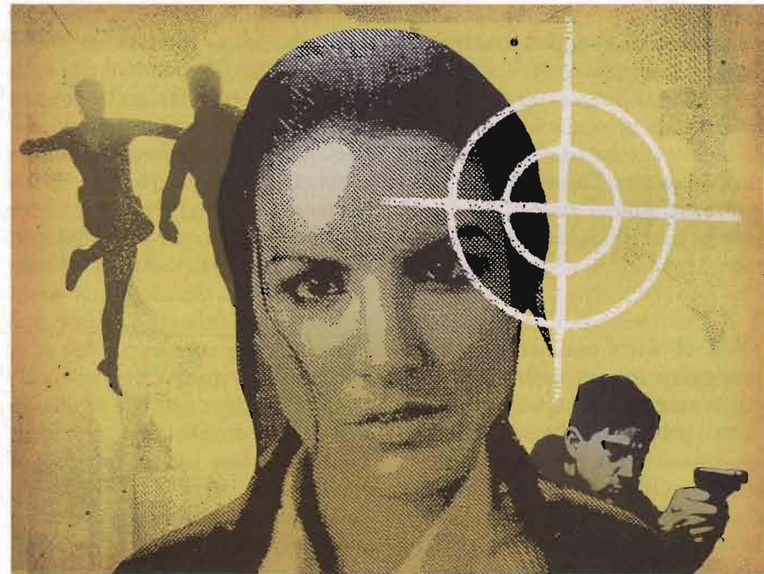
"Crazy Horse," "Contraband," and "Haywire."

BY DAVID DENBY

In "Crazy Horse," Frederick Wiseman's documentary about the legendary Paris nude revue, all the women have the same body—tall, with small, high breasts, long waists, long legs, and full, rounded rumps. There's a definite preference, bordering on fixation, at Le Crazy Horse, the sixty-year-old club on the Avenue George V. At the weekly audition for new dancers, the hopefuls—except for one broad-shouldered transsexual who manages to slip through the gate—offer more of the same. Wearing only a G-string and shoes, the women stand in a line and, when asked to show their profiles, thrust their chests forward and their rears back. That's the Crazy Horse look. In several lengthy performance sequences, Wiseman and his cameraman, John Davey, frame the women's bodies from stomach to mid-thigh, focussing on the pelvis and the rear, as the dancers slowly rotate in mixed shadow and light. The spectacle falls somewhere between sexual reverie and the perfection of a classical sculpture. The scene is alluring but entirely impersonal—flesh transfigured by cinema.

I suppose Wiseman has earned the right to this feast. After years of making expansive, intellectually resonant films about hospitals, schools, welfare offices, and domestic-abuse clinics, Wiseman, like other older artists (Rodin, or Matisse with his late Blue Nudes), has turned to the body as the source of beauty and truth. In recent years, he has made "La Danse," a film about the Paris Opéra ballet company, and "Boxing Gym," shot in Austin, which turns out to be a celebration not of pugnacity and power but of rhythm, speed, and balance—the body in harmony with the spirit. "Crazy Horse" is more single-minded in its pursuit. Backstage, as the women fiddle with costumes, they have the matter-of-fact acceptance of nudity shared by strippers and sex professionals, an attitude without shame or any notion of sin. Naked, they are clothed for work, and, onstage, in their interchangeable way, they do some spectacular turns. The performance style at Le Crazy Horse is hard to describe, since it partakes equally of ballet (the women are sometimes on pointe), the circus, modelling, striptease, and vaguely masochistic pornography. We get a good sample—excerpts from more than a dozen numbers. At the beginning, a dancer drapes herself over the curved sides of a couch, arching in slow abandonment—it's the sexiest number, a languorous ballet that puts viewers in an awed trance. In another routine, dancers emerge from darkness, thrusting their limbs over a horizontal mirror, doubling themselves in nakedness. There is much silhouetting, as in the title sequence of an old James Bond movie, with coy bits of touching and undressing. British tourists, we gather, are a significant part of the audience: in the naughtiest number, the dancers line up as the Queen's Guard at Buckingham Palace, complete with horsetails, in front and back, and bearskin hats, all of which they remove in silhouette. Humor is not much in evidence at Le Crazy Horse; the Queen's Guard routine is about as funny as it gets.

This mixture of styles and temperament comes out of long-held traditions. Le Crazy Horse opened in 1951, under the direction of Alain Bernardin. After Bernardin mysteriously committed suicide at the club, in 1994, his family took control of it, and then sold it in 2005. When Wiseman shot the movie, in 2009, the routines were in the process of being revised by fresh creative talents: Philippe Decouflé, a distinguished choreographer obsessed with movement and lighting, and Ali Mahdavi, a former designer who grew up a Crazy Horse fan and describes the experience of watching the show as



Gina Carano and Channing Tatum in a movie directed by Steven Soderbergh.

JIMMY TURRELL

an aesthetic revelation bordering on ecstasy. Developing new material, it turns out, isn't easy. Le Crazy Horse is open for business every night; it does fifteen shows a week, and Decouflé, insisting on his rights as an artist, complains that he doesn't have enough time to get new numbers into shape. As in every Wiseman film, there are scenes of institutional wrangling as well as moments of routine—the hidden life of the place, the quiet moments of craft and maintenance, the hum of attention and competence. Champagne buckets have to be prepared, velvet booths cleaned, equipment tested. Backstage, a wig master gives a haircut to

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a red synthetic mop that has become a little ragged. A petite costumer patiently explains to a towering dancer that her favorite short skirt makes her look bony in the rear, which, of course, is a no-no.

The members of the creative staff insist that they are full-fledged artists as well as guardians of a particular French tradition. When Andrée Deissenberg, the managing director, is asked by a journalist to describe her idea of sexuality, she says, "To suggest, to seduce, without offering oneself. Restraint. . . . It happens through frustration and imagination." And she describes the Crazy Horse numbers as "an art" that sets off "women's games of erotic seduction in a way that is extremely sophisticated and inspiring for women." But this is not what an outsider sees. The dancers are selected and judged according to a single, inflexible notion of shapeliness and then presented as objects without temperament. Is that really empowerment? Ali Mahdavi says, "There are no ugly women. Only women who refuse beauty because they deny their femininity." His remark and Deissenberg's manage to be pre-feminist and post-feminist at the same time, a French specialty. I don't think, however, that the Crazy Horse people are mere hypocrites selling a girlie show with pretentious claims. They are sincere, but that doesn't mean that they aren't provincial in their own way. Nor does it mean, to my astonishment, that their show isn't repetitive, solemn, and boring. Normally, Wiseman finds the humanity in people we're reluctant to look at. This time, he shows us gorgeous people, but never gets beneath the surface. Wiseman seems to have found a paragon but lost his sense of humor and proportion. As a nearly naked woman is lowered in ropes that both hold her above the ground and bind her, she writhes and stretches, and I caught myself wondering if, in her eagerness to make art at Le Crazy Horse, she wouldn't choke herself to death.

We relish movie spies and criminals because they have enjoyably dishonest skills: they steal things, dissemble, bluff, threaten, and do everything in secret, in the shadows of ordinary working life. They do in the flesh what we can do only in fantasy; they are violent and privileged; they are experts. Two winter-season entertainments—"Haywire," starring the dark-eyed martial-arts specialist Gina Carano, and "Contraband," with the minimalist but inexorable Mark Wahlberg—have no greater ambition than to engage our dreams of behaving badly. Of the two, "Contraband" is the more absorbing. It tells a reliable story: Chris Farraday (Wahlberg), once the most adept smuggler in the world, bursts out of retirement in order to pay off a debt incurred by the stupid kid brother (Caleb Landry Jones) of his loving wife (Kate Beckinsale). He goes down to Panama to bring back a load of counterfeit money, and he meets many unpleasant tattooed men, both there and in his home town of New Orleans. The Icelandic director, Baltasar Kormákur, jerks a handheld camera around as if he were trying to induce seasickness in the audience, but, when he calms down and focusses, he teaches us a lot about smuggling, such as how to store drugs and funny money in container ships, how to deal with a ship's captain who is corrupt, and the like. There's a good, sustained joke about a rolled-up Jackson Pollock canvas lodged in the folds of the movie's spasmodic action.

The expert in Steven Soderbergh's "Haywire" is named Mallory (Carano), and she's some sort of covert-ops person working for a private contractor (Ewan McGregor). She's sent to free a Chinese journalist held hostage in Barcelona, but when he's later assassinated, and she gets set up for the murder, she goes on a rampage, slamming, mashing, drop-kicking, and sometimes killing the men who betrayed her. "Haywire" is ostensibly a spy film, but nothing is at stake in it except the greater glory of Carano, who is a master of every fighting style from Muay Thai to Sambo. Carano is strong, fast, relentless. She's not much of an actress, but Soderbergh hides her weaknesses—he doesn't ask her to express much beyond pride and anger—and the other actors, including Michael Fassbender and Channing Tatum, agreeably allow themselves to be smacked around. (The fights were staged largely without digital enhancement.) The movie is a divertissement; it's lightweight and almost meaningless except for the fights, which are extraordinarily violent. Soderbergh chops up the chronology and keeps us off balance, so we watch each scene knowing no more than Mallory. We're with her all the way: she fights in order to learn what traps have been laid. For her, fighting is the only means of discovery. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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