

Going through the pain barrier

London artist Kathleen Herbert has created a new work for the festival which uses sound to access the hidden agony of the ballet. **Nina Caplan** cocks an ear. Portrait **Scott Wishart**

The UK's biggest stage looks even bigger with its wings lopped off. It's so large that the men lurking at the side look short. They also look few and far between, which they are. It's midnight and the only people hanging out on this giant world-famous platform above the rich red curve of the Royal Opera House seats are a very small film crew, artist Kathleen Herbert, a Royal Ballet soloist and me.

It's not a dare, or a party. Herbert has been commissioned by the ROH and *Time Out* to create a work that will show in the foyer during the three-day Deloitte Ignite 09 festival in early September, and for the rest of the year. She has chosen to film a ballerina dancing a short excerpt from 'Swan Lake', but her interest is more aural than visual. Nathalie, the dancer, has a microphone clipped to the neckline of her leotard. Her pants and gulps will strip away the notion so cherished by classical dance that every movement is as effortless as it's graceful. More than any other art form, ballet demands that illusion of ease, and this is what Herbert wants to break down. 'I like the incongruity of sound as opposed to image,' she says. 'I want to give a sense of the physicality of perfection, the strain they put themselves through.'

Herbert, who is 35, lives in London and has been making fascinatingly peculiar video artworks, as well as photographic and sculptural pieces, for at least a decade, doesn't look like an ambitious artist; she has none of the hard-faced hunger of a Tracey Emin, say. In fact she is so nice it's disconcerting. Wearing a white smock, jeans and an uningratiating smile, she could be a mum at the school gates (she had a child last year). She speaks clearly and firmly, but her voice is quiet. Yet her last big project, 'Stable', involved herding horses into Gloucester Cathedral, wiring them for sound and then filming them. The impetus was historical – apparently the cathedral was used as stabling by Roundhead troops during the Civil War – but the results were beautiful, and the echoing clops of all those hooves in that ancient space was haunting. There are several similarities between that project and this, including the historical starting point (Herbert got interested in limelight, a type of 'nineteenth-century stage lighting that had its world premiere here). But now the creature in the monitors is a dancer, warming up as the camera watches silently.

'I thought it was a simple idea but then it turned out to be a massive operation,' Herbert explains.



Speaker my language? Herbert prepares to sonically puncture ballet's idealised veneer

Her last project involved herding horses into Gloucester Cathedral

'You can plan as much as you like but it'll be completely different from how you visualised it. This piece has changed already and when I come to edit it'll change again.' In the finished work, a light will represent Nathalie's viewpoint: she will become the limelight. 'The intention is quite voyeuristic, but not conventionally so,' says Herbert. 'It's meant to tantalise.' It certainly will, although it's hard to imagine the voyeuristic aspect when we hear more than we see. Perhaps a new term will have to be coined: 'auditeuristic', appealing to someone who listens as avidly as a voyeur looks. 'It's very easy to get obsessed with image,' she muses, 'but it takes lots of elements to make something, and I think sound is more powerful. We're so well read visually but there are so many sounds, they get mixed in together, so to separate them out can be quite interesting.'

This attempt to peek behind the artistic illusion is a strike against what Nathalie and her fellow ballerinas try to achieve. You're not supposed to see the tiredness, the pain. But breath is a betrayer. Cover the blisters, smile through the agony – your breathing will give you away. Which is fine, because no one more than a few inches away can hear it. That is the barrier Herbert wants to get past. She's using sound to get at what you're not supposed to see: one artist's work dismantling another's. The man behind the camera, Peter Emery, has shot Herbert's past three projects. 'He understands what I want and makes it happen. Abracadabra!' Herbert says.

Not quite. Two months of preparation and negotiation, two nights of set-up and shooting in a dauntingly cavernous space, then two weeks of editing is a pretty lengthy wave of the magic wand. But Herbert doesn't mind: 'I'm so involved in the process that it's only after, when I see it completed, that I really understand what I'm trying to say,' she says. 'But,' she adds firmly, 'sound is always the most important element.'

Deloitte Ignite 09 runs Sept 4-6; Kathleen Herbert's piece will show in the Link during and after the festival. www.roh.org.uk/deloitteignite