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A Chat with Cathy Marston | Works & Process: Caleb Tether | Emma Portner Needs No Introduction  
Balanchine: The City Center Years | From Russia: Dagobert PS - International Festival of Arts  
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*"We, the dancers, have agency and the ability to decide how our space relates to us."*

articulate sound but make sound anyway (Lindy Hop). There are forms where physical connection is expected (Lindy Hop); and others where the connection between performers is primarily left to a sonic connection (tap, jazz). That gives us nearly endless tools to play with in creating a new vocabulary. All of these different dance forms, meeting together on sand (which has a particular sonic effect), and all of us wearing the same kind of shoe creates an equality in sound that evens the playing field for these forms to coexist. The dancers in the company all have different backgrounds. Some are strictly tap dancers, others would primarily identify as Lindy Hoppers, and then others don't really identify as anything in particular. By combining our shared values, experiences, and most frequent movement vocabularies, we've tried to create something that pulls from our collective interests and physical histories.

*Establishing borders and crossing them is a motif I've noticed in your work here and in "Bzzz," your Fall for Dance commission, with the dancers stepping on and off the floor, or in and out of light. Can you elaborate a little bit on this idea?*

Yeah, there's a lot of playing with space in both works! I'm really interested in the idea of breaking conventions of what one "can and cannot" do in a piece. What are the unspoken rules of our world? How do they get there? And, depending on what effect we'd like to have on each other and the audience, how do we break or follow those rules? In "Bzzz," that was exemplified in stepping on and off the prescribed "tap floor." We're supposed to dance on that floor exclusively, but dancing off it (and back onto it!) is a very simple way of saying, "This world has more possibilities available if one chooses to be creative. We, the dancers, have agency and the ability to decide how our space relates to us."

*How would you describe the musical score by Conrad Tao and what was that collaborative process like?*

I find Conrad's music very emotional (without picking one specific emotion). Some pieces feel mournful, others are playful, and sometimes the complex embroidered arrangements seem to reflect everything one could feel as a human—

we're complicated emotional beings, after all. We've spent a lot of time in conversation, talking about our shared values and what we hope to express together in the piece (which we usually keep to ourselves), and then it departs from there in many different ways. Some pieces have been fully composed by Conrad with very little editing or interruption or contribution from me. Other compositions are directly inspired by choreographic ideas I set on the dancers and then shared with Conrad. Usually, though, it's somewhere messy in the middle—sections get rearranged, tempos and notes and musical moments get revised to accommodate choreography, and we change to match Conrad's ideas. That's collaboration! We've been very fortunate to have Conrad in the room for every major residency rehearsal we've had. From what I know, that's not common for music/dance collaborations. Usually, the composer and choreographer work primarily by volleying mp3s, rehearsal clips, and emails back and forth. Having Conrad in the room allows his reactions and his ideas to flow seamlessly into the dance side of the composition.

*You've mentioned the importance and joy of social dancing before. How does that reflect in your choreography?*

I very rarely direct individual performances of my company members. I create the steps and do so for a reason, but then I let the dancers embody it with their perspectives and interpretations. When one goes out social dancing, no one says to that person, "This is how you should feel when you swing dance to Benny Goodman's music! This is the happy song! Go dance a happy dance!" Social dance is a vessel for what feels like it needs to be expressed in the present moment. I trust my dancers to not act, to show their natural selves, and for that to be far more interesting than any contrived ideas of drama I could try to impose upon them. Quite frequently, though, joy seems to be a common expression of my group. We enjoy dancing together, we feel moved to dance by the music that is played, and we do not feel the need to hide that joy for our performances to be "taken seriously." If I feel joyful on stage, I hope I show it—and if I feel something else, I hope I show that as well.

# A Chat with Cathy Marston



Cathy Marston in rehearsal. Photograph by Sasha Onyshchenko

*"We need to upend preconceptions about stories on stage"*

By Sara Veale

A glance at Cathy Marston's portfolio shows a distinct literary slant. One of the British dancemaker's earliest creations was an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, devised in 2005 for the Royal Opera House, and in the years since she's gone on to adapt upwards of a dozen plays and novels for ballet companies around the world, including Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.

"I love stories, I love books—I always have done," she tells me over the phone. I'm calling from London, where Marston began her dance career as a student at the Royal Ballet School and later undertook a five-year stint as an associate artist of the Royal Opera House. She's in Bern, Switzerland, the site of her 2007-2013 tenure as the director of Bern Ballett and where she continues to live with her husband and two children.

"I'm very interested in exploring what dance can say about a story in terms of character, emotion, internal worlds and external worlds. It's especially interesting when you get a character who has a life beyond their original source. *Lolita*, *Juliet*, *Lady Chatterley*, *Madame de Tourvel* of *Dangerous Liaisons*—you know what these characters stand for. It fascinates me when they live beyond the book. You're not just introducing them; you can actually have a dialogue with the audience and challenge their expectations." This idea of challenging expectations can be traced back to her school days, when she studied Tom



Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, an absurdist twist on *Hamlet*. "That was a really influential moment for me. I learned that you can take these solid classic stories and look at them from surprising perspectives and create new stories." She did just that when she created her own version of "Hamlet" in 2017 for Ballett im Revier, examining the play from Gertrude's perspective. "What's been said about her? What's taken for granted about her character? What can we challenge?" It's not just fictional figures Marston's interested in reinventing. "I'm currently creating a biographical ballet about Queen Victoria for Northern Ballet. Sifting through years of world history, you can find inspiring, interesting angles and create your own stories."

Narrative storytelling is of course a cornerstone of both classical and contemporary ballet, but Marston's body of work stands out in several noteworthy ways. Her source materials are ambitious and far-reaching, delving outside the usual radius to include imaginative adaptations like "Snowblind," inspired by Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, and "Witch-hunt," centred on Anna Göldi, known as "the last witch of Europe." And her characterisations are studied, particularly those of her female protagonists, revealing a rich interiority that so often eludes the swans and princesses that typically populate the ballet stage. I ask if she herself had a chance to dance any similarly full-bodied roles during her career. "I'd have loved to dance these roles! I didn't have a long performance career, only until I was 30. During that time, I worked with great choreographers, though I never met anyone who made these kind of roles. Maybe I would have gone on performing longer if I had." Instead, she transitioned into choreographing full-time, developing a unique balletic language that draws on contemporary technique to more authentically portray her characters. "The advent of contemporary ballet has been influential in terms of the way we tell stories, particularly for women. Pure classical vocabulary is difficult in terms of expression—Mrs. Alving [of "Ghosts"] can't be expressed in classical vocab; *Lolita* is more than classroom steps. To create these women, you need to be able to take weight. In traditional ballet, the woman is supported and lifted, but that's not always the case with every character; sometimes they have to support others or share the weight. That's important to me, particularly in my pas de deux."

Her point is evident in "Jane Eyre," which Marston created for Northern Ballet in 2016: the titular heroine is constantly resisting the entitled grasp of others, the slides and balances of her choreography a testament to her fraught private consciousness. "I have to credit [Northern Ballet artistic director] David Nixon with the idea to make this work. I have no idea why I didn't think of it before! It's absolutely right for ballet, with wonderful characters who are so physical and danceable. Sometimes for a novel to work as a ballet you need to slightly heighten the narrative, but this story feels larger than life already. The fires and Bertha

in the attic and Rochester—they're all drawn very vividly. The story lends itself to wonderful pas de deux, and has a fantastic female lead who can defy expectations of the classical ballerina."

Marston is staging "Jane Eyre" for American Ballet Theatre in spring 2019, then it's set to go to Joffrey Ballet. "I'm really looking forward to working with these companies. The States is having a real Jane Eyre moment. In the UK, it goes without saying that you know the story; it's part of the fabric of English literature. But I don't know if that's the case in America. I'm curious to see how it's received, since American ballet has a different history and tradition of narrative ballet."

The ABT staging dovetails with a company initiative to support new ballets by female choreographers, a much-needed redress in an industry that consistently, pervasively favours work by men. "As a choreographer, I've always been aware of being outnumbered by men," Marston says. "This was especially significant in my early career. At the Royal Ballet School, I was a promising choreographer—people acknowledged that—but I wasn't the strongest dancer; I wasn't going to get a contract with the Royal Ballet or another big company on the strength of my dancing. However, there were several male students who were also not the strongest dancers but were given contracts on the basis of their choreography skills. As a man in the ballet sphere you can afford that, but women can't."

"My trajectory has varied as a result. If I'd been able to work earlier with the high-level dancers and mentors that a large company can offer, it would have been a different story. Not necessarily better, though—I'm happy with the varied influences I've been exposed to, and know this mix of British and European influences is why my choreography is so successful. But it's been a slow burn. Working with companies like ABT and San Francisco Ballet is a really big step—one that's taken my male colleagues five years and taken me 25."

Her trajectory might have been non-linear, but her success has been indisputable: Marston's leadership at Bern Ballet propelled the company into a significant new chapter, and the freelance role she's assumed in recent years has prompted a swell of high-profile international commissions.

"It's wonderful to have a company and choreograph with the same dancers over time, but there are also distractions that go along with that: admin, politics and so forth. I love travelling and am really enjoying this period of time where several companies with large platforms want to work with me."

It helps that the ballet sphere is demonstrating a renewed interest in narrative work. "Ten years ago, the fashion was much more abstract; it was a more cerebral way of thinking about dance, more about dance for dance's sake. I've always been interested in stories and emotions and human beings, and I'm so glad that's coming back around. We need to upend preconceptions about stories on stage. Luckily I now have enough experience to take these stories and do that."



Cathy Marston. Photograph by Clare Park