

## An Alien in Paris

# High Kicks and Electro

When it intensifies into a blue, white and red apotheosis of lifted skirts and high kicking legs, Nicole Graham throws herself into the show. She is the queen of French cancan at the dance's bastion: Le Moulin Rouge.

By Don Duncan

To get backstage at the Moulin Rouge, you first need to punch a code into the red velvet wall of the entrance lobby to discover that part of it is in fact a red velvet covered door which gives onto this half-world of incomplete illusion: fresh faces partially made up, mishmashes of costume parts and

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“real-world attire,” unmagical lighting, everyday conversations and the smell of the makeup and performance anxiety. It is a warren of corridors and tiny dressing rooms inhabited by tall, nubile youth who stare doe-eyed out of their cubicles suspended in their nightly metamorphosis from hard-working-dancer-living-in-Paris to exotic-imagined-creature-of-the-Paris-night. In many respects, backstage is more interesting than the show, to perceive the chaos and the ultimate mortality behind the artifice, which so vigorously deny such things.

Young men and women add the final layer of stage foundation or reapply their mascara with hasty precision, all the while chattering to each other about their day or their plans for after the show. Others are warming up as the ubiquitous public address system counts down to Showtime, at which point there is a massive flurry of feathers and glitter and excitement in the corridors, dancers streaming out of their dressing compartments to take first positions stage-side. The show starts, the lights saturate the stage and the hot, brassy, cabaret music bles outwards onto the hundreds of staring faces.

Backstage is now quiet and empty—artefacts strewn across dressing room tables and floors in mid-use, as in some Pompeii-like village. Nicole Graham, a six-foot tower of leg, feather and bright, silken primary colours walks

unhurried through the abandoned chaos. She has clearly not been whipped up in the recent mass exodus. As a cancan soloist, her cue is not for one and a half hours into the show.

Nicole, a native of Miami, Florida, is one of the older and most senior of the Moulin's troupe. Now in her mid-thirties, she first arrived in Paris via Spain 15 years ago. She began modelling which brought her to Japan for a while. On a job in Monaco in 1994 she met someone who secured her a fateful audition with Ms. Doriss, the choreographer of the Moulin Rouge. Her background in gymnastics combined with her classical dance training (she

notably Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec who was first commissioned to paint a poster for the Moulin in 1891. Synonymous with the Moulin

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Rouge are notions of perennial beauty, eternal youth, artistic truth and a solid commitment to artifice, fantasy and escapism.

The Moulin myth also portrays its dancers as wondrous creatures who only exist within its vaults of decadent spectacle and fantasy. The

truth is, of course, a lot less glamorous. Once the show is over, the girls and boys pull back on their denims and return to their rented studios and apartments across Paris. There is a tight sense of camaraderie among the cast, Nicole says. However, she adds that soloist dancers are not as part of the troupe as the rest. “The girls look at me as a maternal figure and often come to me with questions or to seek advice,” she says. Some dancers live together while other prefer to separate their work and home lives.

Surprisingly, the Moulin is rarely a definitive point of arrival for its dancers who often use it as a springboard onto other career paths, both in and out of dance. For Nicole, the Moulin is a steady base from which she can explore other artistic interests, notably music. For the past three years, she has been working as a singer and songwriter on a solo album, an electro blend of jazz, R&B, gospel and house. “It's nice to have the Moulin Rouge,” she says. “It gives you a good quality of life and steady salary. However, I don't

want to get into a complacent mindset, dependent solely on the Moulin, of not continuing to audition for other opportunities. I will always audition.” Indeed, the day after we spoke, Nicole had an audition in Marseille for

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The Lion King musical, which is due to open at the Mogador Theatre, Paris in the Fall of 2006.

But for the moment Nicole is very much a hybrid of dreams and realisations as is the backstage space at the Moulin Rouge. She will continue her twice nightly high-kicking solo there while she strives to achieve other artistic goals. Despite the cheesy tourists and the saccharine mise-en-scène found today at the Moulin, this towering lady, at least in her aspirations, is perhaps not so far removed from the washerwomen-come-cancan dancers and artist-spectators of fin-de-siècle Montmartre who brought the Moulin Rouge its first taste of notoriety. ■



Nicole Graham.

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has done both since an early age) enabled her to bypass the usual Moulin Rouge ascendancy through the basic chorus line or “Doriss” line and the more risqué “Doriss Nude” line to solo roles.

The life of a Moulin Rouge dancer is one of both luxury and endurance. The dancers are chosen through auditions, which take place all over the world. All must have classical ballet training and meet strict measurement requirements (5'-8" for girls, 6'-3" for boys). The dancers perform two shows a night, six nights a week without letting a hint of exertion peek through the perpetual smiles held for the audience.

The myth of the Moulin as a self-contained world of sensuality and exoticism, far from the mundane reality of the Parisian streets and boulevards, is one that stretches back to its inception in 1889 when the seamstresses and washerwomen of Montmartre hit the stage with the revolutionary screams, boisterous rhythm and suggestive movements of the *Quadrille Réaliste* (later renamed the cancan). The cabaret soon garnered attention across the channel and among the vibrant Montmartre artist milieu,

## Their Favourite Paris:

### Neighbourhood:

The 11<sup>th</sup> arrondissement.

**Food:** Fuxia, 25 & 51 rue des Martyrs.

**Park:** Parc Monceau, for its (faux) ruins.

**Shopping:** The boutiques on the Faubourg Saint Antoine, near the Bastille. (“The trouble is it's really hard to find clothes that fit me so I buy most of my clothes in the US or in Amsterdam.”)