

Cinematography

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Cinematography

Interview interview between **Ella Margolin** Interview and **Jack Offord**

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Abstract

Director of Photography, Jack Offord, talks to Ella Margolin about shooting and lighting Impermanence's *The Ballet of the Nations*. What kind of visual references, from both cinematography and art history, were brought to bear on the palette and lighting of the film? While depicting the staging of a dance, how does *The Ballet of the Nations* also acknowledge that it is itself a highly staged event?

Interview

Ella: How did you first become involved with *The Ballet of the Nations*?

Jack: Joshua and Roseanna invited me to be involved in a film they were making. They emailed some initial materials and we did research and development over two days with members of the creative team Pam, Rob, and Gwenni. Grace was there as well, and she introduced us to Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*; we started thinking about the film we wanted to make. Then, fast forward, I think we did all the pre-production in three weeks before we shot.

Ella: And what did that pre-production involve from the camera perspective?

Jack: Joshua and Roseanna are very used to working collaboratively and they had their own ideas about what they wanted from the film. I felt it was my place to push them away from theatre and into a more cinematic style. In the pre-production, I really tried to tease a shot list out of them. So, Joshua and Roseanna did a storyboard—quite in-depth—which was great. I also asked them to make a colour document—a series of visual references for the colour of the film. They sent back a collection of, I don't know, thirty paintings and sculptures, all completely different to each other. Because the Impermanence style borrows from so many different sources, in the pre-production, I had to distil a visual style out of this absolutely enormous trove of material.

Ella: Pam said a similar thing—that when designing costumes, she was very focused on picking a colour scheme and limiting it.

Jack: Pam did a lot of the work for me in a way, when it came to the colour, because she sent through swatches of all the different materials she used for costumes and I went, “Right, that's our colour palette.” So, we had the colour defined fairly early on in pre-production.

In pre-production, a lot of Joshua and Roseanna's storyboarding was in the style of theatre staging, looking end-on towards a scene because that's what they know; they're theatre makers and they're dancers and the piece itself is theatrically staged in the text, so that made sense. I was trying to develop a bit more of a cinematic take on that idea. Actually, a lot of the creative heavy lifting I did was in the lighting plans and not necessarily in the shot list and the storyboard, partly because we were very ambitious in the amount we wanted to get done in an eight-day shoot.

Ella: Aside from *The Ballet of the Nations*, what sources did you draw on to design the lighting?

Jack: I was looking at very stylised portraits. It's almost a cliché to name painters like Caravaggio and Rembrandt but cinematographers take visual references from artists like them because the lighting is so striking. “Rembrandt lighting” is even a popular term within portrait photography because of the way that he painted the light on his subjects. I've very much gone down the same path to get a dramatic style.

But we also borrowed references from traditional theatre lighting, which is very front-on; from chiaroscuro-style painting, where the light's coming from one direction; and from film lighting where we tend to light from the top or the back. Those three things hopefully tie the film together visually. For example, we lit a lot from the back using what we call short lighting, where the light is on the opposite side of the actor from the camera; we lit a lot from the side; and when we were front lighting, it was in the style of Caravaggio, as if it's by candlelight (fig. 1 and fig. 2).



Figure 1

Filming *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018. Roseanna directs the dancers as they run their second Chorus number. The black box studio heightened the effect of the lighting, with one dancer remarking that the footage looked like a “moving Caravaggi”. The chiaroscuro created by such strong, directed light accentuated the musculature of the dancers, linking back to Maxwell Armfield’s illustrations. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.



Figure 2

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

Ella: Do you find that the filming of the dance changes it?

Jack: As soon as you bring a camera into dance something happens which can’t happen live, which is you’ve got a moveable composition, whereas dance—unless it’s got very clever set design—tends to be all on view all the time. In film, you’re working with a frame, so you have what you see in that frame; what’s going to come next; what you just saw; and what you can hear but is not in the frame. Early on, I said to Joshua and Roseanna, “I really don’t think we should have much steadicam work, I don’t think we should have a roaming, flying, moving eye as a camera.” I didn’t want this to be a showy-offy “this is what the camera can do” project. It was more about, “what are we saying through the individual shots?”

Ella: Because there’s already so much going on in each frame?

Jack: And because there are benefits to not seeing everything. While it’s not strictly fair on the choreography, I think it’s freed up by being translated onto film. You tend to see dance on-screen in music videos or advertising where it’s rarely there to tell a story; it’s more to illustrate an idea or an emotion or something like that, whereas really we’re trying to tell a story through the dance.

Ella: The film is really self-reflective—there are lots of references to the film crew. How did that come about?

Jack: Very early on in the film, we have that shot where the camera starts at a mirror with the gimbal operator, James, pulling back to reveal the space reflected in it. As he moves back, you start to see the room itself, which is a beautiful and vast dance studio. In pre-production, it struck me as a really difficult space to film in, and then I thought maybe this mirror is interesting, and what if we could see the crew in it (fig. 3)? In the film, this is where *The Ballet of the Nations* is staged. I thought it would be interesting to acknowledge this by saying that our film is also a staged event. So, I said “Well, let’s see the crew, why not?”

In the edit, Joshua and Roseanna took that idea and extended it, and started putting in bits of the clapper board or little bloopers and Billy Zane's attempts to pronounce a bit of French, which gave the film a little bit of levity. I think that's the Impermanence style; it's a little bit camp and a little bit silly, even though they're dealing with really dark things.



Figure 3

Filming *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018. Alessandro performs his solo in front of the mirror in Jacobs Wells Baths. The camera crew, lights, and rigging are all visible in this shot of Alessandro's solo, a play on the idea of the ballet as a self-conscious performance, as well as a way of navigating the practical restraints of the space. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.

Ella: And how does that work with the music?

Jack: That's one of my favourite things about the film. It's very moving and there are these beautiful, daft, amazing costumes; with totally overblown dialogue; and high-concept, borderline ridiculous characters, yet it's all underpinned by this totally haunting music. It's nice that those two things exist side by side. Bringing out-takes and deliberate mistakes into the film helps to lift the mood while it also provides very rich, dark images.

Ella: On a practical level, what is the experience of shooting a film like this?

Jack: At this low-budget scale of film-making, everything is determined by practical elements; we couldn't carve out the time or the physical space to do everything we had originally planned without a big budget. With Pam's costume design and the choice of locations, we found a way to work with the practical constraints and not against them. Even down to the beach scene, we chose to shoot at a time of day where the tide would come in during the course of the shoot and that was part of the imagery of the stick crosses falling (fig. 4). Just as in the dance studio, we worked with the giant mirror and not against it. I think anyone who's ever worked on a low-budget production will recognise that fluidity."



Figure 4

Filming *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018. The six core Nations, joined by students from Bath Spa University, perform their final number on Brean Sands, Somerset. The high tide, which was due in at 5pm, was not the only constraint that affected the day's work. The heat, changing light, loud aeroplanes, and dog walkers all slowed the shoot; but because such elements had been factored into the schedule, filming still finished on time. Digital image courtesy of Ella Margolin.

About the authors

Ella Margolin is an undergraduate student of History of Art at the University of Bristol. With a background in Fine Art, her practice includes photography, film-making, ceramics, and drawing. Alongside her studies she makes videos for local musicians, runs a small pottery enterprise called *Loner Ceramics*, and hosts arts events in Bristol under the name *Big Stink*.

Jack Offord is a director of photography with a diverse background spanning theatre and film. He particularly enjoys being involved in the whole creative process, from storyboarding, through production, to colour grading, to create films with intention and depth. His ongoing work includes projects for National Theatre, Bristol Old Vic, and a continuation of his development as a cinematographer through independent films.

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