

Dance

Choreographer Oona Doherty on dancing into motherhood

A new generation of dancers are bringing their pregnancies into performances

Laura Cappelle 9 HOURS AGO

Pregnant or not, the Northern Irish choreographer Oona Doherty isn't one to sway gently under soft lighting. In *The Devil*, a dance film she made with Luca Truffarelli for New York's Irish Arts Center, she gets chased, killed and tied up — before emerging naked from a literal bloodbath.

“I was trying to figure out how to do a pregnancy dance film that's not cliché, and I just had this taste for blood,” Doherty says over Zoom from her home in Bangor, near Belfast. She was eight months pregnant when she filmed *The Devil*; now, her nine-week-old daughter Rosaria is in the next room.

The plain-spoken 35-year-old may be one of the few dancer-choreographers to have relished the pandemic. Doherty has been in high demand since the success of 2017's *Hard to Be Soft: A Belfast Prayer* and *The Ascension Into Lazarus*, both visceral explorations of working-class masculinity (and femininity, too). Yet life on tour proved lonely. “I started to have a little bit of a nervous breakdown,” she says. “I needed a break.”



Oona Doherty performing last year © Jane Hobson/Shutterstock

Doherty got her wish, and then some. Described by her as a “transition film”, *The Devil* is a still-rare example of a visibly pregnant performer in the spotlight. Historically, dancers have been expected to bow off the stage at the tiniest hint of a bulge, if not downright discouraged from having children.

Yet social media has brought new visibility to performers who want to share their pregnancies. New York City Ballet’s Ashley Bouder amazed many on Instagram by performing complex fouetté turns days before her due date, and a new generation of dancers and choreographers suggests that there is no incompatibility between pregnancy and challenging roles.

“Curiously, the more I danced and the pregnancy progressed, the better I felt,” says the flamenco star Rocío Molina. In 2018, she staged an entire production, *Grito Pelao*, around her unborn daughter, which she performed until she was seven months pregnant. Molina even says she felt “safest” during the demanding *zapateado* footwork sequences, despite the heavy stomping involved.



Spanish flamenco dancer and choreographer Rocio Molina © Getty Images

Lesbian and queer performers have led the way in crafting new works around pregnancy. In addition to Molina, who discussed her artificial insemination in *Grito Pelao*, Ariel Osterweis, a faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts, created *Re-Hump* as a duo with a pregnant colleague in 2007. “I remember feeling my feminism more fully embodied than I had in the past while dancing for other choreographers,” she says.

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Pregnant characters are rare in existing dance repertoire, or else they are shown in passing, with an arm gracefully draped over a fake bump. One notable exception is Hermione in Christopher Wheeldon's successful adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*, created for the Royal Ballet in 2014. I remember wincing at some of the

choreography's most difficult lifts, which seemed to involve midriff pressure — but perhaps a brave dancer will try them while expecting some day.

Dancers are trained to listen closely to their bodies and make adjustments. “We had to let go of any reliance on sensing stability from ‘the core’ since we were working with a new centre of gravity and basketball-like bellies,” Osterweis says. Maria Kowroski, a principal with New York City Ballet, opted out of a couple of ballets while expecting in 2015, yet found pregnancy freeing in other works and performed well into her second trimester. “Having more weight in front of me actually kept me on my leg a little bit better,” she says of George Balanchine's challenging *Symphony in C*.



The New York City Ballet's Maria Kowroski, pictured in the foreground © New York Times/Redux/eyevine

Yet preconceptions about the level of risk involved still abound. “A few people told us after the performances that they were worried we were going to kill our babies,” Osterweis says.

The Devil was initially supposed to be filmed much earlier in Doherty’s pregnancy, but Covid restrictions forced a change of plans. Since she was a month from her due date, a chase scene became a comedy moment. “We have to make this funny because I look like Mr Bean,” she says. “Being a dancer, losing my strength was hilarious. I couldn't even lift my leg any more.”



Dancers Ariel Osterweis, left, and Lisa Wymore performing 'Re-Hump'

The women I spoke to agreed that pregnancy turned out to be a liberating moment in the regimented life of a professional dancer, citing the freedom from expectations around weight. “For the first time in my performing career, I wasn’t preoccupied by my physical appearance,” Osterweis says. Doherty agrees. “I have [the need to be thin] conditioned in me from dance school. Sometimes thinness is confused with power.”

She admits she felt her career slip away last year. “Being pregnant, with the pandemic and everything, I was starting to accept: oh, it's over, you had a good run.” That’s until choreographer Wayne McGregor, who currently oversees the Venice Dance Biennale, got in touch to say she would be the recipient of the 2021 Silver Lion, which will be officially awarded to her this summer. “So there was this new horizon: I'm going to be a mother and a choreographer,” she says with a still-doubtful laugh.



The Royal Ballet's Ryoichi Hirano and Lauren Cuthbertson in 'The Winter's Tale' © Alastair Muir/Shutterstock

Note the absence of “dancer”. While Doherty is set to return to the stage in Venice, her focus has shifted. “I’ll never be the same dancer as I was before. I don’t mean physically, but the show is not the most important thing to me any more. You need to be at home cooking dinner to balance it out. Otherwise the stage becomes normalised, and then you become a weirdo.”

So after years of freelancing, she set up a Belfast-based company in December, and manages a close-knit team of dancers and staggers. She’s working on her next creation, *Navy Blue*, which is scheduled for 2022. The increased cost of touring post-Brexit is a serious concern, even though Doherty and many of her collaborators have both UK and Irish passports. “It won’t save the set, which is double the price to move now.”

After a year at home, the pendulum has swung back enough for Doherty to look forward to being on stage again. “Now it’s like: remember when I used to be a dancer? All the glamour has come back to it again.”

‘The Devil’ is available to stream from March 30 on [irishartscenter.org](https://www.irishartscenter.org)

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