



Cathy Marston is not, has never been, nor ever will be, a man. Her gender may be common in the street, but in the exclusive club of ballet choreographers it is rare. Modern dance is crammed with powerful creative women

- Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman and Martha Graham invented the thing. But ballet, with few exceptions, has been sculpted by male hands. "Of the 25 or so choreographers I've worked for, none have been women," Marston says, crossing one fat-free, pipe-cleaner leg over the other and shaking a head of dark blond curls. "I've tried to figure out why and I can't."

Maybe you can blame the old-fashioned power structure of ballet, or the heavy performing workload of ballerinas, or - who knows? Either way, here she is, just 26, with a decade of choreographing behind her and now creating her first piece for English National Ballet. *Facing Viv*, set to part of John Adams's *Gnarly Buttons*, is inspired by T.S. Elliot's first marriage to Vivien and, most immediately, by a recent biography that casts Vivien in a sympathetic light.

Marston puts three couples on stage, who in the first section evoke different aspects of Tom and especially Vivien. "At the end the music gets very *Psycho*," Marston says, voicing insistent Hitchcock screeches. "Then comes the second part, which is more a fantasy. It's as if Tom and Viv have come back and are wondering about the 'Waste Land' they have made of their lives." *The Waste Land*, in Marston's mind, has links with the asylum where Vivien ended up. "It's as if it's littered with their guts and remains and all the mess they've made and now they can look back and look at each other again."

Facing Viv is one of several pieces by her with a literary subtext, and in May, at the Royal Opera House's Clore Studio, she premieres a piece (as yet untitled) based on L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, part of a shared evening with Tom Sapsford called *Cohabitants* (they used to share a flat). But if all her pieces have a theme, they are plotless to look at. "Obviously *Facing Viv* is making a reference to something and there will be a programme note, although I always have this debate about whether I should write programme notes. I try to make things where you don't necessarily need to know, but it might be interesting if you did."

She always wanted to be a choreographer, or at least she did straight after entering the Royal Ballet Upper School, where she was one of several students under the wings of Norman Morrice and David Drew. They have produced a crop of unusually promising choreographers. Christopher Wheeldon, now scaling dizzy heights as resident choreographer with New York City Ballet, was three years above her. So was Christopher Hampson, busy on English National Ballet's new *Nutcracker*. Tom Sapsford, her closest choreographic accomplice and until recently a member of the Royal Ballet, was a year above. "I became very friendly with Tom and Chris and it was partly because of them I started choreographing. I thought, well, they're so cool, if they can do it, I want to, too."

Originally she just wanted to be a dancer, although she first began ballet lessons in her home town, Cambridge, because they didn't have acting lessons for eight-year-olds. She didn't make it into the Royal Ballet. "I don't think I really expected it. The only

One step beyond

As a woman, Cathy Marston is a rarity in the male world of ballet choreography. But at the age of 26, she's already making her mark. Instead of just using a dancer's qualities, she tells **NADINE MEISNER**, she wants to challenge them

reason it may have been on the cards was for the choreography." The Royal Ballet agreed they might take her on, but as with previous potential choreographers she would have to earn her keep in the corps de ballet – and, moreover, wait for a corps vacancy to come up. Meanwhile, a more stimulating offer came from the Zürich Ballet; she stayed there two years, then moved to the Luzern Ballet. This gave her the experience of working with choreographers less familiar here – Ed Wubbe, Hans van Manen, Richard Wherlock – and allowed her intervals in Britain to choreograph for the Royal Ballet's education department and the small touring outfit, Dance Bites.

It was with her three pieces for Dance Bites that she gained a reputation as an assured and intelligent voice. But all changed when she joined Bern Ballet: first, they couldn't give her time off for moonlighting; and second, Dance Bites got the chop. "And it seemed I needed to be here to do anything. In Switzerland you could do little things, but I had more of a reputation here. I could speak and convince people that I could choreograph."

So in summer 2000 she came back. "It

was quite a step. I quit my contract and stability, and I had decided I'd be prepared to wait on tables." By chance, she immediately found work dancing with Henri Oguike's new company, which conveniently wasn't full-time. Why continue dancing? "You always learn from working with other choreographers, even when it's bad." It also means that she knows what a movement feels like, what its logistics are. "I demonstrate quite a lot in choreographing, which helps at the moment with ENB's dancers. It's given them a big clue as to what I want."

Ballet, though, is at the core of her choreography. Her shapes are lucid and assertive, the dancers marrying the turned-out arcs and lines of traditional classicism with modern twists. "I try to be not boring, that's key. I try to be musical. And I try to make the dancers look good. One of the reasons I love choreographing is that I admire dancers as individuals. If someone has a special quality it's important to use that, but I also try to challenge it. Ed [Edward Watson] is very easy to cast as an outsider, but in my *Go-Between* piece he'll be the Viscount, which is quite different for him."

She says she owes her studio manner to

Richard Wherlock, in which case he ought to start a course teaching it. Faces are staring in at the rehearsal from everywhere, but she is unfazed, self-possessed, authoritative, relaxed. She establishes an efficient working atmosphere that invites the dancers to chip in. She is trying to get the dancers to smash down to the floor in an awkward pose. "If you're going to cheat," she says, "relenting a little, 'find a way I don't notice.'"

As a freelance she has been grateful for any work. She choreographed her first narrative, full-evening piece, *Ballet Shoes*, for the 55-strong, eight to 14-year-olds of the London Children's Ballet. She approached it with dread, but is now very proud of it. Her *Go-Between* piece will be the latest of several she's created for the Royal Opera House's Artist Development Initiative, using Royal Ballet dancers. You could say she has more than proved her talent and deserves bigger exposure from the Royal Ballet than the makeshift Clore. Why don't they at least make the more spacious Linbury Studio available? Full marks, then, to ENB's Matz Skoog for snapping Marston up for his *Tour de Force* programme.

ENB has been a refreshingly different experience for Marston. While the Royal Ballet dancers for her Clore pieces are unpaid volunteers, wearily fitting the rehearsals into the hours after their day jobs, the ENB casts belong to the official schedule, paid and fresh. The downside is that she had to leave Oguike's company. "There was no way to do both."

So what will she do after this? She has projects up to June; after that she doesn't know. "I work like a madwoman and financially it just covers costs." Welcome to the world of the artist. At least she knows that where she treads, others have trod before on their way to success. It's the price paid for doing exactly what you want.

'Facing Viv' is performed as part of ENB's *Tour de Force* programme in Scunthorpe, 19-20 April; Cambridge, 23-24 April; Bezhin-on-Sea, 27 April; Barrow-in-Furness, 30 April, 1 May; Tunbridge Wells, 3-4 May. Cathy Marston and Tom Sapsford in the Royal Opera House's Clore Studio, 13-16 May (020-7394 4000)



Cathy Marston (far left); and (above) rehearsing 'Facing Viv' with the ENB

ARTS DIARY

KATY GUEST

Don't put your soap star on the stage

Ian Richardson, the veteran theatre actor and star of *House of Cards*, has grandly told a Melbourne newspaper that soap actors should not attempt to act on stage. "Because they're big stars they're box-office draws," he says.

"They're engaged by impresarios because they will bring the audiences in. In a week they crumble and fall apart and have to be replaced by an understudy." Meanwhile, the film and theatre actress Rebecca Lacey, who is to appear in BBC's *Murder in Mind*, has said that she finds TV acting frustrating. "There we are working our guts out and people are sitting at home chatting."



A Siberian sing-along

The launch of *The Shaman's Coat: a native history of Siberia*, by Anna Reid, will not be the usual warm chardonnay and soggy quiche affair. Advance information for the event invites guests to the House of St Barnabas-in-Soho later this month to share "vodka and zakuski" and sing with a group of traditional Siberian throat singers.

Music lives

The organisers of The Invisible World concert, which will feature flautist Wissam Boustany and pianist Nigel Clayton, among others, are using an unusual claim to sell the event. A flyer for the concert, at St John's church, Smith Square in London on 24 May, announces: "All the composers featured in this concert are STILL LIVING!"

London jazz club for sale – 500 careful owners needed

The Vortex Jazz Club in north London has come up with a novel way of raising the £200,000 needed to renew its lease: it is offering patrons the chance to own the club. The Vortex Building Company Ltd is to issue 500 shares at £1,000 each. It could be a good buy, not least because Elton John has said he'll consider matching whatever the Vortex can raise to save the club. But potential investors should be warned. A biography of Ronnie Scott, owner of the famous jazz club, records how, during one near-terminal VAT crisis, his business partner Pete King was told: "If you'd been a shrewd businessman, you'd have seen this coming." King replied: "If we were shrewd businessmen, we wouldn't be here at all."