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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Bern Ballet**'Wuthering Heights'
(Sturmhohe)**May 2009
London, Linbury**by Ian Macmillan*

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Last night, before a standing-room only audience in the Linbury Theatre, Cathy Marston's Bern:Ballett gave the final performance of her "Sturmhöhe, inspired by Emily Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights'" and so concluded its first tour outside of Switzerland. I attended both first and last nights, and my sense is that she and her colleagues will go back home well-pleased with their reception last week in London and earlier at Snape Maltings.

Cathy was asked to go to Bern in 2007 by the new Intendant (Director) of the Stadttheater Bern, very much as a result of his having seen "Ghosts", her ballet created around Ibsen's novel during her period as Associate Artist at the ROH. That being so, it is of more than passing interest that the many members of the company she created there have not come from a background in narrative dance, yet they have developed with her and found their

feet now in four of her significant narrative works: "Ghosts", her "Firebird", "Before the tempest - after the storm", and now "Sturmhöhe". I have put on record before my impression that Cathy challenges her audiences at a high level with her narrative work, and that it pays to have done a bit of homework in advance. Thus, I am not overly surprised to see Judith Mackrell say in The Guardian that Sturmhöhe "only works as a Wuthering Heights ballet for those who have read the novel". And having done just a bit of prior brushing-up on this occasion, I think I can see the significance of the otherwise unexplained costume changes for Cathy and, later, Heathcliff, and I would take issue with some reviews suggesting that Hindley might

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have been deleted, when it is his early maltreatment of Heathcliff that sets up much of the latter's need for revenge and domination of all around him later on.

That said, Cathy's programme note makes clear that she is not attempting to tell the complete Brontë tale and that the piece is her personal response to the central characters, Catherine Earnshaw and her adopted step-brother Heathcliff. To make things manageable, she has dealt only with the first half of the novel, but that in itself provides quite sufficient material on which to work, given the tangled relationships between the occupants of Wuthering Heights and those of the nearby Grange. The focus then is on five main characters: Cathy (Jenny Tattersall), Heathcliff (Gary Marshall), Hindley, her brother (Erick Guillard), Edgar Linton, later Cathy's husband (Chien-Ming Chang), and Isabella Linton, Edgar's sister and eventually Heathcliff's wife (Hui-Chen Tsai). The other seven dancers are used as 'Echoes of Cathy and Heathcliff', something of a Greek Chorus. This dramatic device provides frequent opportunities for ensemble work, with movement sometimes in imitation of the two protagonists, at others slightly delayed in canon or even further delayed, akin to the re-emergence of a first subject in a musical fugue. And it also enables Cathy and Heathcliff to do quite literal battle with their inner demons, of whom there is no shortage in this reading.



Emma Lewis and Denis Puzanov as shadow Cathy and Heathcliff
in *Wuthering Heights*
© Dave Morgan



But when all is said and done, we come back to the central performances of Jenny Tattersall and Gary Marshall. Jenny was simply tremendous at Wednesday's opening, running the gamut of emotions from playful and wilful at the start to despair at the close. Last night, her fourth demanding physical performance in a row, lacked some of that initial sparkle perhaps, but those final moments were heart-rending, and she looked drained at the curtain calls. I know that she and Cathy Marston go back a long time together, and the creation of this role and the manner in which it was delivered speak volumes about their work together. Gary

Marshall delivered powerful performances as Heathcliff, variously strong, bitter, angry, and desolate at the end. I stand to be corrected, but I suspect that he is one of those who has extended his dramatic capabilities under Cathy's direction.

The staging is simple, as are the costumes. The score is by Dave Maric, a longtime collaborator with Cathy, and has been constructed from a large range of sampled sounds generated by bassist Mich Gerber, who also played live over the recorded track. Frankly, I had feared the worst from this, but was most pleasantly surprised to find how well it worked in context, altering the mood of the piece as required, from reflective to frenetic.



Jenny Tattersall and Gary Marshall in *Wuthering Heights*

© Dave Morgan

I note that the company's 2009/10 programme will open in October with a "Juliet and Romeo" - to the Prokofiev score, I believe - and I rather infer from the inversion of the customary title that Cathy will have some slant of her own to put across. Hopefully, that will provide an opportunity to showcase some of the other talented young dancers in her company but for now - farewell, and many thanks for some delightful evenings at the Linbury and Snape. And dare I hope that some word of how well this visit has gone will reach the ears of the City Fathers in Bern as they come to decisions on the company's future beyond 2012?



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