
Special issue: Legacies of medieval dance

Coda: Interview with Charlotte Ewart

Charlotte Ewart

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Abstract Charlotte Ewart is one of the foremost experts on Medieval and Renaissance choreography. She is trained in classical and contemporary dance, and obtained a BA in History and Dance from the University of Surrey, as well as an MA in Dance from the University of Roehampton. Ewart has taught dancers and actors across all age groups, and is currently an Associate Artist for Historic Royal Palaces and a Lecturer at the University of Chichester. Moreover, she has worked with a wide variety of prestigious universities and organizations, including English Heritage, Bristol, Brunel, Teeside and Cambridge Universities, as well as The National Theatre, Time will Tell Theatre, and The History Channel. This article contains excerpts from an online interview with Ewart that Kathryn Dickason conducted on July 16, 2022.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2023) 14, 621–626.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-023-00283-1>

For photographs and video content related to Ewart's work, see her personal website: <https://charlotteewardance.com> (accessed March 12, 2023).

Tell us about your background in dance and how you became interested in early dance.

I started dancing at a very young age, at about two and a half years old. In the United Kingdom, I was trained in the ISTD [Imperial Society for Teachers of Dancing] syllabus, and I learned ballet, tap, modern, jazz, and



musical theatre. My first university degree was in Dance, and it was a joint degree in Dance and History. At this time, I was not studying dance history, but rather Dance and History as separate disciplines. After graduation I started dancing professionally in [Euro-American] contemporary dance, and also did a postgraduate certificate in Acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Moreover, I was doing a bit of musical theatre as well as modern and contemporary choreography.

A turning point in my career was when I got a job in a company called Past Pleasures. I did performances for them in which I played people from the past. Here I was able to combine my love of history and performance. I also auditioned for an opera by [George Frideric] Handel, and they were looking for baroque dancers. I had never learned dance from a period this early, and most university dance history courses do not cover anything before Louis XIV or even the nineteenth century. I had never envisioned dance before the Romantic ballets *La Sylphide* (1832) or *Giselle* (1841). I did not audition successfully, but through this process I met Barbara Segal, who is a baroque dance specialist. I started taking her classes in the early 2000s, and it was a revelation.

Once exposed to early dance [i.e., dance before the year 1800], I began my own research. I became very interested in the narrative aspect of early dance. And I found that the less information there was [in terms of choreographic notation and other primary sources], the more I was intrigued by the challenge of doing early dance history. I went back to the Medieval and Renaissance periods and found these dances amazing. To me, these premodern dances are so emotive and are a joy to perform and teach.

How would you describe the aesthetic of medieval dance?

One of the reasons I love medieval dance is that I like to challenge people's assumptions. Problematic research from the past has given us a distorted view of medieval dance. However, dance from the medieval period is exciting and colourful. Some of the iconography is even a bit wild, such as masks, animal heads, and acrobatic movements.

I also think that medieval dance was driven by women. By the late fifteenth century and beyond, Western dance became much more patriarchal. So as a woman myself, I find the early period very inspiring.



I also love the narrative aspect of medieval dance. I find that premodern dances were often connected to stories. They were not just about technique, and they inspired so much joy. There is a simplistic side to medieval dance, but it is still very profound. And the narrative component, along with other stylistic aspects, became lost by the fifteenth century. I consider someone like Domenico [da Piacenza, a fifteenth-century Italian dance master] a transitional figure; he is both looking back but also trying to do something new in Renaissance Italy. Later periods of dance are more focused on technique and have less emotion; dance becomes an exercise of the aristocratic mastering of the body.

I think the medieval period is often misunderstood as a dark and impoverished moment in history. But in fact, it was an incredibly vibrant age. And that is reflected in the dance.

What is your choreographic process for devising medieval choreography?

As a choreographer, I work very closely with the music. The music from the Middle Ages can sound very different depending on what instruments you use, the tempo, and the musicians' interpretation. I experiment a lot with musicians, in which we test different instruments and different tempos. I believe that extant music from the Middle Ages gives clues to the steps.

Iconography is also very important to me. Much of the movement depicted is very lively and I find this fascinating. However, I do not consider these images as records of lived experience. Instead, I understand them to be impressions of reality. Art is a creative representation, as is dance. When we are reconstructing dance, it is an experiment; it is experimental archaeology. We are never going to know what medieval European dance actually looked like unless we find a manuscript. But I don't believe that one exists because there was no need to write the dances down. The music and the iconography, combined with the few textual descriptions of dance we have from this period, justify my choreographic decisions.

I should also say that I choreograph for an audience, and particularly a modern audience. I'm not a purist—I believe that we have to make the performance exciting for modern audiences, so there might be compromises that I make. There are dance historians who would disagree with me and would say that we have to strive to be as historically accurate as possible. But I believe that we also have to create something interesting for people to see.



Do you make a distinction between reconstruction and reenactment, as is the case with postmodern-informed dance scholars (e.g. Mark Franko, Ann Hutchinson-Guest) who research early dance?

Yes, but I would also add the terms recreating and reimagining. For me, I use the words reconstruction, recreating, and reimagining interchangeably. I think reenactment is different. For instance, in the United Kingdom, some people have reenactment as a hobby, in which they dress up in period costumes and have a good time. In the United States, people go to Renaissance Fairs. That's not what I do. I don't reenact; I recreate, reimagine, and reconstruct. My choreography involves my own imagination, and is backed up by the sources. Millicent [i.e., Millicent Hodson, a historical dance notator who reconstructed Vaslav Nijinsky's 1913 *Rite of Spring* ballet] said that if you have fifty percent of the information about a dance, then you can reconstruct. This information can be pictures, music, texts, or notation. So, if I already have the music, that's fifty percent. I never tell people that my choreography demonstrates exactly what medieval people did. I do not take an absolutist approach to medieval dance reconstruction.

How do medieval art and iconography factor into your choreographic process?

Two words come to mind: inspiration and justification. Certain gestures and bodily comportment that I find repeated in the images will appear frequently in my dances.

I strongly believe that there was a significant blending of cultures and the influence of the Middle East on the West during this period, particularly because of the Crusades. And these influences took the form of music, fashion, military techniques, and so forth. So why wouldn't there be a choreographic influence? I am doing some research on the Persian whirling dervishes and trance dancing to better understand these influences. I think there is something there that nobody has explored yet.

The iconography is much livelier than people have realized. Images of acrobatics, weaving, and backbending are so interesting. But I will underscore again that these images are inspirations. I am not suggesting that this is how medieval dancers actually moved.



Have you found any medievalist scholars to be particularly helpful for your artistic work?

Nancy Regalado's scholarship is very helpful. She did a lot of work on the *Tournoi de Chauvency* and has looked at the dance-dramas. That really spurred my interest, and it also led me to really question existing interpretations. The musicologist Timothy McGee, and particularly his *Medieval Instrumental Dances*, is useful for me. I also appreciate the wealth of primary sources in Robert Mullally's book *The Carole: A Study of a Medieval Dance*—however, I do not agree with all of his conclusions. Karen Silen's articles on medieval dance are interesting. Mark Franko, a scholar of early modern dance among other things, is also great. And I read a lot of musicologists who work on issues of reconstruction. I am now reading Seeta Chaganti's *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages*.

When we get to the fifteenth century, there is a (slight) explosion of scholarship that is very good. For example, I've read David Wilson, Barbara Sparti, Jennifer Nevile, Julia Sutton, Barbara Ravelhofer, and others. These more recent scholars have helped to debunk erroneous assumptions put forth in early twentieth-century scholarship.

What are some of the most memorable medieval dance performances you have done?

There are two especially memorable works. I was involved with an event called Medieval Music in the Dales, up in Yorkshire. They were very strict that everything had to be pre-fifteenth century. It was primarily a music festival. That was the year I was working on the *estampie* [a popular dance form during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries]. We created a piece based on an Arthurian story and it included five options for what the dance could be. We used five different *estampie* tunes and experimented with different instruments and different ways of playing them. It was great.

The second performance, and the one of which I am most proud, was a Christmas event at the Tower of London. I used three performers, two men and one woman, as was the case with Domenico's original choreography on which this piece was based. This event honored Richard III. I had studied iconography and ended up using masks, including stag masks, and it was danced in the Tower. The performance was hauntingly beautiful.



Tell us about your recent work on the Amazon Prime production *Becoming Elizabeth*.

It's a little later in period, because the series tells the story of Elizabeth I in her younger years. It begins just as Henry VIII has died and Edward is on the throne. It covers political machinations from that period. The 'becoming' part is Elizabeth learning to play the political game. The series also explores the supposed relationship she had with Thomas Seymour. It focuses on her political and sexual awakening.

I did the choreography for two episodes. There are existing choreographic records from the early sixteenth century, so I looked into those sources and tried to incorporate them into my choreography. But I learned that modern directors are not always interested in authenticity. They want the dance to look good. The dance also has to be amenable to being filmed. Dance in television gives a sense of emotion and helps drive the narrative. For example, we have a lot of circling movements to show how Elizabeth was in a fever of emotion. So, it's not an accurate reconstruction, reimagining, or recreation. It's movement with a flavour of history. And you'll never see a dance from beginning to end, because of the editing process. Nevertheless, I was able to insert some historical movements into the choreography.

Early dance scholars and reconstructors might be very frustrated with this result since the dances are not entirely historically accurate. But I realize that you cannot take an actual historical dance and put it on the screen. When you are working in film, you need to create choreography that is part of the narrative and highlights the characters. But I also think there is a need to produce high-quality films of early dance reconstruction. This content can inspire producers to use more medieval dance in television and film.

About the Author

Charlotte Ewart is currently lecturing on Period Movement and Acting in Historical Productions at the University of Chichester. She is also an Associate Artist for Historic Royal Places. She has been involved with several productions for the BBC, including historical documentaries with historian Dr. Lucy Worsley. Recently, Ewart hosted a series of online dance videos on YouTube. Her choreography can now be seen in the Amazon Prime production *Becoming Elizabeth* (2022). e-mail: cjlewart@me.com

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