

Julia Pascal interviewed on 14 October 2022 by Luke Mallett for Bloomsbury Radio

Discussing Dancing, Trailblazing, Taboo! Eleanor Marx: A Life in Movement and Sing & Subvert to be performed at the Bloomsbury Festival 2022

Welcome back to Bloomsbury Radio. I'm Luke, and I'm so happy to finally be celebrating the Bloomsbury Festival. It's come back around again after I was experiencing it last year. And we're back again this year more in person, which is nice, seeing people, interviewing people, everyone's in the studio. It's been such a nice experience for myself so far. And the way we're going to do that for the next hour is with a very special guest who is running one of the events, as she has done for a couple of years now, I believe. And I have Julia Pascal with me at the moment. How have you been? Julia?

I'm delighted to be back. We did our first Bloomsbury Festival last year. This is our second and it's an honour to be part of it again.

It's an honour to speak to you again because you, as I said to some of the other audience members in the studio at the moment, were one of my first ever interviews. The third or fourth, I think, because I first got involved with the radio back this time last year, and I'm back again now with you in the studio this time. I think we did it online last time. It's so much nicer to have a bit more of an environment.

Yes, in the studio.

Exactly. It's kind of the big boy stage. But of course, we're here to talk about what's going on with the events. You've got an event this year called Dancing, Trailblazing Taboo! followed by a workshop as well, the Sing & Subvert workshop. And that's going to be on the 23rd October at the Royal National Hotel in the Windsor Suite. That's very exciting. It's going to be completely free, which you don't see a lot. So, we're very excited. There is literally no reason for you not to go you don't even have the book you just turn up and you'll have a great time. We're going to explain to you why you're going to have a great time because Julia, what exactly is this event? What will this performance be all about?

So, it's a collaboration between professional actors and student dancers, so professional actors from Pascal Theatre Company - we're working with Amanda Maude, and Sophie Max and professional singer Ruth Getz and students from London Contemporary Dance School. So, it's a dance-theatre project on Eleanor Marx.

Eleanor Marx, there's a last name that jumps out there as a very famous figure in politics and literary history. Who in relation is Eleanor Marx?

Absolutely. Eleanor Marx is really part of a larger project, which we're doing called **Women for Women** in Bloomsbury 1800 to 1900. And that's funded by the Lottery Heritage Fund.

And Eleanor Marx is one of the many invisible women we wanted to bring to the public gaze. We're doing that through an entertainment because she's been eclipsed by her father's huge stature. And we want to say look at Eleanor Marx, look at all the many things she did and come and see the show and be entertained and be stimulated by her.

She did all kinds of things during her life. She was a literary figure in herself and spent a lot of time around this area, and translated her father Karl Marx's works to languages here and there and was also a massive activist for women's rights and even for working rights as well. I believe she was one of the first people to say the 'eight-hour working day' and things like that. She was huge. It's nice to be able to speak about these people. I'm very curious how you're going to be able to tell the story through dance.

Yes, indeed. It was rather daunting because, when you read the political tracts, you think how in god's name am I going to make this into something exciting and easily accessible by the cast. So, in fact, researching her there are two wonderful biographies, Rachel Holmes and Yvonne Cap, which reveal what fun she was. She danced, she sang, she acted. She was an entertainer, the person you want to have dinner with. If you bring back people from the dead, she's one you'd want at your dinner party. So, she was exciting to be around. And she didn't do well at school, but she was incredibly self-educated by the environment and, of course, highly intelligent and multilingual, taught herself Yiddish to speak to East End workers. The family, although they were originally Jews became Christian. So, she wasn't officially a Jew but she identified as a Jew and said she was proud to be a Jew. She learned German to speak to German workers in America, she learned Norwegian, probably many other languages, it's even hard to capture. I'm not sure we even know all that she did. But, if you read what she did in her short life, it's breath-taking. It's many lives lived in one.

Absolutely. It sounds almost mythical, in a sense. You keep hearing little stories and you have no idea which bits are true and which bits all come together but you've created this kind of legendary figure that, once you start to discover you can't stop discovering, so many little stories surrounding her. And we're going to celebrate that I think with this dance performance which will be really exciting. How has it been working with the London School of Contemporary Dance?

We're working mainly with first years, some of them don't have English as their first language. So, all sorts of questions about introducing a very complex and complicated figure to students who don't know the history, don't know the importance of the French Revolution. She was involved in the 1871 Paris Commune, the whole concept of revolution I think is not very well known by many students today. So, they're learning a lot, just as we are learning a lot, of the importance of certainly the French Revolution, obviously, on the period, the 19th century, but on us all today as well. So, what is it to be radical? Of course, we now may reinterpret that in many different ways, but it's the idea of radicalism and therefore, how do you make the performance a radical thing to watch? And we're approaching that through a lot of fun and a lot of entertainment and actually through her childhood. She was a very entertaining and precocious child. When she was nine, she wrote to President Abraham Lincoln and told him how he could conduct the Civil War and the abolition of slavery at the age of nine. So, we start with, with her precocious letters to Abraham Lincoln.

I imagine growing up in that kind of household and building on your political ideas, and then going out on your own as an adult, as a lot of us do, and realising your own ideologies in a sense. And hearing that from a young age must have been incredible to see in person, but hopefully, we get to see that represented as well. It's funny to think about political figures nowadays. We tend to think of big wigs, very boring, they do this and that they're all doing it wrong. And boys, you can think about these radical figures in history. And, actually, some of them were a lot of fun. And a lot of that gets really lost out on. They did this and it was for the working week and very boring terms. But as soon as you start thinking, they must have had some fun at some point. You want to bring it back to that, in a sense,

They had great fun. They were sexual radicals. So, Eleanor Marx didn't believe in marriage, thought marriage was slavery for women. So, concepts of today might be questioned by a more moralistic society. So, reading her and reading what she did and how she lived, and the fun they all had is, is quite exciting.

It's funny that a lot of those radical ideas a couple of 100 years ago, are now being seen as slowly more and more normalized. And you often see it with all those very radical figures, right? A lot of people were, 'Oh, no, we can't do that.' at the time, then a couple of 100 years later, a couple of centuries later, whatever it is, people going, 'Oh, no, actually, that person, I remember that person, I remember reading about that person. Actually, those ideas are really good.' And we can apply that to modern society, you are seeing, as you say, lower rates of marriage, particularly more freedom of expression, especially in a sexual sense, more radical ideas coming out about how the workweek will work. Obviously, we've had a huge influx of ideas about feminism and the way that should be approached. And we've now had several waves of that, which you could argue she was one of the first people to really start as well.

Absolutely. She wrote *The Woman Question*, a very important pamphlet. It's hard for us to realise that women didn't even own their own bodies in this period, they certainly couldn't get a bank account or buy anything. They were always property. And it's good to remind ourselves, that's something we've won recently. And in some countries, that's still the case,

I was going to say we're still not quite there. No, there's many countries where it's not the same. And I guess that's why a really easy viewpoint why this is so important is to look at those places where women are still seen as lesser in a sense, and go, 'Listen, we've gone through this, we know that this is the way forward,? And we shouldn't be doing this.' We can start to make those changes even in other countries, where possible, obviously they've got to make that decision on their own. But hopefully we'll see that kind of history repeated elsewhere.

I was curious also about the workshop. We've covered a little bit about the dancing, the workshop being named Sing & Subvert suggests that we'll be singing.

When I was a drama student, we did a lot of music hall songs. And I became aware of the importance of working class, vaudeville, musical culture as an act of subversion. And so we've chosen the song *If it Wasn't for the Houses in Between*, but it sounds better in a Cockney accent. I'm from the north, so I won't even attempt - overcrowding of the working

class, no green spaces, no fresh air. Again, it has a contemporary relevance in terms of pollution and the right to have fresh air in our lungs. This workshop then engages all sorts of communities with a professional singer and the fun of political satire through singing so that's, that's why that's there. And it's new for us. We haven't done that before. So, each year we need to do something different - I hate repeating myself. So, to do something that stretches us is a good idea.

Absolutely. It's very different to what you did last year at last year was more of a play approach. It was a play between multiple different figures jumping in from time zones, different eras in a sense and now we've got a dance performance and we've got this going as well. So, it's very interesting to see what's going to be going on. And with the workshop, is it encouraged for everyone to sing?

Yes, everyone will have the song sheet and it will be taught and it will be great fun. I can imagine that hymns in a sense, more exciting than hymns.

Typically, if we're trying to bring this fun back again, you want to be shouting and...

Singing, it seems, promotes good health, I was listening to something on the radio about that, the importance of singing and in the community it brings people together. Of course, it's all in English, but it's very subversive, and it's a working class expression of a revolution against pollution and overcrowding. So, it has many therapeutic elements.

I've spoken to a couple of directors, researchers, and like music psychology and they completely agree. They just say you can see even very, very young children, the kind of brain development skyrocket when they start singing and expressing in that sense. So, it's one of the most healthy things you can ever do really. I always find I go home and, if there's no one in the house, you just belt. You listen to a song and start singing, you just feel better. Even if you've had a horrible day, you might be exhausted, but you start singing along to your little songs you put in your favourite song, whatever it is, and you just you to feel better. Yes. And even if it that's your own protest against your tiredness, not quite making quite the statement that these songs will be, but it's your own protest in a sense.

That's right. Absolutely.

Yes, with Eleanor Marx. She's done all of this. Which parts of her life are you trying to focus on? Is there any particular thing that you're trying to pull on? Or is it very much a general overview?

We're starting with her as a child, so writings of President Lincoln. Because how do you engage in the beginning, the first parts of a performance are very important in terms of how you set this tone. And she's very funny. She says, 'I'm going to write to President Abraham Lincoln. He needs my advice. He wants to free the slaves, but so many wicked men want to keep them. My help is needed. I shall write straight away to President Lincoln.' So already we've got this comic little madam who knows it all, which of course, is very funny, these precocious children. I know quite a few of them. And they are very funny because they're so sure of themselves. So, we're starting with that. We're using some nursery rhymes because

how do you express complex political situations without boring your audience to tears? Things like Humpty Dumpty jumped out. Humpty Dumpty as the egg and the communist idea or the socialist idea that you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. So, we're singing Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, and those that get it will get it and those that don't, will get something else from it, and working that through as a dance number as well. On the one hand, it's dealing with childhood nurseries, but on the other hand, it's the political allegory of revolution, which is, enseeded in her life. We're using many layers to tell the story of what she did. And, and because most theatre productions need conflict, we have someone saying, 'Well, why should I hear of you? Who are you? Why do we not know you? And so she keeps proclaiming what she did. So, in an entertaining way, we find out that she spoke to hundreds of 1000s of people in Trafalgar Square and in Brommer's Park, that she wrote *The Woman Question* that she worked on, she was a father's secretary, his amanuensis, she helped translate his work, she did so many different things. She hardly slept. She hardly ate. She smoked a lot of cigars. She was a dynamic person. So, it's just to give a flavour. You can't give the whole life in 30 minutes, but to give a flavour of the key points in her life, and to make her exciting and make people want to know more about her.

That is absolutely the most important thing. Half an hour is not long enough to speak about someone so colourful. And you do just have to inspire. Look at this person. If you're interested in what's happened right now. I had a very quick scroll through Wikipedia and things written about her here and there. And it's one of those things I really wish I had more time. I would sit there and read and read and read and read particularly her own writing, the translation work that she did, her own editions. She's done so much. And you really do hope to carry that through. And the best way to do that it's like, this person is fantastically interesting. Go and look at them. I suppose you're selling it in a sense, through the performance.

We have so many statues of men all over the country We have very little which pays tribute to the work that women have done. I've studied French for years, I didn't know she was the first person to translate Madame Bovary into English and that that edition was in publication until the 50s. So, things I feel I should have known and I haven't known, why have I not known? Why has she been wiped from history is a big question?

We found that so many times, particularly in Bloomsbury as well. So many women around Bloomsbury and Bloomsbury's history, obviously there's the Bloomsbury group including, Virginia Woolf and such, who produced an enormous library of literature including a lot of political pieces and things like that. And a lot of people, a lot of those have just disappeared from history really. And it takes people like yourself, your own theatre company, to bring out again, hopefully, we get to see a few more of these stories, maybe at the Bloomsbury Festival every year.

Our two-year project on **Women for Women** will certainly be highlighting more women in science, in arts, in design, in architecture. We keep finding them and there's such a wealth. Why have they been made invisible?

We hope it is slowly changed. And we can slowly bring them to the forefront and correct some of those issues that we've seen in the past by at least celebrating these women that have, as you say, just been erased in a sense when they had such a huge

impact. Such a huge impact. Like you said, you had no idea but you've studied a lot of this literature, she did that. I'm curious, actually, are other figures that you're thinking about going forwards that you could potentially mention?

There's hundreds of them but they are out of my head at the moment. But we keep discovering them. And we keep discovering people who've done research on it, who we're going to bring in and build it up. I feel we're at the beginning of an enormous journey of uncovering layers of women, certainly in medicine and all the fields that are very strong in this area. Bedford college Ladies College, Sophie Jex Blake, there's an enormous number of women.

I'm curious how you go about the research as well, because as you say, a lot of these people have been almost too well covered. In a sense, how is it you go about researching these people?

Really well, there are quite a few books where there has been the research, but it's pulling it all together from different areas. And we have reached out really to everybody that we can find online and through library research, who's done anything on any Bloomsbury woman in the period 1800 to 1900 so we have restricted it one to Bloomsbury and that 100 years there. So, we're just contacting everybody, having meetings with them and looking at what we will make. We have an exhibition coming and we'll do another performance next year. How can we do this within the budgetary restrictions we have and make a noise and make the women visible and build up an interest of women who lived in the area and worked here and walked on these paving stones that we walk but are not visible? There's no mention of them anywhere except if you really go searching. Why don't we learn about them in school?

Great question. It's funny, the last person that I've interviewed was talking about partition, separation of India and Pakistan, and even the wars that happened that made Bangladesh independent as well. And the first question I said is, 'Why aren't we learning about this?' Why? Why is this the first time that I've personally had to go and look this up to as research for this interview? Why haven't I never really learned about this in school? This seems ridiculous. And this person sat across from me for an hour and spoke to me fully about some of the atrocities that happened. It was the biggest movement of people ever. Why didn't I know that? As a young person in the modern age, how have I not been taught this in my history classes?

Because it's embarrassing to the status quo it seems to me. And the same with women, because the public arena is still seen as a male arena. If a woman's in, she's there. 'Oh, look, we have a woman.' But it's not seen as an equal place for women.

To say that we've only had a woman prime minister in the past few years. Insane. How has it taken this long? It's happened so many times. We can be like, 'Oh, we're all equal now. We sorted it. It is all good. And now you start looking at things. No, come on. We're just not there yet. And so much of that, as we say, is rediscovering the people in the past that have been covered. Until all of that's happened, we can't really say that.

I think it gives confidence to younger women to know that. Not only are we honouring the women themselves, but we're helping the next generation say, 'Look, it's not unusual. This this struggle has been going on for hundreds of years. And you are part of that.'

I was wondering if you had those experiences with the dancers that you worked with. Were there many people that went away and looked at the story and went this is amazing? How did I not know that?

The question with the dancers, the majority of them are young women, and the majority of them don't feel easy using their voices which I find very interesting. Well, one because they're dancers because they're used to using their bodies. But I think there's a lot of young girls are not encouraged to use their voices. There's still a stigma I think about taking the public arena again with your voice. Using the French expression, little girls are told 'Sois jolie et tais-toi.', be pretty and shut up. And that's the question about women's voices, how they should be heard. So, we're training these young women to use their voices and to take space. And you can feel the internal struggle, you can feel their conditioning, which is I mustn't make a noise, or I don't know what to say. And I'm saying, 'No, just speak. Just throw your voice, just allow your voice to emerge.' And so we're finding strategies to deliberate the women in order to become dance theatre performers, as well as not just dancers so that they have a greater employment possibility when they graduate.

You do have a theatre company, you've never said just dance, because otherwise you would be removing that voice element. Theatre is all about people projecting to the people in the back, singing your opinions, having everything out there. as arts can be fairly restrained in that sense. And as soon as you get that voice, it can be imagined massively freeing, in a sense,

That's quite interesting, because the young women often are encouraged to be pretty and to present and the dance also the same thing. So, some of the work we're doing is working with grotesques, and clowning, and showing the human in all capacities rather than just the pretty. I hear myself saying 'too pretty, too pretty' 'Show me something monstrous.' 'Have fun with it.' 'Be a child who's a monster.' So' it's breaking down the boundaries of conditioning of be pretty and certainly the dance world to some extent still has this appearance of flat on prettiness which is a challenge, which in theatre doesn't really happen. It's much more challenging.

Did you say you're working with clowning? Is that the act of being a clown?

Yes. So I get up and clown, and fool around, and make myself look ridiculous so that they can see that I'm not afraid of making a fool of myself. Because to fool around, of course, is what Eleanor Marx did and what children do. You don't care. Do I look pretty? Am I going to be attractive, you don't think about that. You're busy in the action of clowning or performing or trying to make people laugh or do something crazy. So, it's trying to lower the barriers of worry about appearance, and just be a performer or in theatre, you'd say just be an artist. A real artist is someone who can transform and can do anything and be plastic in their movements and be brave and adventurous. And that's really the kind of performer that I want to create.

It's interesting. I was just thinking that some of the most emotionally moved I've been by general entertainment in the past few years has been through sitcoms, which seems very counterintuitive in the sense that it was meant to be funny. You get to know characters, it's meant to be like a very comfort show type of thing, But oftentimes, you get very attached to these characters, and then a very serious issue will come up. And because you're so engaged, you're so with the characters, and you can watch it unfold. That hits a little bit harder in that sense. And that wouldn't work if there wasn't the comedy side to it, as well. It's that light and dark in a sense. I imagine it's similar in the theatre side of it. You need that entertainment side to really make everyone go, 'Oh, no, this is actually fantastic. This is so interesting. This person is so funny. I'm going to go look at them. I'm going to see what they did.' Is this one of the things that she was such a positive light in the sense that she made a lot of progress? But then you can say that progress needs to happen because of a very dark thing that was happening at the time in the sense of the regression of how women were treated, and even in political ideologies, and even economic stances as well. So, it's interesting to hear that from an alternative perspective, going from TV to stage performance, seeing that reflected there as well. It's interesting to hear especially because, as you say, dance tends to be a bit more strict. You think of ballet dancers and very proper.

It's about presenting so you're always showing, which means that you're never really in touch with what's inside. It's rather tangential. It's not the real core of the body and the real core of the energy is not coming out. And I suppose what we're working at is to get that that energy that force, the life force,

Everyone has it.

Everyone has and it is terrifying to some people.

I interviewed someone else last week, and they're also going to be at the Festival, Joy Francis and Patsy Isles are doing a workshop called Activating your Creativity. And it's similar in a sense in that they said everyone has a creative side and you just need to discover it, whether you're coming from a STEM background, which is considered traditionally not very creative, and that's where I come from. But everyone's got that within them. You just need to see it and then suddenly you start discovering all the different things that actually you think creatively about and it's similar in a sense that you kind of need to discover that within yourself and then start expressing it. There's a very creative element, obviously to theatre and even just to dance. And, as soon as you start being able to express yourself, as opposed to being told what to do and being ready to go, and suddenly the character becomes yours. And it's your expression, your creative expression. I think that's the one of the most wonderful things to be able to see. I think you see that in a lot of good actors as well. Some people read the lines, and they go, oh, yeah, this, this and this and that. But then you can see the ones that really take their character, take it to heart, and take their own creative expression on it. As you said, that's their voice. You just need to discover that. So, it's amazing to hear you'd be able to do that with dancers,

Every child has it. So, it's what happens to crush the child, that's the question. What stops it? And so therefore, how do you release that stopper, and let it out? I think it's also about creating a safe space so that the rehearsal room is a safe area where anyone can do anything and nothing is wrong, everything is experimental, and is part of the process, and by experimenting and daring, that's where you learn?

I think so. I hate this phrase. But you do have to fail to learn in a lot of senses. And that's what experimentation in every sense is.

I suppose I try not to be judgmental. So, I'll never say, 'That's wrong.' I'll say, 'Now try that.' 'Do it bigger.' 'And now you're 100 years old, and you're very fat.' find fun strategies to push the performer further, rather than saying that's wrong, and it's failing. I don't use that kind of vocabulary now.

That's kind of experimentation. Yes. Being like, 'Okay, that was interesting. Let's try something slightly different that might be a bit bigger. Let's try and make you express a little bit more, like you say, play some funny characters.

That's right.

Who is the main person that's going to be representing Eleanor Marx.

It's split really between Sophie Max and Amanda Maude. I like the idea of breaking the personality. We are as human beings, we are so complex, we are many personalities. And we have many contradictions. Two of them are Eleanor Marx, and sometimes they disagree with one another, which is quite fun, as we ourselves can disagree with ourselves. So, we have little struggles between the two of them at times. So, there'll be onstage together, always together and also the singer Ruth Getz will be singing the Marseillaise because how do I express revolution on stage was my other question to myself when I was putting the script together, and I thought that the only thing is the song of the Marseillaise, which expresses the French Revolution so to have pure music, running through it at the same time that just filters through as a reminder of what revolution is or the song of revolution. So, I guess there's two Eleanor Marx and then there's a third one, which is the musical Eleanor Marx, at the same time.

Excellent, well, wonderful concepts. It's going to be very interesting to see them like battle it out, in a sense,

All the students also say lines of Eleanor Marx as well so it fragments as well.

Especially in, like you say, half an hour, you've got to make it dense in a sense. It's all very, very snappy.

Yes, very snappy. We've got the audience on two sides. It's in the dining room. Last year we were in St. Pancras Church, and this year, we're in the dining room, I'm quite keen to work in different spaces. That's what's COVID has done for me as a director is to try different areas to bring in new audiences. It's an empty dining room in the Royal National Hotel, the

Windsor Suite, and so audience on two sides. So, the cast are coming down the middle of them. So the audience is involved as well.