

Our Members

Prizewinning Marina Harss

Translator, Critic, Editor

A (very small) subset of dance critics and historians writing in English can legitimately hyphenate their professional identity as ‘critic-translator.’ Marina Harss—a dance critic for print and online publications who speaks and translates from Italian, Spanish, and French—is one. (Her translations of fiction and nonfiction have been published by Farrar Straus & Giroux, Other Press, New York Review Books, and others.) Last spring, Marina’s gifts as a translator were publicly recognized by the French-American and the Florence Gould Foundations, which awarded her the 25th Annual Translation Prize “for superior English translations of French prose [in fiction] published in 2011,” an award of \$10,000, the largest annual award for translation from French prose into English. (Two awardees for nonfiction translation split the prize in that category.) The work for which Marina won is *The Mirador: Dreamed Memories of Irène Némirovsky* by Her Daughter, an “imagined memoir” of the novelist, authored by her younger daughter, Élisabeth Gille. The citation reads: “Written a decade before the publication of *Suite Française* made Irène Némirovsky famous once more, her daughter’s book reveals the ambiguity in Némirovsky’s life and work in a profound and empathetic way.”

In a keen review of the book in *The Harvard Crimson*, James McAuley calls Marina’s a “supple, graceful translation.” What he doesn’t say is that Marina is a Harvard alumna of the comp lit department who also

possesses a master’s in French from NYU—and one of the up-and-coming dance critics of her generation. “I was planning to be an academic,” she explained in her lilting voice one afternoon this past summer, over high tea at an Upper West Side restaurant near her home. “But literary theory got the best of me, and I lost my joy. I wrote a paper on Marie Antoinette and the body politic, in French. It won an award, but I thought, you know, ‘This is complete bullshit.’” At NYU, she attended an informal seminar on translation with the scholar and translator Richard Sieburth. “I really enjoy this,” she realized. She began to translate books from various publishers (she translates about a book a year, in addition to writing reader’s reports of books that are candidates for translation). To supplement the family income (her Italian-born husband, Marco Nisticò, is a professional opera singer, a baritone, specializing in Italian repertory and Mozart), in 1999, she took a job in the checking department of *The New Yorker*, where she was often assigned to fact-check the columns of the magazine’s current dance critic, Joan Acocella.

And so Marina started to attend dance performances. “At first, I’d see what Joan would recommend,” she said, “then I started to develop my own tastes.” Within a year or two, dance for Marina had become an obsession. “I read books, studied videos, audited Lynn [Garafola]’s classes on Balanchine and Russian ballet history [at Barnard College]. I began writing for GOAT [*The New Yorker*’s Goings On About Town section, which

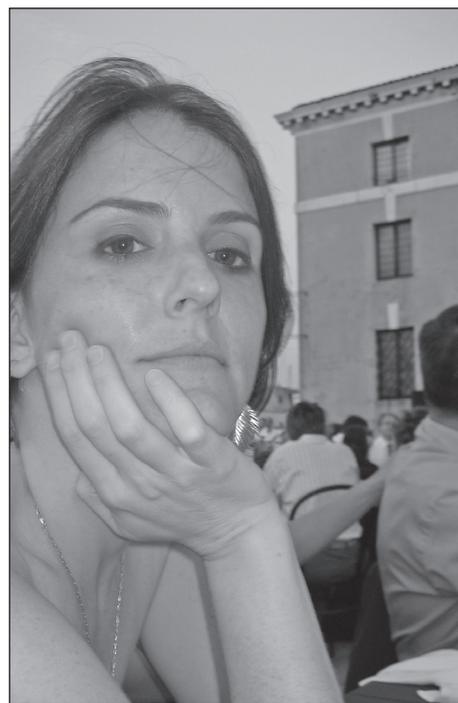


PHOTO: MARCO NISTICO

Translator and dance critic Marina Harss.

contains thumbnail word-sketches of some calendar items] and wrote exclusively there for two years; I treated it like school. I went to see a lot of downtown dance—and [for the GOAT writings] studied advance videos, attended rehearsals, read books [Please see sidebar], built a memory bank. What I found exciting—loved—about Joan’s writing is that you could see the physical action through her words. David Remnick [editor of the magazine] says that she writes about ballet as if it were a boxing match—play by play. Of course, I don’t write like Joan does. As a reviewer, I’m a bit of an autodidact in a way. At first, I didn’t feel I had permission from myself to give opinions; it’s part of my personality not to talk of things I don’t know about.”

After two years, Marina decided she wanted to write more on dance independently, and, to think about doing that, she had coffee with Gia Kourlas, dance editor at *Time Out New York* and a dance critic for *The New York Times*. From this meeting, Marina learned two important things: 1) The principal place now that new dance

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Marina Harss

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writers can write with space is online; and, 2) It takes a long time to have a sufficiently trained eye to write about dance. So Marina began to diversify. For print, she writes about one story a year for *The Nation*, she has written a range of stories for *The Forward*, and now writes regular essays for *DanceView* (based in Washington, D.C.); online, she reviews for *TheFast-erTimes.com* and *DanceTabs* (which replaced the recently folded Web site *dance.co.uk*). Her essays and interviews on dance have appeared as well in *Playbill*, *Flaunt Magazine*, *Pointe*, and *Ballet Review*. And she continues to contribute word-sketches to GOAT, a position she shares with Brian Seibert, who also serves as a dance critic for *The New York Times*. (Many of her published works can be found on her Web site: <http://marinaharss.wordpress.com/>)

To give a glimpse of the independent

sensibility that Marina brings to dance writing, consider her perspective on Argentine tango. Although she was born in Exeter, New Hampshire (her father, himself a literary scholar-critic, novelist, and translator from the Spanish, was teaching at Phillips Exeter Academy at the time), both her parents—opera lovers—are from Argentina. “In my family, tango was looked down on as a nationalist art form dear to the Peróns,” Marina said. “I have sort of an inherited distaste for tango as dance, though I like the tango songs. Gabriel Misse, for instance, I think of more as a milonga dancer—a faster, rougher form that’s more about feet, *terre à terre*, with a lot of wit. More like the early, playful tango songs of Carlos Gardel, a baritone. I like tango songs with lots of words, like the patter in Rossini, and dancing with lots of steps.”

As for dance criticism: “I do believe

in professionalism,” she said, “in gatekeepers, in editors, in fact-checkers—and in people being paid so they can hone their craft. In this sense, we live in a sad time. It’s tragic that someone [at *The Village Voice*] didn’t think that Deborah Jowitt, with that historical memory of dance, was worth keeping. And it’s tragic that once she was let go, she wasn’t replaced by somebody else. It’s tragic that people aren’t being valued and that criticism is valued less and less. What I see are a number of excellent writers with experience and memory who have to write for free online. Look at Tobi Tobias, Nancy Dalva. We’re in a strange moment, because it’s not sustainable: writing for free. And I’m part of it: Most of what I write is for free. I’m compelled to do it, but part of my brain says, ‘Are you stupid?’” ♦

—M.A.

Marina Harss Book-length Translations

The Mirador: Dreamed Memories of Irène Némirovsky by Her Daughter, by Élisabeth Gille, New York, Fall 2011.

—Memoir, translated from French, winner of the 2012 French-American Foundation Translation Prize for fiction.

Two Friends, by Alberto Moravia, Other Press, Fall 2011.

—Novel, translated from Italian.

Been Here a Thousand Years, by Mariolina Venezia, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2009.

—Novel, translated from Italian.

Poem Strip, by Dino Buzzati, New York Review Books Classics, 2009.

—Book-length graphic poem, translated from Italian.

A Week in October, by Elizabeth Subercaseaux, Other Press, 2008.

—Novel (thriller), translated from Spanish.

Conjugal Love, by Alberto Moravia, Other Press, 2007.

—Novella, translated from Italian.

Stories from the City of God, by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Other Press, 2003.

—Short stories and essays, translated from Italian.

For Solo Violin, A Jewish Childhood in Fascist Italy, by Aldo Zargani, Paul Dry Books, 2002.

—Memoir, translated from Italian.