

**Amanda Maud interviewed by Tess Vocalina on 28 October 2022 re her role in Dancing, Trailblazing, Taboo! Eleanor Marx: A Life in Movement performed at the Bloomsbury Festival on 23 October 2023 in collaboration with students from London Contemporary Dance School.**

**Why were you initially interested in taking part in this project? What attracted you to working on this piece?**

Well, I worked with Julia on the Bloomsbury Festival piece last year, which also worked with dancers from The Place and we developed the format for how the piece would work last year. Julia asked me to do it again this year and I had a really good time. It was hard work, but I had a good time last year and, when she told me about Eleanor Marx, there was no way I was not going to do it because she's such an extraordinary person.

**You had worked last year on the Bloomsbury Festival and then working this year on the Bloomsbury Festival, what were your expectations or new things that you're really excited about heading into this year's project as opposed to last year's project?**

My interaction was more limited this year because I was working on another project at the same time. I think one aspect that was a definite improvement is that the company gave a much clearer idea of what was expected from the dancers and what kind of commitment was needed because we didn't really know last year and we were all learning how to work with each other. I think because there was a clearer outline of what the project was going to be like, that the people that actually participated were much more focused on it.

**And then talking about for you in your role for this piece, specifically what was your rehearsal process like?**

It started early on with talking with Julia about going through the script and talking about Eleanor and then doing research about her. It was a much more straightforward process in that we knew more of how we were going to work than we did last year. Also, it was a straightforward narrative which was different. Last year was more of a compilation of pieces. It was a number of different pieces written by different women that were brought together by Julia.

It was a good balance actually. I have a tendency to ignore my own work that I have to do in trying to facilitate what's happening in the group, so it actually helped having Sophie, who played younger Eleanor Marx, to run lines with her and get a little more grounded with "Oh yeah, I have to do this". I guess that's the same in all projects; you have the greater good to think about, but you also need to take care of what you're doing. Which is like life as well.

**What was your experience like this year, not only working with the dancers but working with Sophie and Ruth?**

Well, the very refreshing thing about last year is that you were working with people in the room which wasn't happening very often at that point. This time working with Ruth we're doing things over Zoom a lot. I think you know digital theatre has added a lot to the theatrical process. It's made a lot of things more possible. It's made working with people who live not nearby possible. I think it became a very much richer piece because of Ruth's role as singer, as musician. It developed one way while she was working together digitally and then once she arrived it became more rounded and more involved with the group.

With the dancers, we had more of a focus on what we knew we wanted to do last year. Everyone was trying out lots of different things, but this year was much more focused on what we had. There was a lot of freedom within the structure, but there was more of a structure and so we could give the dancers more support so that it wasn't just about "What is this piece about? How are we going to put it together? Move over there, move over there. Oh let's try this, let's try this." which for a long time last year it was. It came together, but it was much more focused which means I think we were able to support the dancers more. We had people come back which was really nice. It was really nice that Shea was involved. It was nice that Aske was able to be involved; he wasn't able to be involved last year because of the time commitment, but because we laid out how much the time commitment was going to be, people knew and could commit much more. It was good. This is a little strange, I felt less prepared because last year Julia and I were living and breathing this project for a long time, for weeks and weeks and weeks, because it was being formed and then this year, because we knew what the structure was, we didn't do as much training time with the dancers. We knew what we had to focus on with the dancers vocally and stuff. Also, I was doing this other project, so even though I think we were more prepared and there was more focus and that it was a more supportive and secure production, personally, I felt less prepared I think because I had less time. There generally was less time; we had much less rehearsal time and much less training and prep time and also there was that week when I was doing other work, so I couldn't be there for the first week.

**Was there something that you learned throughout this project, whether it be you as an actor, you as an artist, you as a musician that you plan to carry with you in future projects that you work on?**

Well, there's definitely something that was reinforced for me, a couple of things were reinforced, which is, there is no such thing as the right way to do theatre. We're in the breakfast room of a kind of retro hotel and we were able to create theatre there and create a community of people with the audience, the volunteers, and the performers, and the creatives. That was reinforced and I continue to think there is no right way to do it, no prescribed way. It doesn't make it less theatre, like a lower level of theatre than something that is in a huge proscenium arch space. The other thing that was reinforced was that we are all part of a continuing history and that the "We Will Overcome" section - I have a very strong connection with, I feel a bond with Pete Seeger and that folk music tradition and early Dylan and Woody Guthrie. When Julia said, "We're going to do, 'We Will Overcome translated in Yiddish and can you play the guitar?" That's when it triggered that feeling of being part of a continuing history. In the music workshop at the end, that's from music hall through to the Civil Rights movement, Eleanor Marx and before Eleanor Marx, the French Revolution and the thinkers that inspired the French Revolution that we're all part of that continual history. We have to keep going, we have to make sure that history continues.

**Whether it could be for this year's project or this type of theatre in general, has this opened any new ideas or thoughts for you about future theatre work?**

Well, again, I'd say it was affirming. I think what would be interesting because the first year was extremely promenade in a very different space and then a little bit slightly unmanageable space. This year was in a very controlled space and it wasn't moving, we didn't move an audience. It would be interesting to try and get somewhere in between that because I know that Julia likes to challenge the audience a lot. I agree with that I think, and if it's possible to do it with access in mind, to be able to move a little bit more because the audience just sitting and watching, there's enough of that around, there's plenty of that. If you want that, there's plenty of that and engaging the audience enough so that they physically get involved, even if it just means standing up and walking over there or pushing a wheelchair over there. It's a Brechtian thing. It'll take you out of your fantasy land that theatre can create and they go, "Oh what is actually being said?"

**What for this piece specifically, whether it be through your process with Julia at the very beginning or what you learned throughout the process, what was the most interesting thing that you learned about Eleanor Marx?**

That's a tough one, I mean it sounds like she was a powerhouse. Well, knowing who she was, that's a big thing because I had no idea who she was. The not wearing corsets and then her issues with not eating. I don't know if hers were about body image or body shape or anything like that. They didn't call it an eating disorder back then. They didn't call it anorexia. I don't know if strictly speaking it was, she had better things to do in her mind than eat. She lived on coffee and booze, cigarettes, and nerves. Of course, she ate, she had to, but I found that interesting because it doesn't really get talked about. Eating disorders or eating behaviors have this reputation for being created or discovered in the 70s and 80s and you know people have been struggling or learning how to survive that way, if that's the way she survived, that's the way she survived, for centuries. Some people say Joan of Arc might have been anorexic or had an eating disorder of some sort or that her eating patterns may have affected how she behaved. That was quite interesting to me.

**I know you worked with Julia in the past but has the past with Julia or again with this project made you more curious about invisible women from the 19th century and other women we don't know about?**

Yes, I have been following some of the posts on social media, about the model the part African woman, that sounds terrible but you know the post I am talking about? I've been following the posts. Julia had a project about the first English doctor and then the first American doctor who was actually African-American. So yes, I am definitely going to keep following because I'm interested in invisible women. A company I have worked with in the past in New York city, they have a database of women playwrights from Ancient Greece to now that they present. I've done some of the readings of the plays. The project I was doing before I worked on Eleanor Marx was also about unknown, invisible people in the Deptford area and I think that means that's one of my main interests in being a storyteller, being a theatre maker, is speaking for those who can't speak for themselves and telling stories that are overlooked.

**Was there a specific moment either from the rehearsal process or from the week that we were in the space altogether that was your favourite, most memorable from the piece that you will remember?**

Can I choose two? The last show was very packed and I had quite a few people there and at the last moment of where we're going around shaking the audience's hands saying "I'm Eleanor Marx", I was able to exchange that with a number of people I knew and I got to do it in different languages depending on who they were. That was fun and it was really nice to make it personal. The other one was in the music workshop when we quickly decided to finish the workshop by leading the audience in 'We Will Overcome' and being able to do the verses we didn't do in the play. A friend of mine

was there, and she said, "You've made me cry twice today" and she said, "When you started the 'We Shall Live in Peace' verse, that's when I broke down". It didn't feel like a schmaltzy and didn't feel like we were old fashioned. It felt alive and vital and that's when I really felt the connection, part of the history, that's when I felt part of it.

**Is there anything else about the piece or about your process or about Eleanor Marx that I haven't touched on that you want to say that has made an impact on you?**

I am determined to tell as many people as possible about this woman and to learn more about her, and more about her, not just her family history, not just about her, her romantic life, which was what can be what people focus on, but more on her as a woman in herself. It was very affirming for me because things are so sucky right now. The world is really sucky. It was a needed affirmation. I think it'll keep me going for a while and keep me fighting.

**Well, thank you so much Amanda for talking with me for a little bit today.**