# Ballet d’Jèrri revives Jersey’s witch trial legacy through dance at neolithic La Hougue Bie



Nestled on the eastern coast of Jersey, Mont Orgueil Castle overlooks the glistening expanse of the sea, a sigh of tranquillity amidst a turbulent past. Constructed in the medieval period, this fortress now stands as a silent witness to the fervent witch hunts that plagued the Channel Islands during the 16th and 17th centuries. William Monter, a historian who studied the period, has labelled the Channel Islands “the witch-hunting capital of Atlantic Europe,” a grim title that reflects the intense social and religious upheaval of the era.

The fascination with Jersey's historical witch trials inspired Carolyn Rose Ramsay to establish Ballet d’Jèrri, the island's contemporary ballet company. Ramsay, a Canadian native and former ballet dancer, has woven local mythology into her artistic vision, drawing on tales of the so-called “witch ledge” and Witches’ Rock, places steeped in folklore. However, these myths were overshadowed by a darker reality: a series of trials that led to the imprisonment and execution of numerous individuals, many of them women. The contrast between the enchanting legends and the grim historical truths encapsulates the dual nature of the witch trials that Ramsay seeks to portray.

In a striking evocation of this history, Ballet d’Jèrri has announced a trilogy of performances premiering from 5 to 15 June 2025 at La Hougue Bie, a neolithic burial site that provides a poignant backdrop for exploring themes of fear, persecution, and resilience. The choreographers—Vidya Patel, Katya Bourvis, and Cecilia Lisa Eliceche—have crafted pieces inspired by real stories of accused witches. Eliceche, who incorporates her own spiritual connections and experiences into her choreography, echoes the sentiment expressed by her counterparts, emphasizing a collective creative drive, “I feel like all the work I’ve been doing was preparation for this.”

Historian Linda Romeril provides context for these artistic explorations, unveiling delicate 16th-century court records that document the fates of those accused of witchcraft. While many victims were women, like the notorious Andree Tourgis, who was executed in 1608 following accusations of infanticide, Romeril reveals that approximately 20% of the accused were men. One such case involved Symon Vauldin, accused of conversing with the devil in animal form; his fate was a grim foretaste of the harsh penalties awaiting the convicted.

The trials were often marred by community rivalries and individual grievances, exacerbated during periods of social turmoil, such as the plague. Women practising alternative medicine often found themselves in the crosshairs, facing allegations of sorcery. For every harrowing tale like that of Jeanne Le Vesconte, executed for alleged harmful acts despite attempts to heal others, there lies another narrative of a life bound up in societal fears and prejudices. Katya Bourvis's piece, entitled "Flux," aims to reclaim the archetype of the witch—symbolising transgression, intuition, and sisterhood—reflecting the struggles women continue to face today amidst contemporary societal norms.

Dr Adam Perchard, dramaturg for Ballet d’Jèrri, highlights the timelessness of themes surrounding the witch trials. "Fear and suspicion of the other, the patriarchy trying to control the masses – is that the 16th century or is it the present day?" he asks, probing the enduring relevance of the trials in today's social media landscape, where accusations can quickly spiral into digital witch hunts.

Public hangings were a common spectacle, taking place at locations now familiar to the island's residents. The last recorded witch trial in Jersey occurred in 1736, but the charged atmosphere surrounding such trials left an indelible mark on the island's collective memory. The overall tally saw 65 trials resulting in 33 executions, alongside numerous banishments and acquittals. In small island communities, the stakes were palpably high; as Romeril notes, "They’re all innocent of witchcraft, but they might not be innocent of other crimes. It’s just not black and white."

In contemporary Jersey, the spectre of witchcraft has transformed from a source of dread to one that intrigues and inspires. The ongoing cultural renaissance addressing these historical injustices is manifested not only in dance and performance but also in other engagements, such as Jersey Heritage's reimagining of the story of Marie Esnouf, another victim of the witch trials, poised to be staged at Mont Orgueil.

As the ballet company prepares for its performances, enthusiasm abounds among the artists, who embrace the complexity of the witch figure in their work. They aim to honour not just the victims of the trials but also to illuminate the rich tapestry of human experience and connection to nature that witchcraft represents in contemporary culture. As Eliceche’s witch’s hat twirls playfully in rehearsals, it becomes a symbol of both enchantment and fateful histories, bridging generations and reviving stories long held silent.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/jun/06/blood-jerseys-witch-hunting-channel-islands-hanged-strangled), [[4]](https://www.itv.com/news/channel/2021-06-02/how-jersey-became-the-witch-hunting-capital-of-europe)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/jun/06/blood-jerseys-witch-hunting-channel-islands-hanged-strangled), [[2]](https://www.ballet.je/whats-on/witch-trials), [[5]](https://www.ballet.je/whats-on)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.jerseyheritage.org/visit/whats-on/marie-esnouf/), [[6]](https://www.jerseyheritage.org/history/witch-trials-in-jersey/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.ballet.je/whats-on/witch-trials), [[5]](https://www.ballet.je/whats-on), [[6]](https://www.jerseyheritage.org/history/witch-trials-in-jersey/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/jun/06/blood-jerseys-witch-hunting-channel-islands-hanged-strangled), [[4]](https://www.itv.com/news/channel/2021-06-02/how-jersey-became-the-witch-hunting-capital-of-europe)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/jun/06/blood-jerseys-witch-hunting-channel-islands-hanged-strangled), [[6]](https://www.jerseyheritage.org/history/witch-trials-in-jersey/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/jun/06/blood-jerseys-witch-hunting-channel-islands-hanged-strangled), [[2]](https://www.ballet.je/whats-on/witch-trials)
* Paragraph 8 – [[2]](https://www.ballet.je/whats-on/witch-trials), [[3]](https://www.jerseyheritage.org/visit/whats-on/marie-esnouf/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/jun/06/blood-jerseys-witch-hunting-channel-islands-hanged-strangled> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ballet.je/whats-on/witch-trials> - Ballet d'Jèrri is presenting a triptych of world premieres inspired by Jersey's historical witch trials. The performances, scheduled from 5 to 15 June 2025 at La Hougue Bie, feature works by choreographers Katya Bourvis, Vidya Patel, and Cecilia Lisa Eliceche. The event aims to explore themes of fear, persecution, and resilience, bringing the past to life through abstract narrative. La Hougue Bie, a significant prehistoric site, serves as a poignant backdrop for this production, highlighting the intersection of myth, history, and movement.
3. <https://www.jerseyheritage.org/visit/whats-on/marie-esnouf/> - Jersey Heritage is hosting a dramatic reimagining of Marie Esnouf's story, a woman accused of witchcraft in 1648. Visitors can encounter Marie's tale within the walls of Mont Orgueil Castle, where she was imprisoned and awaiting trial. The performance runs from 7 April to 13 October 2025, offering insights into the historical context of witchcraft accusations in Jersey. The event provides a chilling glimpse into the past, shedding light on the experiences of those accused during a tumultuous period in the 17th century.
4. <https://www.itv.com/news/channel/2021-06-02/how-jersey-became-the-witch-hunting-capital-of-europe> - ITV News Channel reports on Jersey's history as 'the witch-hunting capital of Europe'. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, with a population of around 10,000, there were at least 65 witch trials, resulting in 33 executions and eight banishments. The trials were influenced by superstition, social tensions, and political upheavals. Accused individuals were often held in Mont Orgueil Castle until their trials, where many were convicted, banished, or let off with warnings. The last recorded witch trial in Jersey took place in 1736.
5. <https://www.ballet.je/whats-on> - Ballet d'Jèrri's 'Witch Trials' is a triptych of world premieres inspired by Jersey's historical witch trials. The performances, scheduled from 5 to 15 June 2025 at La Hougue Bie, feature works by choreographers Katya Bourvis, Vidya Patel, and Cecilia Lisa Eliceche. The event aims to explore themes of fear, persecution, and resilience, bringing the past to life through abstract narrative. La Hougue Bie, a significant prehistoric site, serves as a poignant backdrop for this production, highlighting the intersection of myth, history, and movement.
6. <https://www.jerseyheritage.org/history/witch-trials-in-jersey/> - Jersey Heritage provides an overview of the island's witch trials, detailing the period between the 16th and 18th centuries when accusations of witchcraft led to trials, imprisonments, and executions. The trials were influenced by superstition, social tensions, and political upheavals. Accused individuals were often held in Mont Orgueil Castle until their trials, where many were convicted, banished, or let off with warnings. The last recorded witch trial in Jersey took place in 1736, marking the end of this dark chapter in the island's history.
7. <https://www.jersey.com/inspire-me/inspiration/jerseys-myths-and-legends/> - Visit Jersey explores the island's myths and legends, including its history of witchcraft during the 1600-1700s. The Channel Islands have been described as the witch-hunting capital of Europe. In Jersey, with a population of around 10,000, there were over 60 recorded witch trials that came before the Royal Court. The accused were held at Mont Orgueil Castle until their trials, where many were convicted, banished, or let off with warnings. The article also discusses local folklore, such as the Witches' Stones and Rocqueberg, known as 'Witches' Rock'.