

# The Thing about Ballet ...

Oona Doherty's most recent work, "Navy Blue"

By Thomas Hahn

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*In her solos Oona Doherty took the mickey out of gender boundaries without making a style out of it. It just happened. In "Navy Blue" she makes mischief with the genre boundaries of dance.*

It would be something like the dance-world headline of the year: "Oona Doherty has made a ballet!" Though it hasn't quite happened. Or not yet. But the idea is certainly there in "Navy Blue". Ballet would mean the wild woman of Belfast giving up the radical gesture we have come to love her for – from the social realism of her first pieces to the eco-feminism of "Magma". And of course she doesn't stage a classical ensemble, but plays with the idea of a ballet so as to really take it for a ride. Still, the fact that the dancer who once portrayed a Belfast hip-hopper – meaning her roles in "Hope Hunt and the ascension into Lazarus" and "Hard to be soft" – now makes use of Sergei Rachmaninov's 2nd Piano Concerto is a surprise even to her. Her first contact with an ensemble of dancers took place in southern France, where she passed on her solo "Lazarus" to the re-grouped Ballet National de Marseille. Here Doherty's lone struggle from Belfast street life was transformed into a tantalising unisono. Even the word 'ballet' seemed to her, at the time, to come from another, superseded world, as the new directors of the Marseille company recount: "We asked Oona to work with the troupe right after our appointment," said the collective (LA) HORDE (Marine Brutti, Jonathan Debrouwer, Arthur Harel), when they introduced the piece in Marseille. This was during lockdown, and Doherty said hello on a video link from her flat. Her husky voice wasn't due to technical conditions; it was authentic, just like the rough graffiti-covered walls in the background.

*Training instead of touring sets things in motion unexpectedly.*

No dissimulation with Doherty. And (LA)HORDE relate how Oona initially brushed them off: "I don't do classical dance!" Neither does the Ballet National de Marseille, by the way, and this was long before the avant-garde Parisian trio assumed control. The word alone was a shock to Oona, but there was a happy ending: "In the end she came to our office, and we arranged a meeting with the dancers, almost against her will. We were able to convince her to spend an afternoon with the group in the studio. In the end there were tears in her eyes and she said she wanted to do 'Lazarus' with the whole company." It was probably Doherty's first step towards "Navy Blue".

#### Lockdown, motherhood and classical music

Blue is the Mediterranean, blue is the sailor's jacket she bought in Marseille. She even started to make plans to move to Marseille. But her partner was against it, she explains, without much regret in her voice. He's from Sardinia, and would rather

live where it's warm and sunny. Except in Marseille. Says Oona. Although "he hates the weather in Ireland." Oona, on the other hand, would like to stay in Belfast, or its suburb Bangor. "My parents and my brother are there." Who would have thought that the choreographic portraitist of male loners was also a family woman? But at the moment they're on tour almost all the time, or travelling from residency to residency in order to finish "Navy Blue". We have to think about where's the best place for our daughter, Rosaria, to grow up." But it wasn't just motherhood that changed her; the lockdowns played their part too, particularly in relation to ballet. "None of us had jobs any more, and I went to the studio. It was a real relief. I could just dance again, without having to produce anything for other people. And I was back in my home town. I even met my ballet teacher again." It was a return to the past. Because she had leaned ballet as a child, "though not to a professional level." Training instead of touring sets things in motion unexpectedly.

#### Rachmaninoff vs. Jamie xx

"I think everything began during lockdown in the dance studio. I made my first ballet-like attempts to Rachmaninov." And he's had a grip on her ever since. "At first I thought we'd develop the beginning of "Navy Blue" from the piano concerto and then disengage from it and commission a composer. We also tried to dance without music, but it didn't have the firepower. And I felt I wasn't going to get rid of Rachmaninov. The connection was too close." But a composer did appear on the scene, to bring out the atmosphere of the other parts of "Navy Blue" in collaboration with Doherty. He's the electro star Jamie xx, head of the British indie band The xx. He knows his dance ropes from writing the music for Wayne McGregor's "Tree of Codes", danced by McGregor's company and the Paris Opera Ballet in 2019. But for Doherty Jamie didn't deliver his usual electronic club dance music. "I asked him to write something terrifying for one part of the piece, and more cosmic sounds for another part." In other words, a "sound of galactic darkness" meets a text spoken by Doherty and written in collaboration with the writer Bush Moukarzel, who has worked as actor and director in the Berlin Schaubühne and elsewhere.

#### Cosmos and microcosm

"We talk a lot together about the cosmos, something in the sense of Carl Sagan and his pale-blue point, when you look at the world from behind the moon or from the edge of the universe and zoom in on it. It has a lot to do with existential fears that really get to you, which we don't really have the words for." This needs the whole emotional force of Rachmaninov's music, "so sad, so romantic, so despairing and so full of hope." It gives rise to a spiritual dimension in its encounter with dance, the dancers and their fragility. Twelve performers rotate like stars, lay their hands on their hearts or raise their fists, run in circles, give each other comfort, turn to the audience in disarming de-

fencelessness, look up and point to the sky together. Would this choral scenario have come about if Doherty hadn't worked with the group in Marseille?

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Here the ensemble here isn't a classical corps de ballet either, but a colourful microcosm of different bodies and characters. Add to this the fact that in "Navy Blue" the performers have various backgrounds, from hip-hop to contemporary ballet or Ohad Naharin's Gaga technique, and represent different generations, from mid-fifties Amancio Gonzalez Miñon to the young urban and contemporary dancer Andréa Moufounda, from the classically trained Thibaut Eiferman, who ended up in Ohad Naharin's Batsheva, to young contemporary choreographers such as Ausgburg-born Magdalena Öttl or the Norwegian Hilde Ingeborg Sandvold. And then there's Ryan O'Neill, from Belfast, who danced the solos in "Hard to be soft" which Oona then had to take on. "I tailor-made them for him, but then he was no longer available, and the producers practically forced me into dancing myself." In "Navy Blue" she doesn't stick to ballet: "It's a great help that some of them have experience in urban dance."

#### **Getting to love your own dance again**

Nevertheless, she wants to invoke a dance feeling that's different from her previous pieces: "I've never done a super-clean dance, with unisoni and 5-6-7-8 counting. But I want to try."

But she won't just try. The new Doherty is unlikely to throw everything overboard. "Navy Blue" is her first creation for such a large and talented ensemble, and she confesses to feeling overawed by all their brilliant careers. And indirectly to having virtually laid the piece at her interpreters' feet. "The third part's about how we can love our dance again. For dancers who have spent their lives in repertory companies and done a lot of ballet, that's a real challenge." She found out quite a lot about the reality of the dance world in her conversations with them. "Many of them have internalised the principle of having to hurt yourself in order to appear strong on stage."

She wants to make "Navy Blue" into a key piece in her output, and to take time before she considers it finished. "Perhaps this isn't a six- or twelve-week project, but a five-year one," she muses towards the end of a week-long residency at the Centre National de la Danse (CND), sitting by the Canal de l'Ourq and dangling her feet just above the water. There's a brisk wind blowing, and only three minutes walk away stand the newly built Hermès studios, whose former foundation director Catherine Tsékénéis now heads the CND. New challenges may soon be waiting for Doherty too, and not just motherhood. You could almost lay bets on this live wire from Belfast soon attracting the attention of larger theatres, closer to the classical dance culture, looking for fresh, adventurous guest choreographers. It just has to get around that she no longer snaps "I don't do ballet" into her phone when you call her. In relation to "Navy Blue" she's keeping all her doors open: "I guess it's a ballet!" 🗡️

*Übersetzt aus dem Deutschen von Michael Turnbull.*

**Oona Doherty**  
**Navy Blue**

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