

BALLET  
CATHY MARSTON

# FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE

Cathy Marston talks about her fearless journey from young dancer to international choreographer, and on making her return to The Royal Ballet to create a new work for the Main Stage

*Words by Sanjoy Roy*



Cathy Marston's  
*Jane Eyre*, performed  
by Northern Ballet  
©Emma Kauldhar

‘Actually, I just wanted to be Juliet Bravo.’ It’s not the answer I expect when I ask Cathy Marston, whose major new work for The Royal Ballet will have its premiere this autumn, how she began ballet. The story goes: when Marston was eight, she was hooked on a 1980s TV series about a female chief police inspector – codename, Juliet Bravo – who tackled not only crime but also the prejudices of her male-dominated workplace. Marston decided she wanted to be a policewoman until her mother gently let her know that Juliet Bravo was not in fact a police officer, but an actress. So with a child’s unfaultable logic, she decided instead to become an actress.

Understanding that dance could be a part of her theatrical armoury to achieve Juliet Bravo status, Marston started tap – having given up on ballet, aged four, after the ribbons she had swaddled her legs in had fallen off. Yet tap led her back to ballet, and ballet led to summer schools, and that led to auditioning for and being accepted into The Royal Ballet Upper School, aged 16. It was a mixed experience. ‘I wasn’t at all the best at classical technique’, says Marston. ‘Plus, there was a different attitude in those days. One ballet teacher told my parents: “The problem with Cathy is that she thinks for herself.” Imagine!’ Where she felt able to flourish, instead, was in choreography – and indeed she won the school’s Ursula Moreton choreography

competition. It swung her first job. ‘There was an audition for Ballett Zürich, and after a contemporary class I was on the shortlist’, remembers Marston. ‘Before we got to the classical ballet I went up to the director and said “I’d really like you to look at my choreography” and showed him a video of me in the Ursula Moreton piece. And he gave me a job.’

It was a dancer’s job but, remembers Marston, ‘I always wanted to be a choreographer.’ During her time in Zürich, The Royal Ballet’s education department invited her to make some small pieces, which led to several commissions for Dance Bites, the Company’s experimental touring project. She managed all of this while working as a dancer first in Zürich, then Lucerne, but when she moved to a job at Bern Ballett she wasn’t given time off for choreography. So she quit Switzerland and returned to London to focus on freelance choreography for ROH2 – the Royal Opera House’s development project based around the recently opened Linbury and Clore spaces, where she became Associate Artist in 2002.

Then in 2007, still only 31, she returned to Bern Ballett not as a dancer but to step into the top job: artistic director. ‘I had two theatre stages and a company of 12 to 14 dancers’, she says. She didn’t hold back, commissioning a full 32 world premieres during her six-year tenure, and usually choreographing one full-length and one shorter piece a year herself. It was also

continues on page 27

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## TIMELINE Cathy Marston

- 1975** Born in Newcastle
- 1992** Goes to The Royal Ballet School
- 1995** Produces works for ROH Learning and Participation
- 1994–99** Dancer at Ballett Zürich, Luzern Ballet and Bern Ballett
- 2002–07** Associate Artist of the Royal Opera House
- 2006** Becomes founding director of The Cathy Marston Project
- 2007–13** Artistic Director at Bern Ballett, Konzert Theater Bern, Switzerland
- 2013–14** Clore Cultural Leadership Fellow
- 2013–present** Freelance choreographer for companies including ABT, San Francisco Ballet, Northern Ballet, Royal Danish Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Cuban National Ballet

### Her many works for The Royal Ballet in the Linbury Theatre and Dance Bites tour include:

*Figure in Progress* (1997), *Words Apart* (1998), *Tidelines* (1999), *Three Words Unspoken* (2002), *Venetian Requiem* (2004)

**Works for Bern Ballett, shown in the Linbury, include:** *Wuthering Heights* (2009), *Clara* (2010), *Witch-hunt* (2013)

**Other works produced by ROH2 include:** *Traces* (2001), *Sophie* (2003), *before the tempest... after the storm* (2004), *Asyla* (2004), *Ghosts* (2005), *Echo and Narcissus* (2007)

**Created for The Royal Ballet School:** *Summer Twinnings* (2003)

**Choreography for The Royal Opera includes:** *Bird of Night* (2006) and *Król Roger* (2015)

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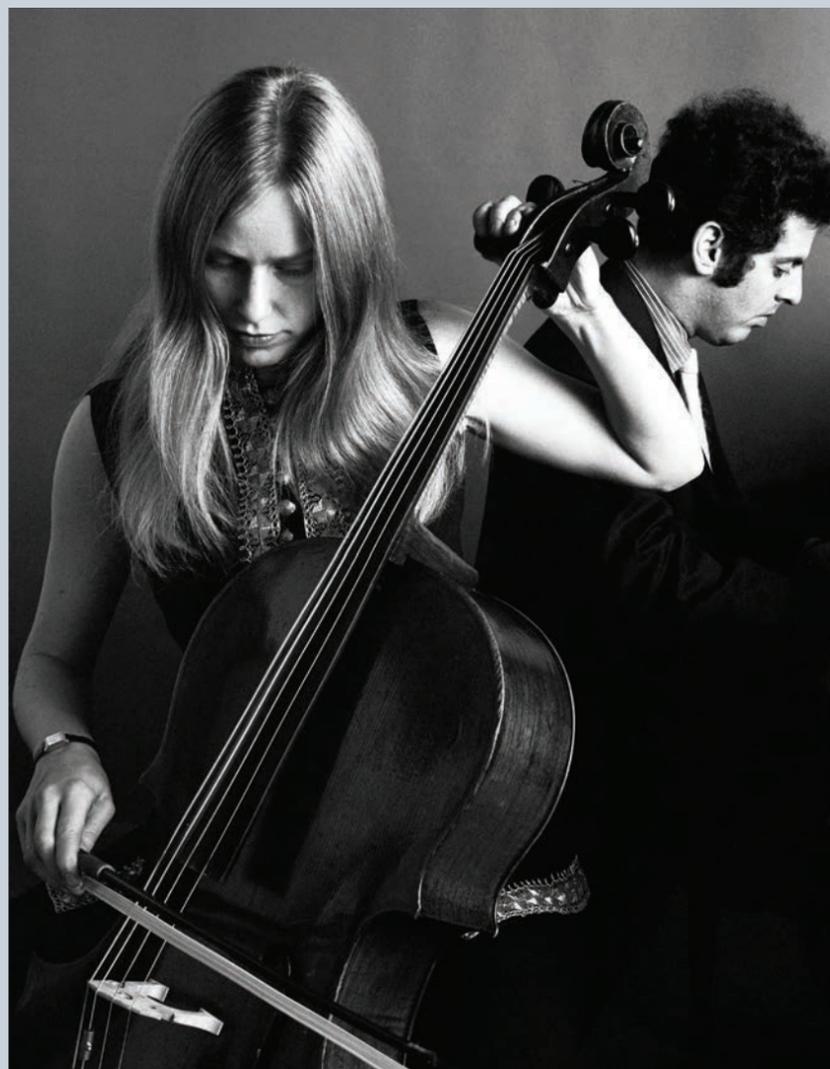
## The musician and the dance

Cathy Marston on the thinking behind her new ballet, inspired by Jacqueline du Pré

The idea for a ballet about Jacqueline du Pré came from two places. One was *Dangerous Liaisons*, which I made for the Royal Danish Ballet in 2017. There was a moment during a scene of a music lesson where I had one of the dancers 'become' the cello. It really worked for this piece and I took a mental note to keep the idea to develop further at some point. And then, when I was considering ideas for The Royal Ballet, my sister suggested that Jacqueline du Pré was a character I might be interested in. And I thought: yes – that's the ballet!

Many people know that Du Pré died young, of multiple sclerosis. In fact, my mother also has the disease, but that's not the reason I am making this piece, and its primary focus is not MS. I see it as a story of love and loss, not between a man and a woman but between Jacqueline and her cello, played by a male dancer. It's about her relationship to her musical talent, and the loss she experiences when it fails her – or when she fails it. It's interesting that we often put human characteristics on objects, and the cello seems so very human: its sound, its shape, the way it's carried and cradled, the intimate physical relationship it has with its player. It really feels like you're holding a body.

How do you separate Jacqueline the person from Jacqueline the musician? The dancer from the dance? It's almost impossible. In any case, I'm not trying to do biography, I'm creating a portrait – a portrait of Jacqueline's relationship with music, and how that affected the people close to her. I'm curious about the relationships that she lived through the language of music. But it's also about movement. As a musician, Jacqueline was famous for her physicality. Watch her with the cello and you can see bodies in play. That's rich with choreographic possibilities. The communion between player and instrument. The separation, too: vibrato playing shading into the tremors of MS, for example.



Of course, Jacqueline's story is tragic, but it can also be seen as a celebration. Speaking to people who knew her, I have not once felt that the light she brought to their lives has diminished. Performers and composers tell me that she continues to be an inspiration. Recordings of her playing continue to thrill new generations of music lovers. And so the piece in my mind becomes one of sound waves and echoes, circles and cycles.

**Jacqueline du Pré with her husband, the pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim**

©Jack Robinson/Hulton Archive/Getty

'The people, the stage management, the Opera House itself – it's very familiar. It does feel like coming home, which is lovely'



**Deborah Bull and Christopher Saunders in *Words Apart* for The Royal Ballet Dance Bites Tour in 1998**

©Dee Conway

an important time artistically. 'I'd always been interested in storytelling in dance, but there I really encountered the idea of *Regietheater*, or director's theatre, which is about realizing your own interpretation. It made me much braver in my choices, and more rigorous about speaking through the language of dance. I feel my choreography now is a product of a British background with a massive European influence.'

In 2013, a change of management in Bern left Marston – now married, with one of her two children – back on the freelance circuit. 'I am pretty resilient', she says, matter-of-factly. 'And since I was 18 I have been very proactive about getting work.' That has paid off in spades. 'Creating *Jane Eyre* for Northern Ballet really changed things for me. I've gotten a lot more offers of work, and it's from companies on the level of San Francisco Ballet, Les Grand Ballets Canadiens, Joffrey Ballet, Royal Danish Ballet and National Ballet of Cuba. And to think, *Jane Eyre* had its premiere in Doncaster, and now American Ballet Theatre is performing it in New York at the Met!'

For The Royal Ballet to commission Marston for its Main Stage is not only indicative of her international

professional stature, but a source of personal joy. 'It's a different generation of dancers now', she says, 'but the people, the stage management, the Royal Opera House itself – it's very familiar. It does feel like coming home, which is lovely.' Not one to rest on her laurels, though, she adds: 'Of course, the dream would be to make this home somewhere I'd come back to regularly.'

She laughs at her own audacity – then shrugs it off. But then to imagine her as an 18-year-old, who thinks for herself, showing an unknown ballet master a video of her choreography halfway through an audition, and to see that she has made a great success in a ballet world dominated by male choreographers and artistic directors, is to realize that this audacity has indeed served her well. ■

**Cathy Marston's new work opens on the Main Stage on 17 February.** See page 67.

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