PRESS CONTACT:
Jürgen Brüning Filmproduktion
phone: +49 30 6950 4106
mail: blab.pierrot.lunaire@gmail.com

FESTIVAL CONTACT:
Jürgen Brüning
phone: +49 30 6950 4106
mail: jbruening@snafu.de

INTERNATIONAL SALES:
Raspberry & Cream
phone: +49 30 6150 7505
mail: sales@raspberryandcream.com

GERMAN DISTRIBUTION:
GMfilms - Michael Höfner
phone: +49 30 851 9861
mail: gmfilms@gmfilms.de

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Arnold Schönberg's
PIERROT LUNAIRE
A MOVIE BY BRUCE LA BRUCE

avant-garde opera film | germany | 51 min. | 16:9 | black and white
About Schönberg’s Pierrot Lunaire

The popular character of Pierrot began life as a stock figure in the commedia dell’arte of the sixteenth century. We recognize him as a man who mourned the loss of his wife, attired entirely in white with a large blouse with enormous black buttons, a high hat, and a powdered face. The late 19th and early 20th century saw a renewed interest in themes and figures from the commedia dell’arte. They appeared in widely varied locations, in French Symbolist poetry, in Italian verismo opera, in the ballets of Diaghilev and even in the films of Charlie Chaplin.

In the period of the “Cult of Commedia” from 1890 through 1930, Pierrot became the luny melancholic clown, involved in strange and unsuccessful romantic adventures. He was a powerless, brooding, manipulative and obsessively passionate figure, isolated, dreamy and indifferent, prone to ennui and violence, unmanly, in love, and mad. It was in this phase of the character’s archetypal evolution, that idea of a woman portraying the figure was popularized – both on the stage and then as a ‘zitat’ in works such as Wedekind’s Lulu.
The source of the text for the composer Arnold Schönberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* was a cycle of poems in French by Belgian symbolist writer Albert Giraud. In 1892 Otto Erich Hartleben translated the poems into German and this version was championed by Leipzig actress Albertine Zehme.

Recitation of dramatic poetry as kind of a cross between cabaret and monodrama was then en Vogue and in 1911 Zehme toured Germany declaiming the Pierrot poetry as set to music by Otto Vrieslander. A year later she asked Arnold Schönberg, then in his thirties, to write voice and piano settings of some of the fifty poems in the cycle. Schönberg arranged twenty-one of the poems into three groups of seven. Schönberg expanded the idea of accompaniment to include five players playing eight musical instruments.

The expressive-atonal piece is situated in the beginning of the modern music theatre, right before the development of the twelve-tone music. Schönberg’s setting of the grotesque poems is highly diversified music full of suspense: Light, free compositions stand next to heavy and complex ones.
Pierrot Lunaire does not tell an ongoing narration or story. Each poem describes a little scene, a moving image, a macabre anecdote, a grotesque of the night, of the moon or the lunatic Pierrot – like short numbers in a Cabaret. Alone Schönberg’s music and the chanting song of the singer connect everything to one unit. The composer Igor Stravinsky, who attended the first performance, wrote that Pierrot Lunaire was “the solar plexus as well as the mind of early-twentieth-century music”. Pierrot Lunaire, with its combination of traditional forms and techniques, and the almost entirely new approach to the arrangement of sounds, became a window into the new century.
Schönberg’s own vision: Animalistic expression and Grand-Guignol

Schönberg was well acquainted with the Parisian Chat Noir and Grand-Guignol and served as the conductor for a similar cabaret in Berlin. For *Pierrot Lunaire* Schönberg envisaged a dream world full of “decadent yearnings, guilt, delights and fears”, a cabaret of puppets replete with the graphic horrors and ironic humor of the Grand-Guignol. Schönberg intended the work to be light in character and in fact made arrangements of several Viennese waltzes to be performed together with the piece. These important influences on Schönberg’s vision of *Pierrot Lunaire* are well documented in the academic world, but rarely addressed in contemporary artistic interpretations of this seminal work of twentieth century music theatre.

In the period in which Schönberg knew it, the Grand-Guignol was known as a real “house of horror” – naturalistic plays with music were presented, which mainly were set in a simple, low class milieu. The works were grotesque, marked by macabre irony and strong on atmosphere – this is the aesthetic predecessor of the splatter film genre.
Fear of “The Other” occurs in the Grand-Guignol genre in countless variations: fear of the unknown, of the foreign, of dripping sweat and of ejaculation. But what carried the Grand-Guignol to the highest was its crossing of boundaries: Altered states of consciousness induced by drugs or hypnosis, loss of consciousness, loss of control. The guillotine played a special role in this cabaret’s dramaturgy, which had a fascination for amputated body parts – the notion of a body living on without a head, for example. But at the Grand-Guignol there was also comedy – naturally one of broad gestures, of a direct and extreme form – so that the audience was given a true hot and cold treatment in one single evening. It is in this theatrical form, that Schönberg’s unique work has its roots.

With his new work Schönberg attempted, as he himself phrased it, to “bring together, sensuality and spirituality”, to explore the dark world of the outsider with “animalistic expression”, dark humor, and irony which makes Pierrot Lunaire truly relevant for the 21st century. The gender of the melancholic clown Pierrot is ambiguous – a woman plays a male character, a being who cannot laugh, a clown, filled with the melancholy and despair of sexual misadventures and unrequited love. The androgynous Pierrot, a man without a phallus, is an outsider, a stranger: Pierrot is queer. Queer in the sense of outside the norm.
Pierrot, the embodiment of the artist, lives outside of the societal norm, in his own peculiar world. He appears to have lost his identity – lost his gender, and lacking a penis has no potential for (sexual) success. The lack of clear gender, appears to explain this figure’s inability for sexual interaction.

Another aspect of Schönberg’s intentions, which almost always is unresolved in scenic interpretations, is the notion of the work as a satire. Thus the psychogram of the sad figure takes itself completely seriously – the lightness Schönberg sought is achieved through observant distance and perhaps loving but biting criticism of the subject matter.
Bruce LaBruce and the concept – true to Schönberg’s intentions

It was these ideas – the roots in horror, the notion of queerness, the need for irony and satire which lead the Serbian conductor Premil Petrovic to ask cult film maker Bruce LaBruce to realize a staged production of *Pierrot Lunaire*. Although LaBruce’s scenic concept may be refreshingly “unorthodox”, Petrovic made no compromise in giving an exacting musical interpretation of the score. The actress Susanne Sachsse, who has worked often with Bruce LaBruce, spent almost a year learning Schönberg’s music, in order to perform the role exactly as intended by the composer. This is the first time that Schönberg’s original intentions are truly brought into a scenic interpretation.

Bruce LaBruce’s concept for a new interpretation of *Pierrot Lunaire*, takes its inspiration from Schönberg’s involvement with *Cabaret*. As in all of his work, LaBruce’s interpretation is colored by his social criticism of perception of gender and sexuality in contemporary society – with his consistently strongly satiric lean – for which he is so popular.
A key aspect for LaBruce’s concept was the casting of the woman in the role of Pierrot – the identity of the narrator, the gender of the character of Pierrot is deliberately unclear, which inspired LaBruce to use a contemporary story as the underpinning for his dramatisation:

“Listening to Arnold Schönberg’s music for his cabaret/opera Pierrot Lunaire, I tried to allow my mind to free associate a concept that both fit the mood of his atonal music, and that could be retrofitted in a more modernist context to the accompanying poems by Albert Giraud. What floated out of the soup of my unconscious was a story I once heard that supposedly happened several decades ago in Toronto, a tale so bizarre and yet so universal in theme (the Oedipal and Castration Complexes come to mind) that it would not seem out of place beside the tragedies of the Ancient Greeks or Shakespeare.

A young girl who dresses regularly as a boy (think ‘Twelfth Night’ or the ‘Merchant of Venice’) falls in love with and seduces a young girl who has no clue that her paramour is of the same sex. The girl who would be a boy comes from a modest economic background, while the female object of his desire is a member of the upper classes, her father a wealthy industrialist. The girl introduces her boyfriend* to her father and although initially reluctant, he is finally won over by his charm and ambition.
Things are going swimmingly until one night in the backseat of a car the girl discovers that her lover has been using some other device to pleasure her, that he is lacking his own personal phallic appendage. The distressed girl reports the incident back to her father, who in a fit of apoplexy forbids her from ever seeing this lowly transvestite ever again. Frantic, the boy* goes out to a male strip bar with the desperate plan of hiring one of the dancers so that he might take him home, cut off his genitals and graft them onto the space between his legs where only an imaginary phallus exists. The boy* who was born a girl imagines the glory holes that are on stage – holes through which the dancers thrust their erect members – as guillotines! But once he* has the private dancer back in his* apartment, the boy* finds his prey too sympathetic and cannot bring himself* to kill him.

Subsequently, the rich girl escapes from her father’s house and meets with her former paramour, professing her love for him* no matter what. This steels his* resolve, so the next night the boy* hires a taxi and instructs the driver to take him* to an address in the middle of nowhere on the outskirts of the city. After a mighty struggle, the boy* stabs the taxi driver to death, cuts off his genitals, and crazy-glues them between his* own legs where no male member has grown. He* then drives the taxi to his* girlfriend’s house and rings the bell. When the father answers the door, he* pulls down his* pants to reveal that he* does indeed now have more than just an imaginary penis!
I believe this story invokes the necessary attributes of melodrama and Grand Guignol that we are looking for in 21st Century version of Pierrot Lunaire. The scenario also has the distinct advantage of casting a female in a male role, one of the odd casting directions that Schoenberg stipulated for his melodrama. The cast would include five main characters: Pierrot (the girl who believes she is a boy), his girlfriend, the girlfriend’s father, the main male dancer from the strip club, and the taxi driver”.

(Bruce LaBruce)

Although at a first reading, this take on the Schönberg’s score may appear to be forced – a reality show meets high culture – it is however founded in deep research and analysis of Schönberg’s work. LaBruce’s concept is not meant as a linear narrative – rather as an underpinning for Schönberg’s cabaret dramaturgy: Scenic situations which give rise to the musical numbers. Thus a perfect re-telling is not intended – and it is not the “real” aspect which is important to LaBruce – rather this idea serves as a starting point – to the highly emotional and expressive musical score.
is a filmmaker, photographer, writer, and artist based in Toronto but working internationally. Along with a number of short films, he has written and directed seven feature films and has recently completed his eighth, *Gerontophilia*, which won the Grand Prix at the Festival du Nouveau Cinema in Montreal. As a visual artist he is represented by Peres Projects in Berlin, and he has had numerous gallery shows around the world, the latest of which, called *Obscenity*, a photography exhibit, caused a national ruckus in Spain. His feature film *L.A. Zombie* was notably banned in Australia.
LaBruce has written and directed three theatrical works at the HAU Theater in Berlin, including a production of Arnold Schönberg’s avant-garde piece *Pierrot Lunaire* at the legendary Hebbel am Ufer Theater. He has now turned this latter project into an experimental film, incorporating footage from the stage production combined with additional material shot on location in Berlin. He has also directed theatrical works at the Theater Neumarkt in Zurich, Switzerland, and he participated as a director in the HAU Theater’s ambitious X-Homes project in Johannesburg, South Africa.

LaBruce has written a premature memoir called The Reluctant Pornographer, and has had two books published about his work: *Ride, Queer, Ride*, from Plug-In Gallery in Winnipeg, and *Bruce(x)ploration*, a monograph from his Italian distributor, Atlantide Entertainment. LaBruce has contributed to a variety of international magazines, newspapers and websites as both a writer and photographer, including index magazine, for which he also acted as a contributing editor.

Additionally, LaBruce has directed a number of music videos, two of which won him MuchMusic Video Awards in Canada.
Susanne Sachsse as **PIERROT LUNAIRE**

was a member of the Berliner Ensemble where she worked with Heiner Müller, Einar Schleef, and Robert Wilson. In 2001, she co-founded the art collective CHEAP, with whom she develops performances, installations and club projects. She has worked consistently in theater and film with Bruce LaBruce, Yael Bartana, Phil Collins, Keren Cytter, and Katya Sander.

In 2011-12, Sachsse appeared in Vegard Vinge’s *John Gabriel Borkman* (Berlin), co-curated the festival Camp/Anti-Camp (Berlin / Frankfurt am Main), and wrote, directed and starred in *Communist Bigamist. Two Love Stories* (Berlin / Düsseldorf / Basel). In 2013 she recorded Schönberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* for the film with Bruce LaBruce.
Paulina Bachman as Columbine

Boris Lisowski as The Father

Krishna Kumar Krishnan as The Taxi Driver
Dancer

Mehdi Berkouki  Amit Elan
Krassen Krastev  Tony Vice
Premil Petrović studied conducting under Professor Winfried Müller at the Academy of Music Hanns Eisler in Berlin. He was awarded the Heinrich Böll scholarship as well as the prestigious scholarship "Musik Theater Heute" of the Akademie der Deutschen Bank, which enabled him to attend interpretation courses held by the leading conductors of today.

In 1996 Premil founded the music theater in Cinema Rex - one of Belgrade's most important, politically active venues in the time of the dictatorship in the nineties. Premil is one of the leading personalities in the music scene of his native Serbia. He lives in Berlin and regularly conducts at Konzerthaus Berlin, Hebbel Theater, Radial System. He also works with different orchestras worldwide and appears on international festivals.
1. Moondrunk
The wine one drinks through the eyes
The moon pours down at night in waves,
And a flood tide overflows
The silent horizon.
Desires, gruesome and sweet
Countless swim across the flood.
The wine one drinks through the eyes
The moon pours down at night in waves.
The poet, slave to devotion,
Drunk on the sacred liquor,
Enraptured, turns his face to Heaven
And staggering sucks and slurps
The wine one drinks through the eyes.

2. Columbine
The moonlight’s pale blossoms,
The white wonder-roses,
Bloom at night in July.
O could I pluck but one!
To soothe my deepest sorrow,
Through darkening streams I search
The moonlight’s pale blossoms,
The white wonder-roses.
All my longings would be satisfied,
Dared I as gently
As a fairy sprite to scatter
Over your brown hair
The moonlight’s pale blossoms.

3. The Dandy
With a ghostly light ray
The moon illuminates the crystal flasks
Upon the black, holy Washbasin
Of the silent Dandy from Bergamo.
In the resonant bronze basin
The fountains laugh a metallic clangor.
With a ghostly light ray
The moon illuminates the crystal flasks.
Pierrot with waxen complexion
Stands deep in thought:
What makeup for today?
He shoves aside the red and oriental green
And paints his face in lofty style
With a ghostly light ray.

4. A pale Washerwoman
A pale washerwoman
Washes bleached garments at nighttime.
Naked, silver-white arms
She stretches down into the flood.
Breezes tiptoe through the clearing,
Lightly ruffling the stream.
A pale washerwoman
Washes bleached garments at nighttime.
And the gentle maid of heaven,
Softly fondled by the branches,
Spreads her linen spun from moonbeams
Across the dusky meadows –
A pale washerwoman.

5. Chopin Waltz
Like a pallid drop of blood
Colours a sick man’s lips,
So lurks within this music
The lure of annihilation.
In untamed strains the chords disorder
Despair’s icy dream –
Like a pallid drop of blood
Colours a sick man’s lips.
Fierce, exulting, sweet, and yearning,
Melancholy dismal waltzes,
You cling to my consciousness,
You are borne on my thoughts
Like a pallid drop of blood.

6. Madonna
Ascend, O Mother of All Sorrows
The altar of my verses!
Blood from thy meager breasts
Has spilled the sword’s anger
Thy eternal open wounds
Are like eyes, red and open.
Ascend, O Mother of All Sorrows
The altar of my verses!
In thy emaciated hands
Thou holdest thy Son’s body,
Revealed to all mankind –
But mankind’s gaze is turned away
From thee, O Mother of All Sorrows.
7. The sick Moon
You dark moon, deathly ill,
Laid over heaven’s black pillow,
Your fever-swollen gaze
Enchants me like a strange melody.
Of insatiable pangs of love, You die,
Suffocated in longing,
You dark moon, deathly ill,
Laid over heaven’s black pillow.
The hotblooded lover
Slinking heedless to the beloved
You hearten with your play of light,
Your pale blood wrung from torment,
You dark moon, deathly ill.

8. Night
Obscure, black giant moths
Have blotted out the sunshine.
A closed book of magic spells,
The horizon sleeps—silent.
From the mist of lost depths
An odour rises, murdering memories.
Obscure, black giant moths
Have blotted out the sunshine.
And from Heaven to Earth
Gliding down on leaden wings
The invisible monsters
Descend upon our human hearts...
Obscure, black giant moths.

9. Prayer to Pierrot
Pierrot! My laughter
I’ve unlearned.
The image of splendour
Dissolved—Dissolved!
To me the flag waves black
Now from the mast.
Pierrot! My laughter
I’ve unlearned.
O give me back
Horse-doctor to the soul,
Snowman of Lyric,
Your Lunar Highness,
Pierrot! My laughter.

10. Theft
Red, princely rubies,
Bloody drops of ancient glory,
Slumber in the coffins,
Down there in the catacombs.
At night, with his drinking buddies,
Pierrot climbs down — to steal
Red, princely rubies,
Bloody drops of ancient glory.
But look— their hair stands on end,
Pale fear roots them to the spot:
Through the darkness—like eyes!
Out of the coffins stare
Red, princely rubies.

11. Red Mass
At the gruesome Last Supper,
Under the blinding gleam of gold,
In flickering candlelight,
To the altar comes – Pierrot!
His hand, consecrated to God,
Tears open the priestly robes
At the gruesome Last Supper,
Under the blinding gleam of gold.
Signing the cross,
He shows the frightened souls
The dripping red Host:
His heart — in bloody fingers —
At the gruesome Last Supper.

12. Gallows Song
The scrawny wencli
With the long neck
Will be
His last lover.
In his brain
Stuck like a nail
The scrawny wencli
With the long neck.
Thin as a pine tree,
Pigtail down her neck —
Lustfully she’ll
Embrace the rascal,
The scrawny wencli!
13. Beheading
The moon, a shining scimitar
On a black silk cushion,
Ghastly huge—glowers down
Through the painfully dark night.
Pierrot wanders about restlessly
And stares aloft in deadly fear
At the moon, a shining scimitar
On a black silk cushion.
His knees tremble,
He collapses and faints.
He fancies it's already whistling down
On his guilty sinner's neck,
The moon, the shining scimitar.

14. Crosses
Holy crosses are the verses
On which the poets bleed silently,
Struck blind by phantom swarms
Of fluttering vultures.
Swords have feasted on their bodies,
Revelling in the scarlet blood!
Holy crosses are the verses
On which the poets bleed silently.
Dead the head, the curls stiffened,
Far away the noisy rabble.
Slowly the sun sinks,
A red royal crown.
Holy crosses are the verses.

15. Homesickness
Sweetly lamenting – a crystalline sigh
Out of the old Italian pantomime,
Echoes over: Why's Pierrot become
So wooden, So sentimental modern?
And it sounds through his heart's wasteland,
Sounds an undertone through all his senses,
Sweetly lamenting – a crystalline sigh
Out of the old Italian pantomime.
Then Pierrot forgets the sad faces!
Through the moon's pale fireshine,
Through the sea's light-tide –
sails his yearning
Bravely forth, aloft to home's heaven,
Sweetly lamenting – a crystalline sigh.

16. Practical Joke
Into Cassander's shiny head,
Whose cries pierce the air,
Pierrot drills with a hypocritical face,
Gently, with a trepan!
Then tamps in with his finger
His genuine Turkish tobacco
Into Cassander's shiny head,
Whose cries pierce the air.
Then screws a cherry pipestem
Into the bald spot behind
And smugly puffs away on
His genuine Turkish tobacco
From Cassander's shiny head.

17. Parody
Knitting needles gleaming and flashing
In her gray hair,
The duenna sits there muttering
In her little red dress.
She's waiting in the arbor;
She loves Pierrot painfully,
Knitting needles gleaming and flashing
In her gray hair.
Suddenly – hark! – a whisper!
A breath of wind softly snickers:
The moon, the wicked mocker,
Taunts and scoffs with its rays –
Knitting needles gleaming and flashing

18. Moonfleck
A white fleck of bright moon
On the back of his black coat,
Pierrot sets off one balmy evening,
To seek adventure and fortune.
Suddenly something's amiss in his clothing;
He casts about until he finds it –
A white fleck of bright moon
On the back of his black coat.
Wait! he thinks: a fleck of plaster!
Wipes and wipes, but – can't get it off!
So on he goes, filled with fury,
Till break of dawn, rubbing and rubbing
A white fleck of bright moon.
19. Serenade
With a grotesquely giant bow
Pierrot scrapes on his viola.
Like a stork on one leg,
He dully plucks a pizzicato.
Suddenly here's Cassander – raging
At the nighttime virtuoso
With a grotesquely giant bow
Pierrot scrapes on his viola.
He tosses the viola aside:
With his delicate left hand
He takes Sir Baldy by the collar –
Dreamily playing on the bald head
With a grotesquely giant bow.

20. Homeward Journey
The moonbeam is the rudder,
The water lily serves as boat:
Thus Pierrot sails southward
On a fair following wind.
The stream hums deep scales
And rocks the fragile craft.
The moonbeam is the rudder,
The water lily serves as boat.
To Bergamo, to Homeland,
Pierrot now returns;
Faintly gleams in the east
The green horizon.
The moonbeam is the rudder.

21. O sweet Fragrance
O sweet fragrance from fairytale times,
Bewitch again my senses!
A foolish swarm of mischief
Buzzes down the gentle breeze.
A happy impulse calls me back
To joys I have long neglected:
O sweet fragrance from fairytale times,
Bewitch me again!
All my ill humours I've renounced;
From my sun-framed window
I behold untrammelled the beloved world
And dream beyond to blissful vistas...
O sweet fragrance
from fairytale times.
CAST

FILM FOOTAGE:

Pierrot Lunaire
SUSANNE SACHSSE

Columbine
PAULINA BACHMANN

Father
BORIS LISOWSKI

Nightclub Performer / Pierrot’s Apparition
MEHDI BERKOUKI

Taxi Driver
KRISHNA KUMAR KRISHNAN

Pole Dancers
AMIT ELAN
KRASSEN KRASTEV
TONY VICE AKA ANTHONY WEISS

STAGE PERFORMANCE:

Pierrot Lunaire
SUSANNE SACHSSE

Columbine
MARIA IVANENKO

Father
BORIS LISOWSKI

Dancer
LUIZO VEGA

Taxi Driver
KRISHNA KUMAR KRISHNAN
CREW
FILM FOOTAGE:
Director
BRUCE LABRUCE
Director of Photography
ISMAIL NECMI
Producer
JÜRGEN BRÜNING, BRUCE LABRUCE
Executive Producer
CLAUS MATTHES
Assistant Director
YOTAM ISHAY
Editing / Sound Mixing / Colour Grading
JÖRN HARTMANN
Lights / Gaffer
JAN SOLDAT
ZAYNE ARMSTRONG
Set Design / Props
DAWN SUTCLIFFE
Make Up / Hair / Styling
TAN BINH NGUYEN
Still Photography
J. JACKIE BAIER

STAGE PERFORMANCE:
Director
BRUCE LABRUCE
Musical Director
PREMIL PETROVIĆ
Production Management
ANNA MÜLTER
Assistant Director
ROGIER HARDEMAN
Art Director
ITEM IDEM
Costume
ZALDY
Video Animation
MARIUS ROTH
Light Design
HANS LESER
Dramaturgy
LAURA BERMAN
Make Up Design
TAN BINH NGUYEN
Hair Stylist
MICHAEL FORREY
PIERROT LUNAIRE

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