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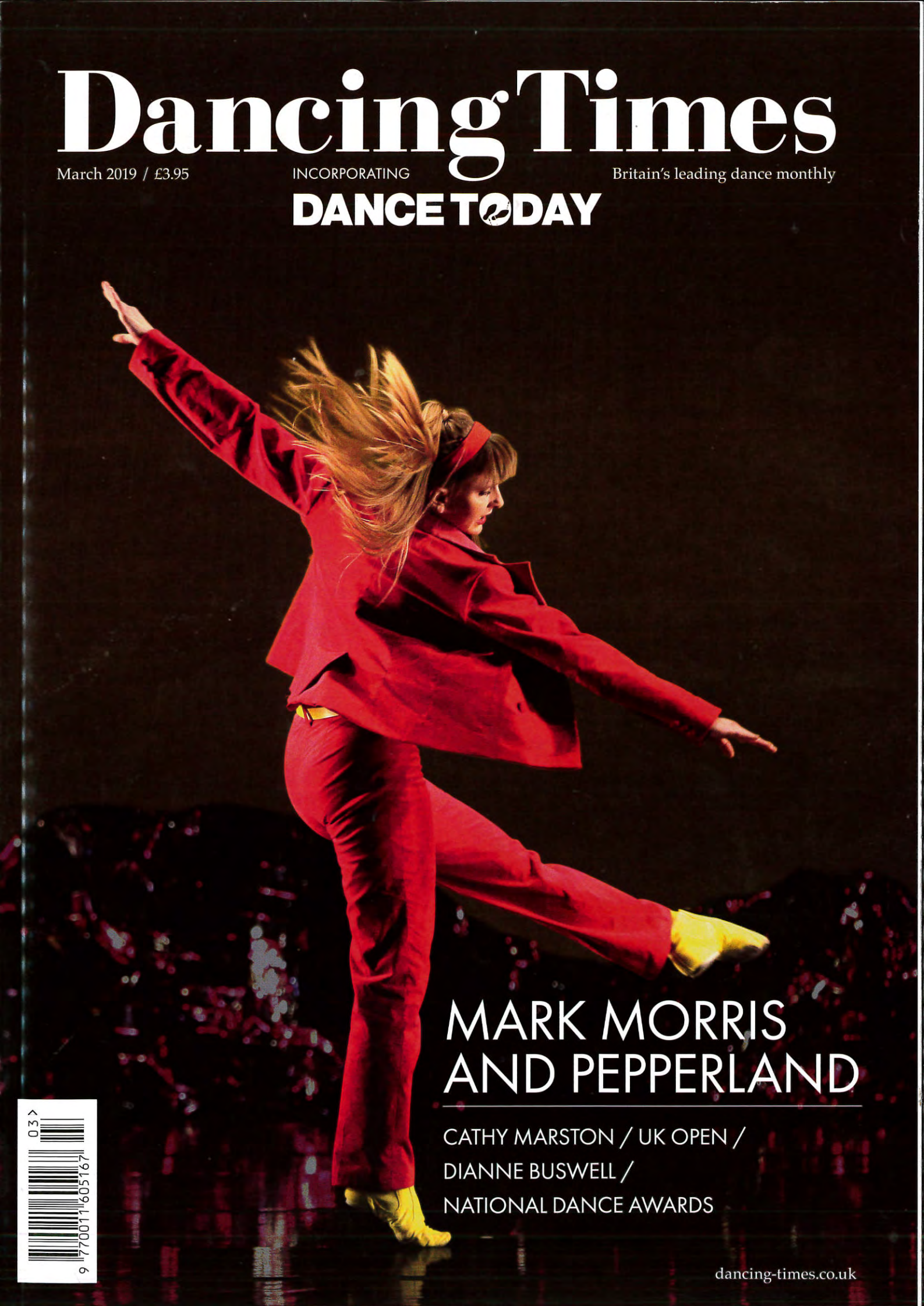

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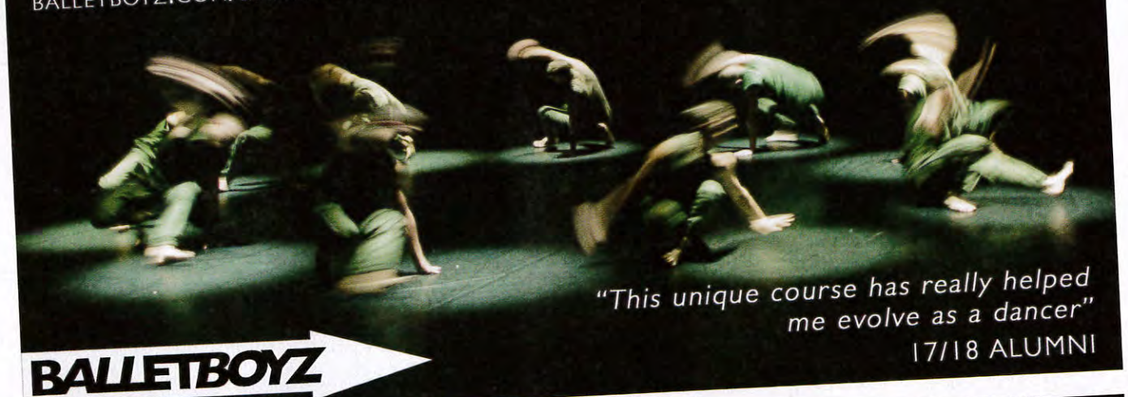

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DANCING QUEEN

Northern Ballet's Gavin McCaig talks to choreographer Cathy Marston about *Victoria*, which opens in Leeds this month

It would be fair to say that 2019 is going to be a momentous year for Cathy Marston. On both sides of the Atlantic, the Newcastle-born choreographer is being called upon to stage her sizeable, immersive narrative dance works that re-imagine some of history's most fascinating characters. I caught up with her early in the New Year to talk about her latest project for Northern Ballet, *Victoria*.

"There have been many adaptations of Victoria's life, and when I'm creating I usually have to find something I can connect with," she tells me. "This was a way into the story that hasn't been explored yet."

If audiences are expecting an A to Z on Queen Victoria's life, they will be in for a surprise. Marston's approach to narrative isn't always chronological, and in *Victoria* audiences will dive into the life of the queen through the eyes of her youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice.

"We wanted to avoid saying, 'This is Victoria and this is the correct version,' because there are so many perspectives on her. Not only her personality but also what the name Queen Victoria conjures up: there's Victoria as a daughter, a mother, a queen, a wife, the empress of an empire when it was at its largest. We didn't want to say, 'This is her,' but aimed to be specific about a perspective. Even in choosing that perspective, I like the fact it's an unreliable narrator we have chosen to tell this story."

By we, Marston is referring to her dramaturg and co-writer of the scenario, Uzma Hameed. "I suppose being a daughter and having a daughter, I find it an interesting idea – what do you know about the lives of your parents before you existed? Often we don't know much at all and haven't even thought about it. That might happen in reverse with my own daughter, too.

"When you imagine looking at Victoria from Beatrice's perspective, it's either going to be through memories or through reading. It seems clear that the first thing you do when you lose a parent is remember. That brought us to a structure whereby we show the second part of Victoria's life in Act I, and then go further back in Act II," a technique Marston describes as "excavating memories".

"The earliest things are the deepest down," she continues, "so you sweep away the sand and get to the shallow parts, then dig deeper and discover the stuff that's more buried emotionally, which takes you right to the heart of the matter. Beatrice slowly gets to the point where her mother was a young girl."

For Marston, this has been by far the most complex production she has tackled due to the sheer volume of information on Victoria and those around her. "There's a massive amount of detail, and the thing is, people know those details. Every character in the piece could have a ballet made about them – their stories are all so individually fascinating."

She explains that documentation boomed during the Victorian era, with the rise of photography and the invention of film, as well as the vast amount of books written. With so much information on the queen, does Marston worry there's too much to encapsulate in a two-act ballet? She laughs: "Yes, I do!" ➢

Cathy Marston with Joseph Taylor and Abigail Prudames in rehearsal for *Victoria*.

Photograph: DREW FORSYTH.

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Dancers of Northern Ballet during a rehearsal for Cathy Marston's *Victoria*.

In the studio, Marston uses a word-based creation process wherein dancers build up a movement language for each character and then develop a palette of steps she can draw on when she pieces scenes together. When used, the movement may then have different intentions layered on top, or they can be reworked in such a way that develops relationships on stage. The system manifests itself beautifully when telling stories: movement becomes a product of the narrative and is fundamentally rooted in the essence of who the characters are.

With complexity in characters and plot, *Victoria* will be an excellent match for Northern Ballet. "It's really important for me to know what the characters are trying to express," Marston continues. "A lot of the time that's through conversations, which Northern Ballet are particularly good at. There's just no inhibition about telling the story."

With the boom of period dramas on television and in the cinema, it won't come as a surprise that the life of one of the UK's most famous monarchs is being transformed into a ballet. What does Marston hope audiences will take away from it that they won't have seen on the screen? "I believe dance just speaks entirely differently. For example, there is a passionate bedroom scene in the ballet between Victoria and Albert. I think you get a glimpse of that in the TV series, but we know the couple had an intense, physical relationship and dance will be able to show us that in a way that offers a different perspective."

Marston tells me of her ambition to create a bedroom scene laced with explicit partnering that will bring to life the couple's marriage in a way television can't. "When you read the diaries it's so difficult to imagine, because they are so stylised in that 19th-century feel. The way she talks about being kissed by Albert 'all over' – she's in raptures about it, but you've got to do that to feel what that really means. How do those words manifest themselves physically? I'm trying to make a ballet that's absolutely embedded with detail, so the more audiences know, the better."

Another collaborator on *Victoria* is the composer Philip Feeney. "Philip is such a master of understanding the narrative," Marston adds. "Because the set is so minimal, I like using music to help locate the subject in time, so there are some sections in the score that feel Victorian, even though they are not."

An exciting development, both for Marston and Northern Ballet, is the news that *Victoria* is to be screened across the UK, the first time Marston's work will be shown in the cinema. What does she hope this will accomplish? "It will definitely open the door to different audiences. So many more people are going to be able to see it," she beams. "Cinema is such an international and accessible artform and seeing the whole work there will be so different from seeing a rehearsal clip or trailer broadcast online."

What about the task of taking *Victoria* from stage to screen? "It's a totally different thing with film. A choreographer's job when you're telling a story in dance is to guide the eye of the audience around quite a big stage to the points that need to be seen. That's part of the challenge – deciding what I want to tell. You know, there are four waltzing couples but I need to show the relationship between Victoria and Lord Melbourne too. How am I going to do that? I might get carried away making some really nice steps for the couples, but I ➢

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Cathy Marston in the studio.

can't. Making those choices and killing your darlings… that's important."

Marston's industry and facility to create new dance works have not gone unnoticed. This year she won the Critics' Circle National Dance Award for Best Classical Choreography for *The Suit*, a work she made on Ballet Black. "The company do an incredible job on a tiny amount of money and it's been a pleasure to work with them," says Marston enthusiastically. "They've had a great run of performances and are continuing to present the piece later in the year at the Linbury Theatre, and again with Birmingham Royal Ballet on a triple bill throughout September and October. I'm also re-staging it in Germany in 2020, so the piece will go on to have a life of its own."

The Suit is not unlike *Jane Eyre*, Marston's previous work for Northern Ballet that toured to critical acclaim in 2016 and was revived last season at larger venues. "It was created on a smaller budget, and premiered at the Cast in Doncaster. Now it's going to the Met in New York!"

Is she excited to see her work going transatlantic, with both American Ballet Theatre and the Joffrey Ballet taking *Jane Eyre* into the repertoire? "It's amazing. It's really special to get that call. There are two world-class companies on the other side of the globe wanting to take this ballet that had really quite humble beginnings." Marston reveals that one of her ambitions is for the work she is creating to go on and have a life of its own. "I like the fact that audiences will see varied interpretations of those roles. Re-staging the ballet allows it to develop and mature: things get solidified and it all becomes richer."

Does she have a particular proclivity for story-based work, with so many of her creations being centred around narrative? "That's just how my mind works," she replies. "It's not because I'm standing for the story ballets and think there should be more, it's just because I love stories and that inspires me to choreograph."

Will *Victoria* stand the test of time?", I ask her cheekily, eyebrow raised. "*Victoria* is a slightly more difficult title to sell internationally. It has worked well with Canada because it's a nation in touch with its history and the British Empire. [*Victoria* is co-produced with National Ballet of Canada, a first for Northern Ballet.] It's a much more specific subject than *Jane Eyre*, which is a classic, but if we can make a ballet that moves people, it will be successful." Warming to her train of thought, she mentions Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling*, another full-length ballet also based on historical figures: "It's emotional. Ultimately, there are not enough story ballets for the appetite that I believe is out there. People want to be moved, and stories move people.

"The advent of co-commissioning is helping, however, because people are spreading the risk. The combination of know-how and the acknowledgement in the wider artistic world that narrative is being revived, weighs in favour of *Victoria* standing the test of time. It's also a story about women. I've just been to see *The Favourite* at the weekend and it's a film that has three principal female characters, which is what we have in *Victoria*. It's time for that," Marston concludes with assurance. "A story about a woman, told by a woman." ■

Northern Ballet's *Victoria* opens at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, on March 9 before touring the UK. Visit northernballet.com for full tour dates and venues.

Photograph: DREW FORSYTH.