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## Striking a pose



Cathy Marston,  
Britain's busiest  
choreographer

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NEWCASTLE-BORN CATHY MARSTON IS THE UK'S HOTTEST YOUNG CHOREOGRAPHER. THIS YEAR ALONE SHE HAS CREATED THE DANCES FOR A PLAY IN LONDON'S WEST END, A PIECE FOR NORTHERN BALLET THEATRE AND A COMMISSIONED WORK FOR THE ROYAL BALLET'S DIAGHILEV CELEBRATIONS. ALLEN ROBERTSON FINDS OUT WHAT MAKES HER TICK

## DANCING QUEEN

YOUNG, VIVACIOUS AND CLEVER, Cathy Marston is one of the busiest choreographers in Britain today. Since the beginning of the year she's been up and down the country like a yo-yo—from London to Leeds and Scotland.

So what is it that she's been doing? Just what is the job description for a choreographer?

Making something out of nothing is too glib an answer. Even if it is the truth, you could say that's what a painter, a composer or a poet does as well. However, there's a big difference between a choreographer and other artists: a choreographer can't really create something without the participation of others. Choreography is a communal undertaking, a give-and-take group activity. It's doodling with living bodies. And because other people need to be there in the studio with you, a dance-maker never has the luxury of the infinite amount of time available to a poet or a painter.

Creating a dance must always be done with one eye on the clock—and with the unions perched on your shoulder. Every minute spent in the rehearsal studio equals multiple pay cheques on the line.

Okay, those are some of the conditions of the job, the rules of the game. But what do choreographers actually do? Well, they turn nothing into something.

"Who can say where an idea comes from? Nowhere and everywhere," Marston says. Though in Marston's case, her initial idea is likely to have been sparked off by something that she's read. Several of her most successful dances to date are linked to the texts that kick-started her choreographic process. Marston's evocation of LP Hartley's *The Go Between* became *Between Shadows*, William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* was simply called *Sophie*, and when she took on *The Tempest* she created a pair of duets collectively known as *Before the Tempest*, *After the Storm*. As the title implies, these duets bookend Shakespeare's magical tale as a prequel and sequel. (They were broadcast by the BBC earlier this year.)

*Sophie* was created for the intimate Linbury Studio Theatre, down in the bowels of the Royal Opera House. It was Marston's attempt to provide a kind of "parallel universe" to Nicholas Maw's opera, which was having its world premiere upstairs in the main theatre. Both Maw and Marston began with the same source, Styron's horrific novel.

But instead of relying on literature as a crutch, she uses it as a springboard. She insists that viewers don't need to be familiar with the originals in order to appreciate how she has translated them into movement.

"Marston's non-linear dances inhabit a space where one thing melts into another with internal logic, but without external reason. Oblique, suggestive and selective, they strike out in search of new ways to link meaning and movement," I said in my *Times* review of the premiere.

Marston conceived her *Sophie* as a duet—just Sophie herself and a single male dancer who played all the various men in her tortured life. Marston also came up with a devastating idea that expanded the dance into another dimension. In collaboration with the filmmaker Terry Braun, she devised a series of films projected on see-through fabrics both in front of and around the dancers. At one particularly tense moment, Sophie (Antonia Franceschi) was dancing with three different, and exactly life-sized, "ghost" versions of herself. It felt as if Marston was allowing us a glimpse into Sophie's soul.

Franceschi, who danced with New York City Ballet after having been in the film of *Grease* and playing the role of the snooty young ballerina in Alan Parker's film of *Fame*, has nothing but praise for Marston. "So it's like this about Cathy: she's wonderfully 'present'. You get the sense that she wants to only be there—in that rehearsal with you, supporting you to do whatever it is you might want to try. Cathy has an uncomplicated desire to work, to

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MATZ SKOOG  
Artistic Director, English National Ballet



create; and she is always inviting your input."

"I'm completely bad at anything else," Marston admits. "I think that's inevitable with a job that you enjoy."

All choreographers start out as dancers. That's where they learn the fundamentals, the building blocks of the craft. After all, you can't write a novel if you've never learned the alphabet, and the word choreography (it's ancient Greek) does mean writing movement. "I wanted to be Juliet Bravo," Marston laughs. "I was six or seven. When my mother told me that she wasn't real, but actually an actress, I immediately decided that I wanted to be an actress too."

Cambridge, where Marston grew up, although she was born in Newcastle, didn't have an acting school for tiny-tot thespians, so Marston found herself in dance classes instead. "I didn't really like it at first," she admits, "but I wanted to learn how to do all those amazing things that Juliet Bravo could do."

As the years passed, the intricate elegance of ballet began to replace the kung-fu antics of the TV lady copper. Over the next decade Marston became increasingly committed, moved to London as a teenager to study at the Royal Ballet School and then went off to dance with several companies on the Continent.

Though she has never been a member of the Royal Ballet itself, her links with the company are strong. She'd already successfully tried her hand at choreography while she was still a student and over three seasons in the late 1990s, while she was still performing in Europe, the company commissioned dances from her for the now defunct touring programme known as "Dance Bites". Currently, Marston is an Associate Artist in an ongoing programme at Covent Garden that is under the direction of former ballerina Deborah Bull. Both *Sophie* and her *Tempest* duets stem from here.

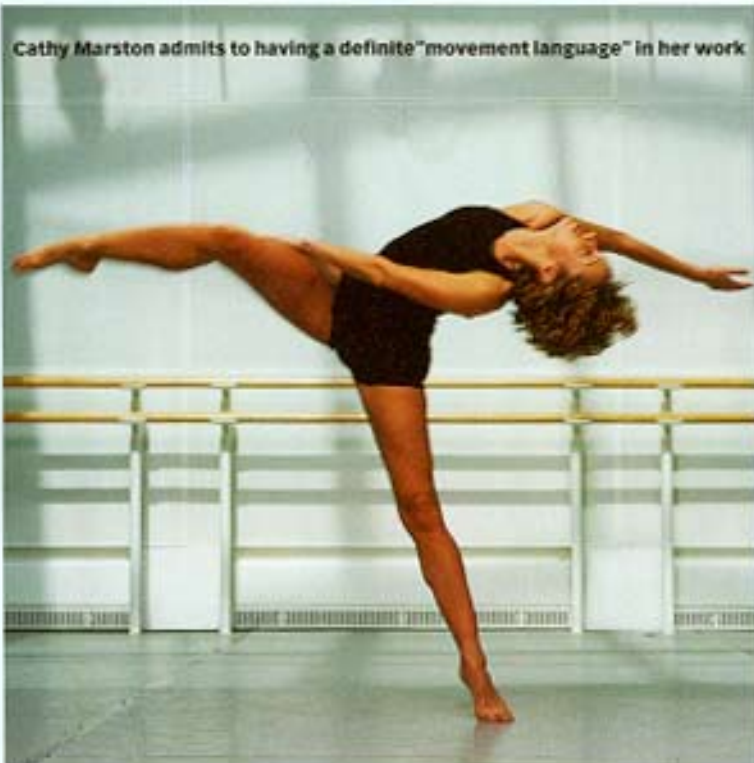
In 2000, after six years of dancing in Europe, Marston realised that it was time to make some definite choices about her future. She opted to return to Britain and set herself up as a freelance choreographer. It has been pretty much non-stop ever since.

Almost immediately Matz Skoog, the artistic director of English National Ballet, asked her to choreograph for his company. The

outcome was *Facing Viv*, a subtle look at disintegrating relationships, initially inspired by the problems surrounding the mental collapse of TS Eliot's first wife.

Skoog was immensely pleased. "The exquisitely feminine quality of Cathy's work is, in fact, her most distinguishing characteristic. In my opinion this sets her apart from many other contemporary female choreographers."

"One of the things I've always had is my own movement language," Marston agrees. "I've got a certain way of moving that is mine. Cathy's stamp."



Cathy Marston admits to having a definite "movement language" in her work

And how would she define that "stamp" for someone who has yet to see her dances? What should they expect to see?

"I'm trying to make things that take you into their world," she says. "Once you're there, you should see something that is beautiful to watch, musical, very sensual, athletic in terms of partnering, explicit or implicit stories."

David Nixon, artistic director of Northern Ballet Theatre, was so impressed with *Facing Viv* that he invited Marston to come to Leeds to create a new one-act ballet for his company. "I think that she is extremely gifted," says Nixon. "Cathy's work is both highly expressive and physical, which are qualities I believe to be identifiable to our dancers."

"Yes," Marston agrees, "there's a real buzz of excitement with the Northern lot—we're having a great time working together."

Her new dance, which she has titled *Dividing Silence*, has its world premiere at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, on June 9 and will be touring around the country in the autumn. It is danced to Bohuslav Martinu's *Double Concerto* for two string orchestras, piano and timpani. The split structure of the Czech composer's score will surface visually in the patterns of Marston's choreography.

"The music is very emotional, but it also has this divided form," says Marston as she pulls out her preparatory notebook filled with page after page of pencilled numbers combined in light sequences. "No," she laughs, "maths was not my best subject. My favourite thing was English; both of my parents are English teachers."

Just three weeks after her Northern Ballet Theatre premiere Marston will unveil yet another work in the Linbury Studio Theatre.

She is one of five choreographers creating new dances to honour the great impresario Serge Diaghilev and his revolutionary company, Les Ballets Russes. During its 20 years of existence (1909-29), Diaghilev commissioned scores and designs from the likes of Picasso, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Cocteau—from virtually everyone who was anyone.

"Because it's a celebration of Diaghilev, I felt really strongly that I should be commissioning a new score and designs," Marston says. "He liked to involve singing in dance, so a song cycle seemed to be a good idea. I started talking to [composer] Judith Bingham, and we came up with a Venetian Requiem. Diaghilev, who died in Venice, had always feared death by water."

This summer's performances will feature only a seven-minute duet from Bingham's composition, which is scored for saxophone and counter tenor.

So, this could just be a preview of bigger things to come? "Oh, I hope so," Marston says. "Choreographing to new music is a wonderful way to work. I've got thousands of CDs, I'm constantly listening to music, but it's really satisfying to be able to collaborate with a composer."

◆ *Allen Robertson has been the dance editor of Time Out since 1984. He also edits the quarterly Dance Now and is a regular contributor to The Times.*

**Cathy's dates:** World premiere of Cathy Marston's *Dividing Silence*, part of a mixed bill also including works by Nacho Duato and Val Caniparoli. June 9-12, Leeds Grand Theatre & Opera House (0113 226 6222). **The Ensemble Group** premieres new works by Marston, Christopher Hampson and Toni Mira. June 12, Festival Theatre, Edinburgh (0131 529 6000); June 17, Carnegie Hall, Dunfermline (01383 314000); June 26, Theatre Royal, Glasgow (0141 332 9000). "*Inspired by Diaghilev*", five small-scale works by Marston and four other leading choreographers. June 23-27, Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London (020 7304 4000).