

Cathy Marston

CHOREOGRAPHER

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 11 September 2003.

Cathy began a ballet class when she was very young. She wanted ribbons to go all the way up her thighs, but they fell down; so she refused to go again.

When she was eight, she loved the TV police-woman, Juliet Bravo, and wanted to be her. Her mother told her that Juliet Bravo was really an actress. At that time she was too young for drama classes, so she took swimming, dancing, horse-riding, tap and then a ballet class. When ballet clashed with horse-riding, she opted for ballet.

She wanted to be in musicals. She attended a secondary school in Cambridge, where she did lots of jazz and contemporary dance. She was already choreographing, although she did not realise it. For two years, at the age of 14 and 15, she attended the Royal Ballet Summer School.

It is customary for three Upper School students to choreograph for the Summer School. Cathy had performed in a ballet created by Christopher Hampson to music by Arvo Part. Monica Zamora and David Dawson came in to help him. Cathy was full of praise for Monica Zamora; she was now choreographing a new ballet on Monica for George Piper Dances. In her second year, she appeared in a work choreographed by Christopher Hampson. Both Chris Hampson and Tom Sapsford, being older than Cathy, were exclusive with their friends. They were “pretentious and arty,” in a fun way, going out to the Riverside Studios and art films. Cathy was full of admiration.

When she was 16, Cathy joined the Upper School. She referred to audition day as one of the most important days in her life. She stayed at a hotel in Hammersmith. She had been away on camping holidays with her family, but she had not stayed before in a hotel. She had glandular fever at the time and the doctor had put her on steroids.

Cathy told us that very few applicants from normal schools get into the Royal Ballet School. Some get in from outside schools, such as Elmhurst or Tring. At the Royal Ballet School, students in her year included

Edward Watson, Christina Arestis, Jenny Tattersall, Tom Whitehead, Matthew Dibble and Robert Parker. Ricardo Cervera and Tom Sapsford were in the year above and Laura Morera was in the year below. Cathy described her year as incredibly successful – many getting contracts with the Royal or BRB.

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days, she had often worked with Edward Watson and Jenny Tattersall, both as a choreographer and a dancer. She had a hard time with one of her ballet teachers, so she would go up to the top floor and listen to LPs with Norman Morrice. She likened these experiences to tutorials at university, whereas ballet classes were dictatorial.

Cathy’s parents are both English teachers. She found great confidence from the academic subjects at the Royal Ballet School, where teachers thought it was wonderful that she thought so much. Whereas her ballet teacher thought it was terrible that she thought for herself.

Cathy always knew she wanted to be a choreographer, but she was also performing and dancing. She enjoyed both disciplines. She found dancing so hard, so competitive. She just wanted to do her own thing. Dancing, for her, is a means to an end, not the end itself. At the Upper School, she won the Ursula Moreton Choreographic Competition with *Les Feuilles Mortes*, set to a song by Ute Lemper, with Christina Arestis and Edward Watson. In her first year she collaborated with another girl on a piece of about four minutes about Lady Macbeth meeting Ophelia. She had now taken up this idea again, with the new work she was creating for

George Piper Dances.

Cathy talked about the group of choreographers, which had emerged from the Royal Ballet and the School around the same time, Will Tuckett, Chris Wheeldon, Chris Hampson and Tom Sapsford. "Norman Morrice and David Drew gave us the support and the freedom to investigate by ourselves. They made us see lots of things. Norman Morrice and Val Bourne got tickets for us at Dance Umbrella. They encouraged us to be open and hungry. We were a group of individuals, encouraged to be individual."

At the end of her period at the Royal Ballet School, Cathy did not obtain a job with the company, despite David Drew fighting on her behalf. She has often been asked why there have been no female choreographers from the company.

When she left the Royal Ballet School in 1994, Cathy applied to the Zurich Ballet, which was directed by Bernd Bienert. Bienert had assembled an amazing group of dancers in Zurich, including dancers of New York City Ballet, Frankfurt Ballet and Nederlands Dans

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Theater. They were a talented bunch, many of them a lot older, people that Cathy looked up to and learned from. They treated her as an adult member of the company, whereas in England she was still treated as a student, which made it difficult to grow up as a dancer. The Zurich repertoire included Balanchine, Mats Ek, Hans Van Manen, William Forsythe and Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. The mixed repertoire, with different influences, was very good for Cathy. Sadly, after two years Bernd Beinat's contract came to an end. He was fired and all of his dancers with him. Heinz Spoerli came in as the new director.

In 1996 Cathy auditioned for Richard Wherlock, director of the Luzern Ballet, and spent the next three years in Lucerne. This company was very different from the Zurich Ballet. Zurich had 35 dancers, whereas Luzern had only 14. Cathy performed lots of solos and pas de deux. Wherlock's biggest influence was not his choreographic style, but his manner in rehearsal, his way of treating people. He was very funny, very liked.

Whilst in Switzerland, Cathy had always kept in touch with the Royal Ballet, particularly with Darryl Jaffray in the Education Department, Monica Mason, David Drew, Norman Morrice and Geraldine Morris, who taught Dance Studies at the School. Darryl Jaffray commissioned Cathy to create a solo during a summer

holiday for Jenny Tattersall to perform in educational programmes. Then in 1997 Anthony Dowell commissioned her to create a piece for *Dance Bites*. The result was *Figure in Progress*, inspired by the sculptures of Giacometti. She was only 20 or 21 and Richard Wherlock gave her three weeks leave from Luzern.

After that, Cathy returned once each year to London to create a new work. She obtained some encouraging criticisms. She continued to build relationships with the dancers she had known in school. In 1998 she was really excited to have the opportunity to create a work on Deborah Bull and Jonathan Cope, *Words Apart*.

Cathy approached Anthony Dowell again, with a view to coming back to London. He told her that she would have to dance and auditioned her. Shortly after he resigned as Director and Cathy's plans to return did not work out.

Richard Wherlock left Luzern for a post in Berlin. In 1999, Cathy spent her next year with a third Swiss ballet company, this time in Bern. The company of 14 dancers performed 11 different ballets in one season, including nine creations. She had no time to choreograph. She resigned in 2000, in order to put greater emphasis on choreography.

Cathy rang everyone during the Summer. She was commissioned to create a work (*Rosemary for Remembrance*) for Images of Dance, the London Studio Centre's classical graduate company. London Children's Ballet commissioned her to create a full-length narrative ballet (*The Ballet Shoes*). In August, Cathy auditioned for the Henri Oguike Dance Company. A private supporter emailed her to offer her some money and she created a work for the first Cohabitants programme in the Clore Studio, with the dancers working for free. This work was *Traces* in the first year of ADI (the Artists' Development Initiative) at the Clore Studio. She did not take a day off; she said yes to everything.

Cathy spoke about her ballet for the first year of the ADI, *Traces*. "The dancers were all my peers. I made a ballet about friendships, about growing from teenagers and adolescents into adults, about wondering where, why, when. The music was by Yann Tiersen. I liked it and the dancers liked it too. I created it on the dancers, working in their spare time. It was not a group piece, but had little duets and trios, a patchwork of interwoven stories, an adolescent soap opera like *Eastenders*. I gave characters to each of the dancers. I was happy with the piece at the time."

Now she was reviving the piece for performances in the Linbury Theatre, with most of the original cast and with three new dancers. Now the original cast are so busy, with lots of principal work. During rehearsals, the ballet came back to all of them, the music and the characters. Cathy was so excited. They had all been laughing for days. The dancers were keen on the piece. Cathy was

asked where her inspiration comes from. *Traces* was her first major piece. You can't just make a ballet about yourself. Cathy likes having characters. She is not a writer, but reads a lot and likes looking in books.

George Piper Dances had recently commissioned her to create a 10 to 15 minute piece for Monica Zamora and Oxana Panchenko. It was the first piece that the Boyz would not perform. She was creating a work about two female icons, Lady Macbeth and Ophelia. Both characters are in love with their partner, both have ambitions to be queen. Both try too hard and it goes wrong. They go mad and die offstage.

Cathy referred to Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. "I want to bring the offstage action on stage. Lady Macbeth is in your head; she resonates in your head. She was never a real person, but exists as a ghost. I am imagining the ghosts of Ophelia and Lady Macbeth on stage after the play has ended and the theatre is shut. It is a fantasy on the theme of how they would relate to each other. Lady Macbeth has

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a child; she needs to be needed. Ophelia has a mother – but when her father dies, she goes mad.” Cathy was undertaking a big journey with these characters. The ballet is about two women trapped in a space. The work is called *Non Exeunt*, (No Exit), to indicate that the two characters are unable to leave.

Before starting to choreograph, Cathy spends time in the studio by herself. She puts lots of energy into the collaboration with composers and designers. For this ballet, she spent time looking for music. She finds the piano characteristic of a man, whilst the violin is characteristic of a woman. She found John Cage's *Six Melodies* for harp and violin, both instruments reminiscent of a woman.

She had deliberated hugely as to whether to explain the background in the programme or not. People always complain about the lack of explanation. Sometimes they like to know about a ballet afterwards, before they see it for a second time. Cathy took a straw poll of the audience and the majority wanted her to include a programme note of explanation.

In 2002, Cathy had created *Facing Viv* for English National Ballet. She had begun with lots of research. She read a biography of Tom and Viv Eliot; she read Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land*. Cathy talked about the recent revival of *Facing Viv*. She wants familiar people to mount her work, but she enjoys seeing different casts and letting a ballet-master work on her pieces. It was wonderful to return to *Facing Viv*. The dancers had

looked after it and had developed it over the tour.

Her ballet *Between Shadows*, for a Royal Ballet Cohabitants programme in the Clore Studio, had been based on L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go Between*. She had attempted to convey the essence of a novel in a half-hour ballet, but this was far too ambitious. Perhaps she would attempt a longer work in the future. It was a breath of fresh air after so many abstract works, a chance to interpret a narrative.

In Summer 2003, Cathy Marston created *Summer Twinings* for the Royal Ballet School. The eight dancers had showed up as individuals. She loved working with the school, she saw the students as people. When she had been 18 years old, she had not been treated like that.

Cathy was asked whether the dancers take over, during the creation of a piece. Cathy was clear that the concept and the music are hers. She starts in the studio on her own and works up a specific language. Then she starts to teach the work to everyone. Creating a pas de deux is like making a sculpture. The constant problem for the choreographer is very little time, so she is very structured in her work.

Cathy spoke about choosing music for a work. Sometimes there can be a problem with copyright. This is a matter for the company, which must be timely in seeking permission. Otherwise it can be nerve-wracking. *Between Shadows* had a commissioned score. It is hard to put together a story ballet without a commissioned score, to find music off the shelf to fit a narrative. For her ballet *Sophie*, Cathy had used a collage of music, just as William Styron weaves a musical collage in his novel.

When commissioning a score, Cathy stipulates the structure, how the music should be, in what order it is played, how many minutes. Mats Skoog had commissioned the composer, Roxanna Panufnik, and Cathy to create a ballet on the subject of Leda and the Swan for English National Ballet. Cathy had set the scenario and timings very carefully and Roxana had responded accordingly. Now the ballet had been postponed for financial reasons. The score was to be performed at the Polish Music Festival. Cathy's scenario without Cathy's choreography!

Cathy spoke about her life as a freelance. She was an Associate Artist of the Royal Opera House, a two-year position up to 2005. "Nice title! I go to lots of meetings, but I don't get paid. I am paid per project; for a couple of Cathy Marston events every year in the Linbury or the Clore." On the other hand, Cathy is completely free to do other things. She spends some months dancing with Arc Dance Company. She is completely insecure financially, but the freedom is wonderful. She had just spent three months in Austria, appearing on the stage on the lake at the Bregenz Festival in *West Side Story*.

Now, as an established choreographer, Cathy finds that people have expectations about her work. At the

outset, if her work was good, it would be a pleasant surprise for everyone. Now she could say yes to everything proposed, but she must not over-choreograph. She should not do everything. Too many pieces may become boring and repetitive.

Cathy had recently spent four days in Venice, working on a piece for a Diaghilev evening to a commissioned score, *A Venetian Requiem*, for saxophone quartet and two voices. It will be a fusion of song and dance together. Diaghilev and Stravinsky were buried together in Venice. She was reminded of Böcklin's pictures of The Isle of the Dead.

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Cathy spoke of the need for investment in choreographers. She had been invited to go on a retreat in Scotland and was about to do so. It was a project to bring artists together for three weeks to think, visual artists, writers and composers. She was considering a story ballet about the triangular relationship of Clara and Robert Schumann and Brahms. She would spend some time

on retreat making a treatment for the ballet. Perhaps it would be a full-length ballet, although Monica Mason had suggested 50 minutes.

Cathy was very positive about the now defunct Dance Bites tours of the Royal Ballet to provincial theatres, presenting small-scale, modern works. It was a fantastic opportunity for dancers and choreographers. It was sometimes difficult to balance a programme of four new works, particularly as no-one knew how each one would turn out. You could develop in a smaller theatre, rather than in the Opera House. The audiences did not always like these programmes, they wanted to see successful works.

Cathy was also complimentary about how the Royal Ballet encourages young choreographers. Although she had danced for six seasons in three Swiss companies, she had never choreographed abroad. Most dancers elsewhere retire and then start choreographing.

Her most embarrassing moment? She was working on a new ballet, *Figure in Progress*, with Ed Watson, Christina Arestis, Leire Ortueta and Zenaida Yanowsky. She was influenced by Giacometti sculpture and was trying to explain the concept to her dancers. “It’s like having great sex,” she told them. They fell about laughing and constantly remind her about it.

Report by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked and corrected by Cathy Marston and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2003.