



# Marlene Millar

Inhabiting cinematic worlds of our making

filmmaker — producer

Interview by David Hinton

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Established dance film creators and mentors, David Hinton (London, UK) and Marlene Millar (Montreal) sit down to discuss what has shaped Marlene's approach to creation and what defines her unique imprint in the dance film genre. Together they shed some light on the practice as they focus in on the crafting of Marlene and Sandy Silva's [migration dance film project series](#).

**David Hinton —** Well, Marlene, I'm a huge admirer of your work. One thing I thought of while watching the films, is that I don't know how you got into dance film, or screendance in the first place, where did you come from?

**Marlene Millar —** Where do I start? [laughing] I was always very passionate about dance. Even when I was studying visual arts and interior design and was working with my brother who is an architect, I was always designing dance or performing arts spaces. From there, I moved into contemporary dance and developed my skills as a performer and choreographer. I was more inspired by real spaces than the stage, so I started videotaping my work in situ — places I couldn't bring an audience to otherwise. I'd look through the lens and compose the space within which I'd perform. So, this was a period of discovery, of creating movement within the confines and possibilities of the frame. I had no film training whatsoever, other than a film studies class I was taking, which I have to say provided a wonderful understanding of film aesthetics, and an understanding of presence and space, particularly, at the time, in films by Antonioni, Varda, and Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*. From there I naturally shifted into studying filmmaking and starting to make films with dance. While watching a performance, I could be transported to another environment in my imagination and see it through extreme close-ups, say, or camera movement engaging with the dance, or, in a completely different space and time. Really adapting dance to screen as one might with a good book or story. I don't know if it's been like that with you as well?

**DH —** Yeah, for me it's been a big journey. I started working with theatrical works and transforming or translating them into screen-works. Now I try to do things that can never exist as theatre, I've become more interested in film itself. But it sounds to me that basically you've got all the different threads of your background that have all come together in your filmmaking. It's like everything you did has made you into the perfect dance filmmaker.

**So how do these films happen? Where do they start?**

**MM —** The approach has evolved from one film to the next. I lay me low was already choreographed, composed and arranged. It was about adapting an existing work. I thought of following pathways and linking it to the waterways, imbuing a sense of journey and capturing the emotional depth of the performance.

And it was such an inspiring process working with Sandy Silva, we decided to keep working together. So yeah, each film has gotten more focused on creating the choreography in a location that has a strong connection to one of our migration themes. We're on our seventh film and it's been an evolution from adapting existing work to creating new work in locations, for and with the camera.

**DH —** Tell me more about the people in the films and the performers. I mean, who are they? They're not all youthful, young dancers, you know, who we are used to seeing in dance films. They're the kind of people that we the viewer can see ourselves represented in. How did that come about?

**MM —** Sandy has a career as a soloist, but when I met her, she had just started working with other performers. The core group are people interested in her approach to body percussion. Some of them come from other forms of percussive dance, some have a passion for rhythm, movement, and or singing. Sandy's like a magnet, you know, that has attracted this multi-generational ensemble from different backgrounds. They're all very creative people, some are professional artists, but they don't all work in the creative field other than in our projects. I just love the mix. Culturally and artistically diverse and multi-generational, it's exciting and inspiring for me to see them work together, creating the soundtrack through their body percussion and vocals. Transposing this to the screen really takes my practice to another level. Some performers have left, others have joined, there are still seven of the original 10 core members.

## “In filmmaking you have to plan to be able to be spontaneous.”

**DH —** The variety of people and the feeling of community, it definitely makes the films so moving and unusual. And of course, the clarity and the precision of the soundtrack, you know, the beauty of the way it's mixed, is such a powerful element in the films.

**MM —** I love the challenge in capturing the nuance in it all, visually and sonically.

**DH —** In navigation you made the weather into a great performer in the *Burren*, in Ireland. Every element in the landscape feels like part of the unknown.

**MM —** Oh yeah, the weather was intense. We'd be putting up tents at 5:00 AM in the torrential rain, then we'd wait for it to stop so we could shoot. We lost one day because we couldn't fly the drone and another day when we were supposed to film with a group of asylum seekers who were associated with the choir. We had really been looking forward to including them in the film, and sadly we had to cancel because of treacherous weather. And the sea! It had never been as wild — it was so rough the days we filmed there.

**DH —** [laughing] I thought you directed the sea so brilliantly!

**MM —** [laughing] Thank you!

**DH —** The ways the waves hit that cliff at the end in relation to where the performers are, it's miraculous.

**MM —** Yeah, it was like a bit of a concerto thing, right? The waves crashing up one after the other.

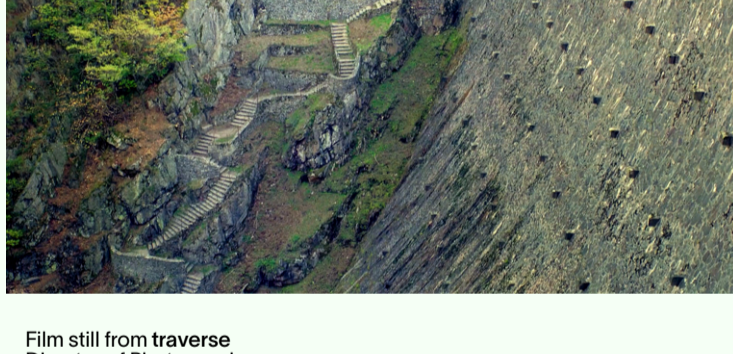
**DH —** It was extraordinary.

**DH —** Another thing I love about the films is just the kind of precision of the shooting. So here I've got to know: do you storyboard it all out very, very carefully before you shoot?

**MM —** Yeah, yeah, definitely. I like to do a lot of the initial sketching out of it myself and then I work with a cinematographer. Some of the setups are super complex. At the ancient dam site in traverse, I really had to figure where the light was going to fall and when. We used photographs of the locations with all the camera placements drawn on, you know, showing how and when we would get all the different angles. I've worked as an editor for many years, so I do find when I'm planning, I'm visualizing the film. I am seeing it in a series of shots and scenes.



Millar's camera placement geographies for filming traverse.



Film still from *Traverse* by Geoffrey Beauchemin (2018).

When I'm teaching, I'm always encouraging people to plan as much as possible. I feel if you have a good plan, you'll have the time to try things out that you might not have thought of until the day of the shoot. There is potential to be surprised. In filmmaking you have to plan. To be able to be spontaneous.

## “Is it the film that's determining the movement, or the movement that's determining the film capture?”

**DH —** Makes so much sense that you've got an editing background. Editing is to me the most choreographic element in filmmaking. I've always said dance and film have this fundamental connection and they're both about giving structure to action.

It's interesting how much of the structure of what we're looking at is going to be created by the editing. I always feel like in your films, you're following the structure that's already there in the performance. Then you shift to another section where the edit is taking you away from real time.

**MM —** With the *Migration* series, I love playing with shifts in time and place, at the same time following the structure they've put in place through the musical composition. I like to recreate and rewrite the action in the writing, then through the editing process. The choreography has become more and more influenced by the filmmaking process and now we've really got it to a nice place where it's a back-and-forth conversation. Is it the film that's determining the movement, or the movement that's determining the film capture?

**DH —** That's why it's so good to be working with the same choreographer over and over again isn't it? Because you develop language and a set of ideas between yourselves, and you can keep moving forward.

**MM —** Yes, absolutely.

**DH —** Now, this next one is going to be like a modern urban world, is that right? As far as I know you haven't done that.

**MM —** That's right. *refuge* will be filmed here in Montreal and explores the individual and collective embodiment of home as refuge. This past year, especially with the pandemic, Sandy and I have been focusing more on working individually with each artist. To connect with the end of navigation, I've been thinking of an opening scene with everybody advancing together into a cityspace, so that sense of arrival is established before we explore each person's personal space. We're finishing our research now and we're hoping for another exploratory shoot before it snows.

**DH —** Can't wait to see how that evolves, and to discuss the magic that went in that creation once it's ready.

**MM —** Yes, [laughing] I'm looking forward to that too, and to seeing you new collaboration with Siobhan Davies, a dance film from still images, I'm intrigued.

**DH —** Always more to discuss [laughing] 'til next time then.

**MM —** 'Til next time, yes. Thanks for the chat, David.

British film director **DAVID HINTON** is a two-time BAFTA award recipient for his documentaries and has also won many awards for his dance films, including a Prix Italia, an Emmy and IMZ Dance Screen Award three times. He is well known in the dance world for *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* and *Strange Fish*, his film versions of stage shows by DV8 Physical Theatre. He has also directed television films with *Adventures in Motion*

Pictures, the Alvin Ailey Company and the Royal Swedish Ballet. He has collaborated with several choreographers — including Matthew Bourne, Rosemary Lee and Siobhan Davies — to create original dance works for the screen and has made several experimental screendance works using archive footage and “found” movement. He teaches dance film workshops all over the world.