



Top: Donlon Dance Collective Berlin in Marguerite Donlon's *Strokes Through the Tail*  
Photo: Todd Rosenberg, courtesy of Dance Salad Festival

Left: Meritxell Aumedes in Ballett des Saarländisches Staatstheater's production of Marguerite Donlon's *Le Sacre du Printemps*  
Photo: Maria-Helena Buckley

Right: Liliana Barros in Ballett des Saarländisches Staatstheater's production of Marguerite Donlon's *Soma*  
Photo: Maria-Helena Buckley

# IN CONVERSATION

Maggie Foyer talks to Irish-born, German-based choreographer and director Marguerite Donlon

The career of Marguerite Donlon, director of Donlon Dance Collective Berlin and the new ballet director at Theater Hagen in Germany, has been a gallop through unconventional routes. When we recently spoke in Houston, Texas, during Dance Salad Festival, Donlon told me how she had come late to ballet. Yet, at 19, she was able to secure a specially created dancer apprentice position with London's Festival Ballet (the precursor to English National Ballet), where she was given a job as dresser to support herself while she waited for a full-time dance contract.

Donlon, whose rich Irish brogue and quirky expressions could give her a second career as a shanachie, an Irish storyteller, admitted, "It was a tricky situation. I was working with dancers trained at the Royal Ballet School and the Paris Opera. If asked where I'd trained, I'd say 'Halifax, in Yorkshire' (which most of them hadn't heard of), 'and before that, in a cowshed in Ireland,' so it wasn't easy."



Then José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane* was taken into the Festival Ballet repertoire.

"This wonderful woman from the Limón company came to do the casting. Peter Schaufuss was cast as the Moor, Johnny Eliassen was Iago, Lynn Seymour was Emilia and I was Desdemona. This was a scandal because Desdemona should have been one of the ballerinas, and some people still weren't sure if I was a dresser or a dancer."

In 1990, Donlon moved to Berlin, where Schaufuss was now director of Deutsche Oper Berlin. "I came in as a soloist and without the history of being the dresser. That was when I started creating."

Choreography, Donlon says, was something she was always drawn to. "As a girl, I did Irish dancing, but I questioned the straight arms. So I added arms and used different music, starting to make little stories."

At school in Longford, Ireland, at the Convent of Mercy, there were no dance classes, but Donlon gathered some friends and created a dance on an Irish story. "I entered it in a competition, the Slógadh, and made it to the All Ireland finals. One of the posh Dublin schools got first place, but we got second. It was a miracle," she says.

"There wasn't a theatre in Longford then, but culture was very important in my family, and my Mum used to help out at the local talent shows. Then this wonderful teacher, Anica Dawson, came to Ireland from South Africa, married an Irish farmer and started teaching ballet in a cowshed. She put an ad in the local paper for children aged four to nine. I rang her, but she said, at 15, I was too old. I begged and in the end she agreed to let me attend."

After the first year, Dawson told her parents that she was talented and needed to go to a proper school. Dorothy Stevens, a visiting Royal Academy examiner, offered to take her on.

"That's when I went to Halifax, to live with this woman and six cats. She made it clear the cats came first, but I owe her everything," Donlon says.

"It was very hard as a teenager starting in Grade 1 with six-year-olds, but I knew it was my only chance. She was tough, telling me I'd never be good enough. In my second year, we had a confrontation. I said, 'Look, Dorothy, I know you mean well but I need somebody to tell me I'm not so terribly bad.' 'Oh my dear, I didn't know,' she said, adding, 'That was how I was trained.' I learned so much from her in those three years."

Still a student, Donlon attended a Festival Ballet workshop in nearby Bradford, and was invited to join company classes. She followed the company to London, working as a dresser during the Christmas season.

In 1991, she presented her first choreography on a joint platform open to dancers from the three Berlin ballet companies: Deutsche Oper (where she was a dancer, and whose own choreographic platform was for men only), Ballet of the Berlin Staatsoper and



Komische Oper Ballet. Donlon trawled the city's Irish pubs looking for Irish musicians and found a bodhran player. The bodhran is the traditional Irish drum sometimes called the heartbeat of Ireland. He and his band joined in and her work, *Celtic Touch*, was a resounding success.

In a unique soundtrack for her piece, *The Last Lifeboat*, Donlon used the looped words, sighs and breath from an interview she conducted with her great aunt, who'd survived the sinking of the Titanic.

Rather than narrative, what interests Donlon is emotion and energy. "I create a body of movement, like an alphabet, and together [with the dancers] we build words. Then it depends how you put them together, at what speed and where you put a comma or a full stop," she says.

"I give a lot of thought and reflection beforehand, and I write and draw. In the studio, I put all that aside and start moving. I'm turned on by the dancers and not the dance. I talk to them about the energy between people and what it feels like. I talk about the movement, the detail that is left behind in the space and the colours that paint the movement."

After the early success of *Celtic Touch*, Donlon knew she still needed to learn a lot and was fortunate to work with many great choreographers at Deutsche Oper. "Jiri Kylian, from NDT [Nederlands Dans Theater] really sparked something in me," she says. "I loved how he managed to bring the best out of people and he has this beautiful manner. I felt like that's how I want to get things out of people. I always loved dancing, for me time just stood still onstage. But, in 2001, at 34, I signed my contract as director at Saarbrücken State Theatre and remained until 2013, also giving my energy to choreographing."

Being a woman choreographer was never an issue for Donlon. "Ireland is quite a matriarchal country," she explains. "Women have a strong position there, and I wasn't engrained with this 'I'm just a woman so that's not my place.'"

This was evidenced in her *Giselle: Reloaded*, nominated for the Prix Benois in 2007, which was set in Ireland. "I didn't want Giselle to be a victim," says Donlon. "There is that moment when she is just about to kill herself and the rest that happens is a dream. Then she comes back to that moment and decides, 'No, I'm not going to kill myself for Albrecht.' That was my way of empowering the woman."

The contribution of her husband, Claas Willeke, whom she met when he was studying jazz in Berlin, was central to her work. "He became a professor of electronics and music theory, and I went on to choreography and directorship. We had this fantastic relationship as composer and choreographer. He also had a very good eye. For me he was kindly critical, the best dramaturg I could ever have. He would simply ask the right questions, leaving me to figure the answers out."

Willeke's death in a 2013 motor accident was a devastating loss: husband, artistic partner and father to their young daughter, all gone. Six months later, finding the studio a safe place, she returned, extending *Shadow*, an earlier work. "I was working with Claas' music and with Sam Auinger,



his colleague. At first, I felt I couldn't do it, then I heard Claas say, 'You will do this. This is what will keep you alive.'"

Donlon's next opportunity came with Minutemade for Dance at Gärtnerplatz in Munich, where she was one of four choreographers given one week each, in turn, to create a new work on the company. Each work had to pick up from the endpoint of the previous week's choreography. Returning to her roots, the result was the high comedy of *Made in Love*, set to a score combining traditional Celtic music with electronic.

Donlon only gave the music to the dancers a few days before the performance. "I knew if I put the Irish music on, they would start being 'skedowdie dowdie' and I didn't want that. Just at the end I said, 'OK, try it now to this.'"

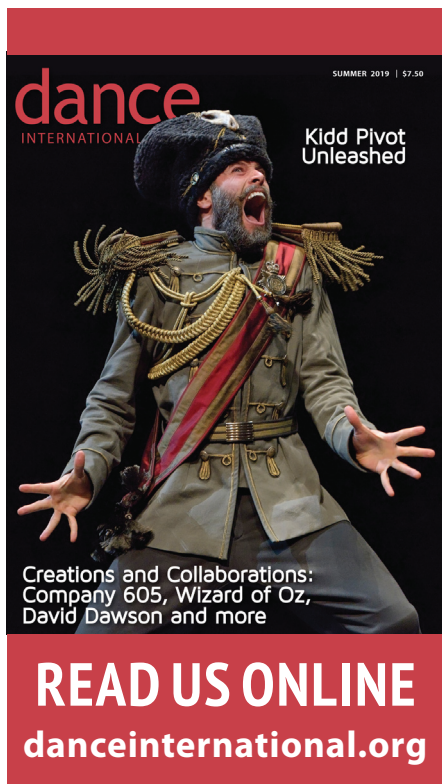
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The work was featured at the 2016 Houston Dance Salad Festival, where Donlon returned this year with *Strokes Through the Tail*, a work for one female and five male dancers.

Choreographed for Donlon Dance Collective, *Strokes Through the Tail* echoes the subtle wit and virtuosity of its Mozart musical setting while displaying Donlon's mastery of comedy, playing on modern themes of cross dressing in contemporary ballet style. Additionally, the work was chosen by Bolshoi ballerina, Svetlana Zakharova, as part of her Amore program, which toured internationally.

"When I put a piece onstage, in a way it represents life, and in every day there's a moment to smile. I know that working with comedy opens people and then you can deliver something even stronger. I guess also being Irish, I can't take things that seriously, otherwise I really would be in the ground. Comedy is a lot harder than drama and it has to feel right, you can't force it," she says.

"The only thing I ever want to be is truly happy, and to feel that I am pushing my limit; not anybody else's image of my limit, but my limit in that moment in time." <sup>01</sup>



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