

Directing and Choreography

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Directing and Choreography

Interview interview with **Roseanna Anderson** Interview and **Joshua Ben-Tovim**

WORD COUNT:2,811



Abstract

Writers, directors, producers, and dancers Roseanna Anderson and Joshua Ben-Tovim speak with the *British Art Studies* editors about choreographing Impermanence's *The Ballet of the Nations*. How did art-historical research enable Impermanence to creatively rearticulate Vernon Lee's 1915 pacifist publication, and to what extent did this shape their collaborative working methods?

Interview

BAS: How did you first become involved with this project?

Joshua: Grace Brockington contacted us because somebody at Bristol University knew about our work. Initially, she wanted a dance company to help her interpret the *The Ballet of the Nations* and perhaps realise it. I had never really interacted with an art historian, and for that first year, each time we met, it felt like she was opening up a whole new way of thinking, looking at things, and remembering. She brought books and different pamphlets with her and gradually we grew more and more enchanted with this world that she was fascinated by.

BAS: So the collaboration started off being very broad and ideas-based. At what point could you imagine the reality of the project? Where you could see the bigger picture and how you might realise it?

Joshua: It crystallised slowly and organically. First, we imagined it as a live performance, perhaps in a gallery space alongside the objects associated with the text. But meeting *British Art Studies* as a potential partner was the real penny drop moment, which pushed us to envision it being hosted online. After that, rather than thinking of our output as a film of a live production, it made more sense to actually conceptualise it as material made specifically for a digital screen.

BAS: Had Impermanence worked in film before?

Roseanna: We have filmed aspects of our work in the past—interviews, or clips of us dancing—but we have never made a film as the core artistic product. The scale of this film was also completely different and new, working with a full film crew and the scale of production that comes with it.

BAS: How did choreographing for film differ from choreographing for a live performance?

Roseanna: I found it really different, because when you're staging something you can't control where a person looks. They're going to focus on wherever they feel drawn to, or watch the whole picture. So right from the start, it felt like an opportunity to decide which details we wanted to bring out in each moment. In some scenes, we were really choreographing with a particular shot in mind, where the cameras would all come into focus on a detail of the movement, and then open back out. Another dimension was how the camera moved, and how that relates to the dancers moving and physically travelling through space. There's one bit where the camera is moving forwards to the dancers, and they move backwards in response. So that was fun to think about—a kind of dance with the camera.

BAS: And were there other models or sources of inspiration—in terms of dancing on camera—that helped you think through this project?

Roseanna: Oh, I like looking at Busby Berkeley films; they're definitely an inspiration (fig. 1).

Joshua: Yeah, there is an amazing framing and logic in the way those old Hollywood films like *Singing in the Rain* show dance. Working on *The Ballet of the Nations*, we were really seeing those big musical numbers and iconic dance sequences in a new way.

Roseanna: And how they use the environment—they use all these different settings, and show how choreography can be really matched to the places where you're filming.



Figure 1

Film still, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, scene choreographed by Busby Berkeley, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, 1933. Digital image courtesy of Granger and Bridgeman Images.

BAS: That's quite interesting, because those big Hollywood films are historic examples. Today, do you feel this film does something quite new in the realm of contemporary dance? Is filmed dance also happening elsewhere, or is the live event still seen as the main way to meet audiences?

Joshua: Filmed dance is happening elsewhere: Daniel Hay Gordon and Eleanor Perry, artists with whom we've worked closely in the past, have made beautiful short experimental dance films over the years. These definitely fed into the way we thought about colour, pace, framing, narrative, and abstraction in our film.

At the same time, at a recent university screening, one of the students said that our film mismatched her expectations, because there is a lot of dance film, or filmed dance, but less made in that older model, which is more akin to a musical, where you've got narratives, a plot, and characters as a base, and then dance intersecting with that. I think there's quite a lot of dance films made where bodies, camera movement, and editing are used to create a "pure aesthetic experience", but which can often feel too polished—like a big expanded selfie!

BAS: It seems that, in this style of film-making, you have an advantage being both choreographer and director, because you can plan the shots in relation to movements and other elements of the narrative. But were there any instances where you felt friction between those two roles?

Roseanna: There's sort of another layer as well, of being dancers in the film! I definitely felt the pull between directing and dancing, and it was quite a challenge to shift my focus back and forth, between performing the sequence and watching the take play back on the monitor, then communicating what choreographic and technical adjustments were needed.... before checking my hair was still in place for the next take!

Joshua: In a sense, we had to give it a logic, which was that the dance follows the directing. We would highlight the mood or themes to be referenced in a section, in relation to the narrative, and the choreography would follow. It would be interesting to rework that directorial structure—to start with the dance and build the film around that.

BAS: Did you split the choreography between you?

Roseanna: We did, and with all the dancers in the film.

Joshua: We were all responsible for different sections, so that when we got into the studio we would bring some material ready, or at least a way of approaching the scene. Then we would each lead our sessions based on what the scene needed to tell, or the world it needed to inhabit. Sometimes it was quite structured, with a leader, but often it was quite fun to play and team up, working together in a very relaxed way and building up movements (fig. 2, fig. 3, fig. 4, fig. 5, fig. 6, and fig. 7).



Figure 2

Ella Margolin, *Behind the scenes of The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, photograph. Alessandro and Tilly work on a sequence inspired by the “excessive machine” in Roger Vadim’s *Barbarella* (1968). An opening discussion among the dancers about the spectacle of violence and the ejaculatory, orgasmic qualities associated with its display was followed by experimentation with the source material. The choreographed sequence, which was ultimately excluded from the film, closely quoted Jane Fonda’s movements and facial expressions as she suffered the euphoric violence of the “Orgasmatron”. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.



Figure 3

Ella Margolin, *Behind the scenes of The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, photograph. Working collaboratively, the dancers construct a series of tableaux, which would come to represent the violence immediately succeeding the destruction of the smallest Nation. Inspired by Rubens’s whirling forms, the dancers created static compositions, working outwards from a central point. In rehearsal, Joshua noted that: “the actions need tension, otherwise they’re just poses”. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.



Figure 4

Ella Margolin, *Behind the scenes of The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, photograph. In chorus costume, Tilly, Joshua, Lenny, and Alessandro work on a series of poses to be interspersed throughout a mechanical Nations sequence. Alessandro, who lead the rehearsal, moulded and positioned the dancers such that their limbs were layered and distorted, echoing and displacing the violence played out between the Nations. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.



Figure 5

Ella Margolin, *Behind the scenes of The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, photograph. Harry works on a routine, choreographed with Roseanna, that expresses elation, freedom, and goodwill. Roseanna choreographed their costumes into the dance as a central element, playing on the buoyancy of the chiffon to amplify the lift of the jumps, and using the floating and fluttering corners of the dress to heighten the flowing quality of the motion. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.



Figure 6

Ella Margolin, *Behind the scenes of The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, photograph. Roseanna leads the choreography of a sequence inspired by the song “We’re in the Money” from Mervyn LeRoy’s film *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933). The dance pays tribute to the pseudo-Grecian illustrations in the text, and incorporates formations quoted directly from found images from the 1920s. Particular attention was paid in this dance to details such as gaze and posture. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.



Figure 7

Ella Margolin, *Behind the scenes of The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, photograph. On the penultimate day of rehearsal, Joshua leads a session in which the dancers consolidate their work. The varying styles and parallel narratives of the film made the choreography difficult to comprehend as a singular unit, so recapping the dances orally and in chronological order served to situate each dance within the wider narrative. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.

BAS: So when did you actually meet the book itself, *The Ballet of Nations*, as an object? Can you remember when you first saw it and whether its aesthetics made an impression on you?

Joshua: Grace brought one of the original copies, with all those beautiful orange-coloured illustrations (fig. 8). It made a big impression on us—it felt like a real artefact, a relic, a rarity that had a special quality. But it was also Grace’s enthusiasm and the magical way she describes that time, the historic moment in which Vernon Lee was writing *The Ballet of The Nations*. It took a few reads to let the gravity of the text really sink in. The language is quite dense, but the completeness of the allegory, which describes the tragic nature of conflict and its roots in the collective unconscious, was so impressive.

Roseanna: We had already been reflecting on Impermanence’s collaborative working methods, and how it’s important to have a specific thing in the middle of a process—so that everyone can respond to something, rather than the central “idea” existing in someone’s head. And all of a sudden, Grace appeared and brought with her this incredible timeless object!

Joshua: Along with Grace, we ended up feeling the film should honour the book as much as possible, and illuminate the book itself, rather than just using it as a departure point. That’s why we kept a lot of the original language in the script. But the story Grace told, about the disjoint between the Maxwell Armfield illustrations and the text—and how Vernon Lee wasn’t enamoured by the original images, claiming that Armfield used it as a vehicle to display his own theatrical practice—gave us permission to riff off the notion of an incomplete book, a not totally representative portrayal of the text. It gave us some freedom in how we approached the film and a sort of agency to display our own techniques and aesthetics, rather than recreating something historical.

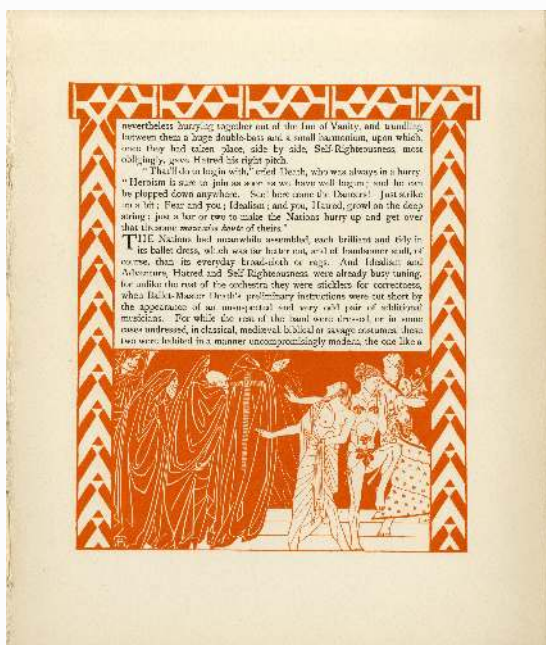


Figure 8

Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality*, with a Pictorial Commentary by Maxwell Ashby Armfield (London: Chatto & Windus, 1915), unpaginated. Illustration design by Maxwell Ashby Armfield. Digital image courtesy of Chatto & Windus, Penguin Random House UK and The Estate of Maxwell Ashby Armfield.

BAS: And how much did the context of the commemorations around the end of the First World War influence your thinking about aesthetic choices in the film?

Joshua: I have felt more and more conflicted about this, because to do this project was also to consider pacifism, which is where this text emerged from. I think sometimes pacifism is taken as a given within liberal artistic communities ... But who is actually a pacifist? What do I think about pacifism? What do *we* think about pacifism? It's a very particular standpoint that often isn't given full examination, but the context and timing of this project made it a brilliant way into thinking about these questions. There is still more mileage in that process for us. There's been such an enormous outpouring of work to commemorate the centenary ... but where does it all fit in relation to the glorification of war, or repainting the memory, or giving beauty to death? I'm really glad we made this film, because all of us had to personally reflect on the First World War and its realities. But it's conflicting and worrying, the amount of beauty and art that's been poured into remembering this awful thing.

BAS: The film ends with a list of all the wars that have taken place since the end of the First World War, a sort of war memorial of its own. When did that idea come about?

Roseanna: That came about in September, during the final weeks of editing. I was thinking about the last sequence, and how to bring it up to the present day. How could we show that this story was from the First World War, and acknowledge our own time, while gesturing to everything in between? We explored adding archival footage but I kept thinking about Vernon Lee's last line "and thus the ballet of the nations is still a-dancing." When we researched and discovered such a long list, it felt like a stark way to point at how the ballet keeps reshaping and reforming itself.

Audiences so far have really responded with shock and horror as it conveys the idea of everything continuing ... which is the foreboding prophecy of the text.

BAS: Is there any specific imagery in the film drawn from Grace's research, and your own research, into the visual culture of the First World War?

Roseanna: There are lots of instances where that visual material influenced the choreography and production. As an example, I found footage of an American training video for the First World War online and transformed the movements happening into choreography for the final dance. That dance happens on a beach and we wanted to use the space, and I wondered how they would travel: what were the pathways? So we structured them around the shape of a military insignia from the era.

At another point, I also went to the British Library and requested weekly war magazines and newspapers from 1915, and it was incredible ... a lot of the sequences I choreographed are influenced by their illustrations. One article was about a tug of war, a game that soldiers played on the home front, and that turned into the red rope sequence. And then we also used this image of a soldier and a woman lighting a cigarette off each other, which was quite a romantic and glamorous picture; it was used as the front cover of a magazine (fig. 9 and fig. 10). I was completely overwhelmed by the marketing being employed and there was something compelling about using this imagery as a historic truth.

Joshua: Grace also brought an incredible amount of visual material to the table. A lot of Margaret Morris' photographs inspired some of the poses and frieze-like movements, in the film (fig. 11). A big part of our role, with the production designer Pam Tait, was to scan volumes of source imagery and then ask, how do we translate this material into something on bodies, in film, in a space, as part of the storyline? It's been an immensely collaborative project and we have always tried to pursue non-hierarchical and collective forms of authorship. The historical context obviously influenced the score, set design, and costumes, as well, and all of those exchanges were incredibly fluid.



Figure 9

L'entente Cordiale, cover design (from an original drawing by J. Abbey) for *The War Pictures Weekly* and *The London Illustrated Weekly*, no. 27, Vol. II, 18 February 1915. Collection of The British Library. Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board.



Figure 10

Impermanence, *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, film still. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.



Figure 11

Two student dancers adopt a symmetrical pose at a summer school run by Margaret Morris and John Duncan Fergusson, 1920s, photograph in David Walker, "The Dancer from the Dance: Margaret Morris," *The Library Time Machine* (blog), Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries Local Studies, 31 January, 2013. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries Local Studies.

Roseanna: The exchange went in both directions, too. The front cover of *The Ballet of the Nations* has this sort of wrestling pose, with the two men, who have snakes around their thighs (fig. 12). And it was when Joshua was researching Eadweard Muybridge's photographs, that he realised that actually Armfield had used a Muybridge photograph as the basis for that illustration — a connection that was new to Grace (fig. 13). That was a really exciting moment, which made us look more into Muybridge's work. And then when we introduce the chorus of dancers, right at the beginning of the film, the camera pulls away and two male dancers are making this pose from the front cover, followed by a series of chorus poses that all build on Muybridge's photographs (fig. 14).

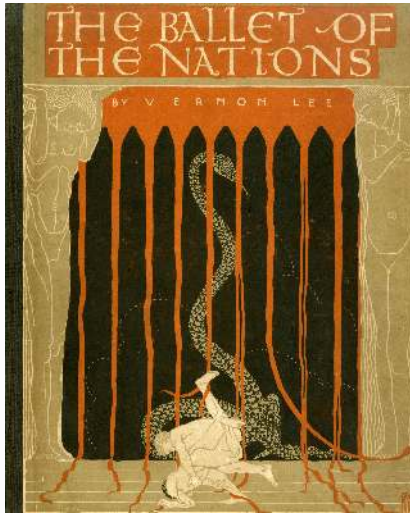


Figure 12

Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality, with a Pictorial Commentary by Maxwell Ashby Armfield* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1915), unpaginated, cover design by Maxwell Ashby Armfield. Digital image courtesy of Chatto & Windus, Penguin Random House UK and The Estate of Maxwell Ashby Armfield.

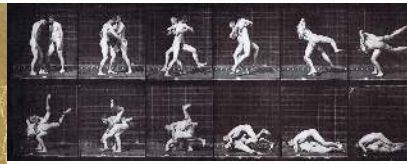


Figure 13

Eadweard Muybridge, *Wrestling; Graeco-Roman*, 1887, collotype process. Plate from Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion: An Electro-photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movement. 1872–1885*, (Philadelphia: Published under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania, 1887) pl. 347.



Figure 14

Impermanence, *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, film still. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.

BAS: Do you feel like this intensely archival and historical research process has changed your overall approach to choreography? Is the feel and style of the dance in this film very different from projects you've done previously—and how much will it influence your future projects?

Joshua: We want to work with an art historian on every project from now on! We often abstract different media into movement, but the quality, quantity, and relevance of the source material available on this project was incredible. In every new project we try to incorporate whatever techniques or skills we have learned previously, but within different parameters. Our last production for instance was in the round, and we thought a lot about foreground, middle ground, and background, and ensuring each moment could be seen from 360 degrees. So, that style of thinking came with us into the film—a lot of it's about the gaze, isn't it?

Roseanna: *The Ballet of the Nations* has broadened the kinds of atmospheres and feelings that we try to evoke with our movements. The idea that the nations are puppets, and replaceable, for example, really influenced sequences where the style of movement is quite stiff. The project also shifted the emphasis from seeking movements that are as challenging to the body as possible, to ones that fluidly convey an idea. It was more about the overall image, and saying "OK, this idea is being articulated right now, and the movement needs to make that as clear as possible." And I think, through the collaboration with *British Art Studies*, it's made us think about how to make our choreography sit more clearly within a narrative, and perhaps become more available to people, which will influence future projects.

BAS: What about communicating your vision as directors to all the various professionals on set? Were you mainly storyboarding?

Joshua: Well, the first thing to say is how incredibly the crew was—they were very supportive and all immensely skilled craftspeople. One of the biggest lessons from this project was realising how specific you need to be when directing a film of this scale. You drill down into incredible levels of detail because you cannot waste time once you're on set. There are so many stages required to arrive at a shot list, which you then divvy up between the days. The person who really guided us through that was Kim Heron, the first assistant director. She does big-scale shoots and chooses one “charity project” a year to support—and that was us! We had an intense month of pre-production preparation, sketching—and resketching, and resketching—where each of the shots would be precisely on location, how they would be framed, and what should occur (fig. 15, fig. 16, fig. 17, fig. 18, fig. 19, and fig. 20).

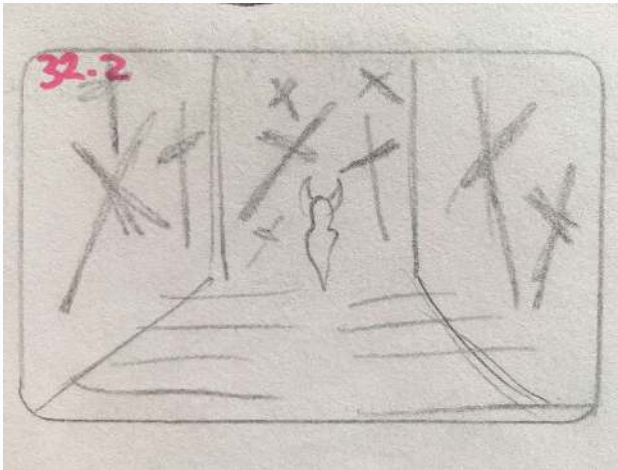


Figure 15

Storyboard frame, *Satan is Revealed in the Sandham Memorial Chapel*, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.



Figure 16

Impermanence, *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, film still. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.

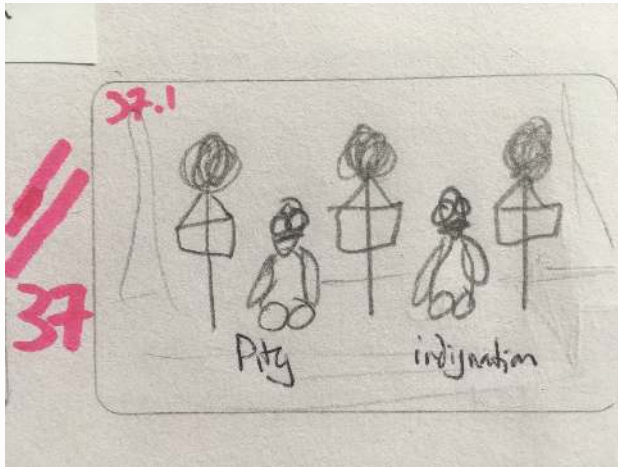


Figure 17

Storyboard frame, *Pity and Indignation Appear Amongst the Audience*, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.



Figure 18

Impermanence, *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, film still. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.

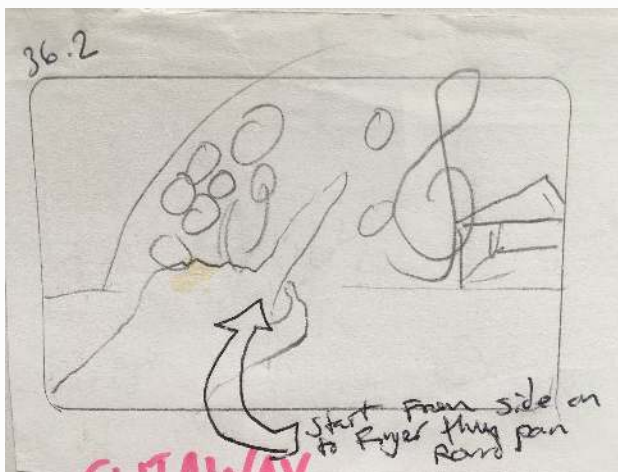


Figure 19

Impermanence, *A Follow Shot Along Satan's Arm as She Points to the Orchestra*, 2018, storyboard frame. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.



Figure 20

Impermanence, *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018, film still. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.

The other thing about the storyboard, which I found really exciting, is that because dance is so physical, to make it up you need a space. Yes, there are stories that Frederick Ashton used to make up ballets in his kitchen, but he could also go into the Royal Ballet studios whenever he wanted! With film, all of a sudden, we could literally storyboard on a train in a notebook. It felt incredibly freeing because you can think very technically, physically, and creatively in the confines of a page. That felt like a great thing to discover.

About the authors

Joshua Ben-Tovim is a dancer, choreographer, director, producer, writer, painter, sculptor, and cook—in that order of emphasis. Alongside running <http://www.impermanence.co.uk> (2011) with Roseanna Anderson, which has been his major occupation since graduating from the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, he has performed with artists Lea Anderson and Jasmina Cibic, as well as teaching at various universities.

Roseanna Anderson started her dance training in Newcastle, Australia going on to study in Dresden, London, and Leeds. As a co-founder of <http://www.impermanence.co.uk> (2011), Roseanna has collaborated with over 100 artists, making performance works for theatres, pubs, festivals, and cabaret bars. In 2018, she choreographed her first opera, a revival of Stanford's *The Travelling Companion*, worked with Clod Ensemble on their show *Placebo*, and set up a monthly cabaret lunch designed to reduce loneliness amongst older people in Bristol.

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