PLAY DEAD!

A film by Matthew Lancit

Run Time: 80 min.



WRITER, DIRECTOR: **MATTHEW LANCIT** CAMERA AND SOUND: **MATTHEW LANCIT** MAKEUP AND SPECIAL EFFECTS: **DAVID SCHERER, ANNE VAN NYEN, FLORENCE THONET** PUPPETS: **NATACHA BELOVA** EDITOR: **ARIANE MELLET, MATTHEW LANCIT** MUSIC: **ETIENNE NICOLAS** SOUND DESIGN: **JAN VYSOCKY** SOUND EDITOR: **STÉPHANE RIVES** SOUND MIX: **JULES WISOCKI** COLOUR: **YANNIG WILLMANN** PRODUCER: **SIMON P.R. BEWICK**

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PROCIREP ANGOA

CNC

Synopsis

What began as a nostalgic film diary has become gradually contaminated by phantasmagorical and burlesque representations of diabetes and its effects on the director's body. Now he is on a quest to reclaim images associated with the horror films of his youth and to return them to the reality of the everyday.

Producer: Simon P.R. Bewick
Writer, Director: Matthew Lancit
Camera and Sound: Matthew Lancit
Makeup and Special Effects: David Scherer, Anne Van Nyen, Florence Thonet
Puppets: Natacha Belova
Editor: Ariane Mellet, Matthew Lancit
Music: Etienne Nicolas
Sound Design: Jan Vysocky
Sound Editor: Stéphane Rives
Sound Mix: Jules Wisocki
Colour: Yannig Willmann

With the participation of: CNC, Région Normandie, PROCIREP / ANGOA,
Sacem, Brouillon d'un rêve de la Scam, Canada Council for the Arts, ICA



Interview with Matthew Lancit

Matthew Lancit – Writer and Director
Toma Clarac - Interviewer

At the heart of Play Dead is your relationship with diabetes, but to say it's a film about diabetes would be extremely reductive. What was your original ambition?

Five or six years ago I read an article claiming that a cure for type one insulin-dependent diabetes was now imminent. And when I got to the end of the article, there were all these elated comments from other readers. I was surprised to find that I was not elated. Of course, I was pleased by this medical breakthrough, but not quite elated. There was another feeling that I can only explain as a sort of nostalgia, a fear of loss. If this disease, which has accompanied me through adolescence and into adulthood, would soon be eradicated, what other parts of me would be erased with it? So, I decided to keep a film diary to document the last traces of my diabetes. But pretty soon afterwards it became clear to me just how much my diabetes touches on every aspect of my day-to-day domestic life. There was this other presence co-existing in our family home, of whom we rarely spoke. So, I began to film everything, like one of those fathers from my childhood, coming home with a clunky camcorder that he can't put down. And in the attempt to make an image of this invisible disease, my home movies became increasingly contaminated by this entity.

There are no, or very few, medical references to the disease, no investigations or interviews with specialists as you'd find in conventional documentaries. It's essentially approached through your own experience and the way your loved ones see you... Are you wary of an overly didactic approach?

Aretaeus of Cappadocia was known to quote Homer when a clinical description of a disease would not suffice. He wrote the first clinical analysis of diabetes, and he explains the disease as *"a melting down of the flesh and limbs into urine …"* This also happens to be the first reference I can find to a popular motif in the horror films of my youth: the body melt.

I don't feel like an intimate gaze is necessarily in conflict with the many informative works on the subject that already exist. I think these two approaches can be complementary, and that this film perhaps explores a gap left open by more medical or journalistic works. Most people already know that diabetics have to take needles, for example. But when I am at a restaurant, I have to ask myself if I want to go to the bathroom to inject myself in private, or if I want to push a needle into my stomach for all eyes to see. And when I do it at the table, nobody dares mention it; everyone just pretends like they didn't notice. Diabetes is so prevalent in our society today that pretty much anyone reading this interview knows someone with the disease. But what do we really know about how the disease affects these people's day-to-day lifestyle?

In Play Dead, the dangers of diabetes seem entirely contained in the person of your Uncle Harvey. He died prematurely of terrible complications and has been a scarecrow ever since. Like a boogeyman you conjure up to scare children. Your parents tell you: "You could end up like the neighbor who's 80 and doing fine, or like Uncle Harvey". It's horrible and, at the same time, like many horrible things of this kind, a little funny...

Yes, well I belong to the camp who find Kafka very funny. And, for me, this conjuring of Uncle Harvey recalled the figure of the father in Kafka's short story "The Judgement". But, of course, we never see my actual Uncle Harvey, who was a very kind and gentle man who suffered a terrible and unjust fate. I have a great interview that someone recorded with him for a school project on diabetes, where we can see him talking about his illness and injecting himself with insulin. But I had to resist putting that in the film because the two Uncle Harveys belong to two different worlds. He only exists here in drawings from my notebooks and in my depictions of pirates with missing eyes and wooden legs during playtime with my kids. On one hand, his affliction instills the fear and anxiety associated with the disease, but he also embodies an empowering transgression that increasingly draws me in. Like all ghosts, his image is uncertain and incomplete.

You play zombies with your children, you design a hideous doll in your own likeness, a small protuberance on your back becomes a gigantic hump in the flash of an eye. Play Dead begins as a filmed diary of illness and ends as a grotesque horror film...
Did you have a script and a precise work plan, or was the film written as you went along?

There was definitely an element of writing with the camera to record my own private body horrors. But even with the more scripted scenes, I was always conscious to leave an opening for the real world to enter. When I was diagnosed with diabetes my uncle was on his deathbed, suffering from every possible complication you can imagine (blindness, kidney failure, lower limb amputation). And this was at a time when David Cronenberg films were very popular amongst kids of my generation, especially in Canada where I grew up. But these films affected me differently than they did my friends. The way I watched these films was different. So, with my own film, I suppose that I wanted to reclaim the horror tropes that I felt fiction had used to distance us from death and disease, to place them back in the reality of the everyday.

Of course, once you get a makeup and special effects team involved, you have to convince them that you have a precise idea of what you're going to do. This process is quite costly and time consuming. We worked mostly with prosthetic effects, and these actually have their roots in medical moulage. There is wonderful museum of medical moulage from the 19th Century in a hospital in Paris. In trying to envision different possible futures for my body, we used a combination of medical research, inspirations from the body horror films from my childhood, and Georg Baselitz paintings of infected feet. I also have a notebook filled with rather disturbing sketches. But all this research mostly serves as a starting point. With Florence and Anne, we wanted to create a sort of organ to host the entity, but it needed to remain mysterious. So, it couldn't just be the pancreas. It needed to breath, but it wasn't a lung either. We had to imagine something. Same for the bionic pancreas. A bionic pancreas is already in trial testing stages, but it looks nothing like the one we see in the film.
The problem then became a question of how to make these scenes aesthetically fit in with the rest of the film. That's not just a matter of using natural light or limited coverage; we had to keep a DIY feel to these scenes. I love Lon Chaney, for example. He did all of his own makeup, and he was perhaps the first monster makeup artist in cinema. When you watch his performances, you sense his hands-on approach. And you have this feeling like you never know what he's going to do next, and maybe even he doesn't know.



How long did it take to shoot the film? How many hours of rushes did you have before you started editing?

I shot this film over a period of five or six years. I never counted the number of hours of rushes, but there were a lot. Before entering the editing room with my editor (Ariane Mellet), I had to preselect the rushes for her to watch. Otherwise it would have taken her two years just to go through the material. So, I suppose that makes a shooting ratio of six years of lived life to two years of filmed life. How many hours are there in two years?

The film takes place almost entirely in your family apartment. Why did you choose to shoot the film indoors, in this quasi-enclosed space (it's impossible, it seems to me, to pinpoint the location)?

Yes, it would seem that I had decided to make a confinement film a couple of years before covid. The making of this film has been prophetic in ways that I could not have imagined. When we see this lonely masked woman from my bedroom window towards the end of the film, we have a sense that the world outside has finally caught up to me. The use of my Paris apartment as a kind of studio set recalls both the structural documentaries of Chantal Akerman and the apartment horrors of Roman Polanski. The apartment becomes its own character and its space has a profound effect on the narrative. This is not just expressed by the tactility of the physical space, but by sounds of neighbors and mysterious noises coming from inside the walls. All this helps give the film a very corporeal feel that people will probably interpret as some kind of metaphor for my body. The difficulty of pinpointing exactly where you are in a space which has become increasingly familiar to you while watching the film can be quite unsettling. Although I never thought of it as a reference, you remind me of this disorientating feeling I experienced when watching A Woman Under the Influence. There is something about the way we move through the house of that film. People always speak about the emotion in a Cassavetes film, but I think that he does a really good job of unifying the physical and psychological spaces of his characters. And this is needed to create a visceral response that readies us for the excess of emotion.

Can you talk more generally about the way you work with your children and your partner?

I suppose that my methodology changes to accommodate the different members of my family, but there are a few ground rules that I try to always respect: never hide the camera or film a family member in secret, don't force anyone to perform against their will, always put the camera away when someone asks. Mostly, I try to be open to whatever they want to bring to any given moment, be it in a fragment of our life together or in a scripted scene. My youngest daughter, Liora, was a baby when I started filming her, so there's not much you can do in the way of direction. I just had to sit back and watch her tear apart whatever I had tried to set up. To be overpowered by a toddler was a simultaneously humiliating and entertaining experience. Madeleine is older, so it's more complicated. Part of the charm of the film is seeing how her relationship to the camera changes as she grows older. But, in general, it seemed easier to just follow her direction instead of imposing anything on her. She even takes the camera into her own hands at times. Perhaps I should be sharing a directing credit with her. Ultimately both my daughters are quite stubborn and resistant to receiving direction of any kind from their father, which I suppose is natural enough. My wife, Blandine, works very differently. She prefers to be warned in advance with scripted situations. She gets very annoyed with me anytime I try to improvise. And when she watches scenes from the film, she continually remarks on the messiness of the set design. But this might be an underhanded attempt to get me to clean up more around the home.

The film's title evokes the games you play with your children and the figure of the undead that runs through them. But it also calls to mind a discussion you have with your daughter

about the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, which you say is sometimes presented as a dress rehearsal for death... Does Play Dead also function as a dress rehearsal?

The whole film can be seen as its own making-of. And all these special effects and makeup, the mis-en-scène, reveal truths that the film diary cannot. They not only permit me to better understand my diabetes, but to transform my relationship to it. In our current Western culture, we tend to turn away from pain and death, pushing them out of view and into the realm of the conceptual - isolating them in hospitals and cemeteries, or fictionalizing them in horror films. It was important for me to "show the strings" in order to let the audience know that I am not trying to fool them. Instead, I'd like to invite them to play with me.



Matthew Lancit – Writer/Director

Matthew Lancit has made several shorter works ranging from documentary, fiction, experimental, and video dance. They have all screened at various festivals, as well as in art galleries and museums. His first feature length documentary *FUNERAL SEASON* has screened at major festivals around the world, winning accolades at some, and has been chosen for preservation by the Library and Archives of Canada.

Simon P. R. Bewick – Producer

Simon P. R. Bewick is a french-british writer, director and producer. His first documentary *"What do Dragonflies dream of?"* foreshadows his work to come : an inner reflection on childhood, its joy, wanderings and difficulties. His following documentary, the award-wining *"In session, do not disturb"* is released in theaters, DVD and VOD after a festival tour from France to Russia, Belgium and Spain. He was a member of the France4 Award at the Critic's Week for the Cannes Festival 2013. His latest series *"Throw yourself"* was developed at the Series Mania Institute. Simon P. R. Bewick can also be seen acting in the films of Pierre Léon, Bénédicte Brunet and Pascal Cervo. When he's not writing fiction and developing TV shows, he spends his time producing and directing documentaries.

Ariane Mellet – Editor

Ariane Mellet is a highly regarded and respected film editor, backed by a strong academic background and a diverse filmography. A graduate of I.N.S.A.S. in *'Editing-Scripting,'* she also holds a Master's degree in Ethnology from the University of Paris X-Nanterre and a Bachelor's degree in Cinema from the University of Paris VII-Jussieu. Multilingual, she is fluent in English and has basic proficiency in Russian and Spanish.

Her filmography reflects her talent and versatility, having collaborated with directors like Boris Lehman on projects such as '*My Seven Places'* and *'My Filmed Interviews.'* She has also worked on feature films like *'Nothing Personal'* by Mathias Gokalp and *'The Evening Dress*' by Myriam Aziza, demonstrating her ability to navigate between deep documentaries and engaging fictions.

In addition to her editing career, Ariane Mellet has also ventured into academia, teaching at Insas in Brussels since 2000. Her experience also extends to a stint as an assistant editor, covering genres from documentaries to TV movies and feature films between 1998 and 2008.

With over two decades of experience, Ariane Mellet is not only an accomplished technician but also a sought-after educator and collaborator in the industry. Both her body of work and her teaching set a standard for excellence and creativity in the field of film editing.

Cairos Studio – Sound Design

Sound, Music, and Image in Synergy
Studio Cairos, affiliated with Cairos Edition, is a partnership between three associates: Jan Vysocky, Stéphane Rives, and Jules Wysocki. Our goal is to offer directors and their productions new possibilities for sound design in fictional films, documentaries, or art films. We operate both in the field of sound engineering and musical creation. We approach the sound of a film from these two perspectives simultaneously. With this cumulative expertise, the established boundaries between sound editing, foley, mixing, and composition become porous. The flow between these different phases of work naturally finds a coherent synergy. In this way, the stages of sound production are articulated in a horizontal creative relationship, rather than a vertical one. Throughout this process, Studio Cairos can develop these exchanges for greater unity in the crafting of a film's soundtrack.
It's this synergy that we offer, creating conditions that fully meet the needs of films in accordance with their production resources.

Etienne Nicolas – Composer

Étienne Nicolas is a multifaceted artist whose talents span music composition, guitar playing, and sound direction. Known for his distinctive mix of autoproduced tracks, Nicolas thrives in collaborative settings and has spent years mastering the alchemy of sound.
Since 2006, he has been a cornerstone of the band CHEVEU, signed to Born Bad Records, where he serves as a guitarist, composer, and arranger. Over his tenure with CHEVEU, Nicolas has been instrumental in composing and recording four albums and singles, one of which received the 'Album of Audacity' award and another that garnered the Indies Award in 2017. In film, he left his sonic imprint on Thierry de Peretti's 'Les Apaches,' which was showcased in the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 2013. He is no stranger to the road, having completed five U.S. tours, including prominent gigs at the MOMA, South by Southwest, and Gonerfest 3. His footprint also extends internationally with tours at high-profile festivals like Roskilde, Dour Festival, Rock en Seine, and La Route du Rock, among others. Nicolas' versatile craftsmanship in sound and music offers a rich tapestry of auditory experience, making him a sought-after talent in both the music and film industries.

Natasha Belova – Puppeteer/Visual Artist

Natacha Belova was born in Russia, graduated in history, and has lived in Belgium since 1995. After initial work as a costume and set designer on the Belgian and international performing arts circuits, she went on to specialise in contemporary puppetry. Working on numerous projects in theatre, as well as in dance, circus, cinema and opera, she acquired a great depth of experience that drove her to instigate her own projects. Her first creations came in the form of exhibitions and installations.
In 2018, following the meeting with Tita Iacobelli, a Chilean puppeteer, they created their company Belova-Iacobelli, Tchaïka is their first show, created in June 2018 in Santiago de Chile. In September 2021, they created their second show LOCO at the Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles in Belgium. In October 2022, Natacha Belova's performance Sisypholia, co-directed with Dorian Chavez, took place as part of the Biennale Internationale des Arts Vivants Toulouse Occitanie in France.
In recent years, she has led numerous puppetry workshops in 15 countries on three continents, and since 2021 she has been teaching at the Master in Puppetry Art at ARTS² Mons, the Tournai Academy of Fine Arts and the Maison de la Marionnette de Tournai.

Producer statement

When Matthew first approached me, he was sitting on a goldmine of raw footage, a maze of personal archives and bizarre drawings in a little notebook that needed a compass. He aimed to reforge the cinematic genre of the filmed journal. His venture into documenting his own life while battling a relentless illness, was a Pandora's box full of questions: What to do with all this personal footage? How can he innovate a genre that he's already contributed to?
So we decided we would make the first-ever horror documentary feature.

Our solution is audacious: a horror-documentary hybrid. This isn't just an aesthetic choice; it stems from Matthew's lifelong dilemma—Is he a person with diabetes or is he diabetic? For the first time, Matthew's film wouldn't just document reality—it would confront it, adding a layer of tangible dread by incorporating dreamlike horror elements, crafted through cinematic tools like puppetry and special effects. In terms of production this meant working with the best people in the industry, like Bloody Mary's SFX but also David Scherer whose CV goes from Gaspar Noé to the *Walking Dead* and Natacha Belova, an award-winning puppeteer. It meant reaching out to convincing people of great adventurous taste like Rasha Salti from Arte - La Lucarne.

In my role since 2017, I've functioned as more than just a collaborator. I see myself as co-visionary, channeling Matthew's raw, artistic impulses into a coherent, yet disruptive, narrative. As the first-ever horror documentary feature, *Play dead!* isn't just a portfolio piece; it's an industry game-changer. This project signals a new direction in documentary filmmaking, one that fuses reality with genre conventions to create an entirely new cinematic experience. In a saturated market, *Play dead!* doesn't just stand out; it creates its own category.

What makes *Play dead!* resonate more broadly is the pandemic-stricken world we find ourselves in. Matthew's personal concerns around illness have suddenly become everyone's nightmare, making the film not just a private journal but a collective scream.

Taking a leaf from Yves Bonnefoy's essay *'The Tombs of Ravenna,'* we realized that the project also serves as an existential inquiry. Bonnefoy argues that philosophy has largely sidestepped the issue of mortality, offering instead abstracted notions that fail to grapple with the urgency of life and death. We took this to heart. *Play dead!* isn't just a project—it's an ethos, one that urges living intensely, as Bonnefoy says, where *'intensity equals eternity.'* Matthew Lancit writes his life through the lens of a camera; I helped him edit that life into a narrative worth sharing. Together, we're not just capturing moments; we're creating them, turning the limitations of reality into an asset, much like William S. Burroughs suggests: *'writing is an attempt to change reality.'*

With *Play dead!* we are here to redefine the boundaries of what a documentary can be. Together, we're not merely pushing the envelope—we're tearing it open to see what spills out.

Simon P.R. Bewick



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