Move to the music
In *Etudes*, dance meets rock meets opera

BY BYRON WOODS

Choreographer Martha Clarke’s work deals with passions and their consequences.

It’s true of her classic theatrical dance works including *Vienna: Lusthaus* and *The Garden of Villandry* (an early American Dance Festival commission, which the American Ballet Theatre will reconstruct this fall in New York). It’s also true of her recent appearances at ADF—a 2007 reconstruction of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, her staged interpretation of the famous 16th-century Hieronymus Bosch painting, and a startling 2010 commission, *Angel Reapers*, which probed the back stories and cultural psychodynamics of the Shakers of New England. All these works depict people torn between darkness and light, the spirit and the flesh—struggling toward higher ideals while caught in imperfect bodies, in an imperfect world.

In our interview, Clarke stresses that *Etudes for Italy*, a new composition which debuts Monday at Reynolds Theater, is not a fully realized, evening-length work. It couldn’t be, given the time constraints in the Past/Forward student concert, a shared bill with a Twyla Tharp reconstruction and a new work by an upcoming Taiwanese choreographer, Bulareyaung Pagarlava. The title’s the first clue: Clarke’s works here this week are literally études—studies—for a major spring 2012 commission at La Scala, the famous Italian opera in Milan.

That work will be based on the songs of Vasco Rossi, perhaps the most prominent rock songwriter and singer of the last two generations in Italy. The opera’s subject matter deals with an older man’s conflicted attraction to a much younger ballerina. Darkness, meet light again.

The *Indy* spoke with Clarke at the Duke campus on Friday, July 8.

INDEPENDENT: What are the challenges in making a work like this for a major Italian opera house?

CLARKE: What’s really challenging for me is that it’s rock and roll. Rossi’s a good writer, his words are interesting, but his genre of music is not something I’ve ever worked with. I’m a Franz Schubert girl. I’m actually using Bach here, in Durham (laughs).

Some of his songs are like Sting, some are like Men at Work. But the arranger is going to set one song with the influence of Gershwin, another with the influence of Debussy.

There’s no shortage of so-called rock operas in America and England. It sounds like this Italian approach has something different in mind.

It could be wonderful. We’re all trying to bend all of these forms for a major opera house.

Here, I’m working to find a theatrical ambience that’s appropriate for the work. And the piece already has an atmosphere to it.

At this point, it’s kind of like a diorama as if you gutted an apartment building, and were looking into various people’s rooms in mid-activity, viewing various lives in transition. Vasco’s work has an element of voyeurism to it; he writes these love songs about couples who are disappointed, someone who’s angry, somebody who’s a dreamer and dreams of romantic, adolescent love.

So I’m trying to find these people.

Your work is very visual—I know you’re regularly inspired by painters as well as writers. Who do you draw on in a piece like this?

Well, Balbus, of course.

And I’ve been very interested here in mask work. The bodies here look like Picasso, where the image is fractured, given the way I’m using the masks.

I’m working with fragments and reflections, because I think there’s a certain degree of narcissism in love: “Oh, he’s just like me,” or “We’re having the same thought at the same time.” And Colette wrote a lot about the way also when you fall in love, you’re sometimes not at all like yourself. Sometimes it’s a relief when it’s over and you regain your voice. That’s in the novel she wrote in the 1920s, *La Vagabonde*.

The *Etudes* are being set on a group of the most advanced dance students here at the ADF. But your work is just as theatrical as it is choreographic; routinely you work with actors in your professional productions as well as dancers. What’s it like when they encounter your style?

I say now I direct dancers and choreograph on actors, which is true. I think of myself more as a director now than a choreographer, although choreography is my means.
I'm now more interested in human observation and how people interact emotionally—what their stories and impulses are—than I am in looking for interesting movement.

And I'm happy to be attacked on that. That's just who I've become. I've kind of done those making up of lifts and pairings; it's part of who I am, but it isn't where I am.

I love working with dancers, but I really think that subtext, storytelling and the motivation for the movement is what makes the movement interesting. And for many dancers, particularly of the younger generation, this is a challenge.

These dancers haven't been challenged in this way, which can be frustrating for them. When I want total realism with the masks, they can't show off any technique.

I mean, it's fun; you see them begin to discover the joy of working with something so idiosyncratic as masks and seeing what works. But it's not easy; they're not getting that adrenaline kick from their usual movement. They're having to shrink everything, pull back everywhere for this. It's a workshop—just not the one they may have expected.

His initial plans were to create a contemporary work from a traditional men's dance from his aboriginal Paiwan tribe of Eastern Taiwan. “But at the auditions, when I saw these really unique, powerful female dancers, I changed my mind.”

How important is collaboration in your work?

When I was in Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, I danced with (artistic director) Lin Hwai-min for a couple of years. But I needed something more; I wanted it to have more of myself in it.

Then, when I was directing, I noticed I was saying “You can’t do this; do that; don’t do that”—I would be saying a lot of words. And when I asked later, “What is the feeling in that movement?” the dancer said, “I don’t have that feeling; I don’t get it.” But yet, when he started talking about what we were doing, he showed me something about the work I had never seen before.

When I start to create a work, I am always thinking about this, and I open the door to talk with dancers. Because they're not just dancers; the work belongs to them as well. I think it's very important that we share our information, our imagination, our experiences and use them to create something together.

How would you describe the "landscapes" you see your dancers creating in Durham?

They're students, and they're very, very busy in the mornings running, taking classes, dancing, seeing dances. The first section is like that, very rushed; they are painting the scenes of their lives with so many beautiful colors here.

We meet, we talk and get to know each other. And as we share our stories we build some landscapes together, here at ADF. ☛