

A'LEVEL DANCE KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

CHRISTOPHER BRUCE

<p><u>Training and background</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christopher Bruce's interest in varied forms of choreography developed early in his career from his own exposure to classical, contemporary and popular dance. Bruce's father who introduced him to dance, believing it could provide a useful career and would help strengthen his legs, damaged by polio. His early training, at the Benson Stage Academy, Scarborough, included ballet, tap and acrobatic dancing - all elements which have emerged in his choreography. At the age of thirteen he attended the Ballet Rambert School and Rambert has provided the most consistent umbrella for his work since. After a brief spell with Walter Gore's London Ballet, he joined Ballet Rambert in 1963 when it was still primarily a classical company. In 1966, under the artistic direction of Norman Morrice, an influential figure on Bruce's career, Rambert reformed and embraced the contemporary influences of the time, adding contemporary works to the classical work it had been producing. In this smaller and more innovative company, Christopher Bruce emerged firstly as one of its leading dancers and, a few years later, as one of its major choreographers - the last to be nurtured by the Company's founder, Marie Rambert. As a dancer, Bruce was recognised as an artist of intense dramatic power and was considered to be one of the best male interpreters of modern dance in Britain. This was revealed in the title roles in Glen Tetley's <i>Pierrot Lunaire</i>, Vaslav Nijinsky's <i>L'Après-midi d'un faune</i> and the poet in his own work <i>Cruel Garden</i>. Christopher Bruce's performing career was largely with Ballet Rambert, with occasional guest performances for other companies. Bruce took on his last major role in 1988, when he was becoming increasingly in demand as a freelance choreographer. A few months after choreographing <i>Swansong</i> (1987) he performed the puppet <i>Petrouchka</i> in Michel Fokine's ballet for London Festival Ballet, but scheduling only allowed him one performance. 	<p><u>Influences</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walter Gore: Bruce briefly performed with Walter Gore's company, <i>London Ballet</i>, in 1963, whilst a student at the Ballet Rambert School in London. Gore was a pupil of Massine and Marie Rambert in the 1930s before becoming one of Ballet Rambert's earliest significant classical choreographers. His influence on Bruce is seen less in classical technique and more in the abstract presentation of social and psychological realism. This can of course be a characteristic of Rambert Ballet's 'house style', post-1966. Norman Morrice: As Associate Artistic Director of Ballet Rambert in 1966, Morrice was interested in exploring contemporary themes and social comment. He was responsible for the company's change in direction to a modern dance company as he introduced Graham technique to be taught alongside ballet. Glen Tetley: Glen Tetley drew on balletic and Graham vocabulary in his pieces, teaching Bruce that 'the motive for the movement comes from the centre of the body ... from this base we use classical ballet as an extension to give wider range and variety of movement'. Tetley's collaborative approach, particularly with Nadine Baylis and John B Read, also influenced Bruce. His early work <i>Living Space</i> (1969) used the same designers. Bruce's preference for minimal stage settings, distinctive costume design and atmospheric lighting can be traced back to this. Anna Sokolow: Anna Sokolow danced for the Martha Graham Company and established a career as a dancer and choreographer starting in the 1930s until her death in 2000. She was a guest choreographer for Ballet Rambert in 1967 and 1970. Her works were socially and politically aware, and often used popular music. Marie Rambert: Marie Rambert instilled in Bruce high standards and emphasised the need for theatricality. <table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="974 1031 1786 1800"> <p><u>Thematic, emotive and often entertaining subject matter</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bruce's works are essentially about ideas. They may not have an obvious story-line and may be episodic in structure, but they generally include dramatic or emotive elements that make an impact on the audience. Works portray recognisable experiences they are deliberately open to multiple interpretations and he leaves his audience thinking about their experience and free to interpret what they have seen. Bruce's work generally develops from an external stimulus - music, paintings or literature (fact, fiction, journalism, prose, poetry or history). Bruce's work often contains an autobiographical element. <i>Rooster</i> (1991) the lifestyle he remembered from the 1960s. A number of works, particularly those choreographed while his own family was growing up, such as <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981), reflect his love of children e.g. peasant boy arms outstretched like an aeroplane whilst he pivots in a circle. There is an unusual level of political, social and ecological awareness in Bruce's choice of subject. <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981) and <i>Swansong</i> (1987) are concerned with political oppression. </td><td data-bbox="1786 1031 2598 1800"> <p><u>Strong connection with design and the aural setting</u></p> <p>Marie Rambert influenced his belief that dance should be independent of music. For many of his early works the electronic score was added when the choreography was almost complete.</p> <p>Bruce gained confidence in using existing music and commissioning original works from Philip Chambon. Since the early 1980s Bruce has also choreographed to popular songs e.g. Rolling Stones for <i>Rooster</i> (1991). Bruce has collaborated closely with designers. On occasion, Bruce has taken the responsibility for the visual aspects of his productions notably <i>Swansong</i> and the Andean setting for <i>Ghost Dances</i>. <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981) South American songs and folk tunes by Inti-Illamani. Played mainly on panpipes, sung in Spanish and accompanied by sounds of the wind. The piece begins with wind effects before the music fades in very quietly.</p> <p><i>Swansong</i> (1987) was specially commissioned by Christopher Bruce for Swansong and was composed by Philip Chambon. The music composed is played by various instruments and is modified using a computer/synthesiser. The electro-acoustic accompaniment includes digitally sampled sounds, vocals, a reed pipe and popular dance rhythms. Unaccompanied interludes (silence) enable us to hear the tapping of feet, as the dancers perform. The silence means that the audience can hear the sound of dancers' movements and breath, the chair and allows the dancer to improvise and feel the mood of the dance freely.</p> </td></tr> </table>	<p><u>Thematic, emotive and often entertaining subject matter</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bruce's works are essentially about ideas. They may not have an obvious story-line and may be episodic in structure, but they generally include dramatic or emotive elements that make an impact on the audience. Works portray recognisable experiences they are deliberately open to multiple interpretations and he leaves his audience thinking about their experience and free to interpret what they have seen. Bruce's work generally develops from an external stimulus - music, paintings or literature (fact, fiction, journalism, prose, poetry or history). Bruce's work often contains an autobiographical element. <i>Rooster</i> (1991) the lifestyle he remembered from the 1960s. A number of works, particularly those choreographed while his own family was growing up, such as <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981), reflect his love of children e.g. peasant boy arms outstretched like an aeroplane whilst he pivots in a circle. There is an unusual level of political, social and ecological awareness in Bruce's choice of subject. <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981) and <i>Swansong</i> (1987) are concerned with political oppression. 	<p><u>Strong connection with design and the aural setting</u></p> <p>Marie Rambert influenced his belief that dance should be independent of music. For many of his early works the electronic score was added when the choreography was almost complete.</p> <p>Bruce gained confidence in using existing music and commissioning original works from Philip Chambon. Since the early 1980s Bruce has also choreographed to popular songs e.g. Rolling Stones for <i>Rooster</i> (1991). Bruce has collaborated closely with designers. On occasion, Bruce has taken the responsibility for the visual aspects of his productions notably <i>Swansong</i> and the Andean setting for <i>Ghost Dances</i>. <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981) South American songs and folk tunes by Inti-Illamani. Played mainly on panpipes, sung in Spanish and accompanied by sounds of the wind. The piece begins with wind effects before the music fades in very quietly.</p> <p><i>Swansong</i> (1987) was specially commissioned by Christopher Bruce for Swansong and was composed by Philip Chambon. The music composed is played by various instruments and is modified using a computer/synthesiser. The electro-acoustic accompaniment includes digitally sampled sounds, vocals, a reed pipe and popular dance rhythms. Unaccompanied interludes (silence) enable us to hear the tapping of feet, as the dancers perform. The silence means that the audience can hear the sound of dancers' movements and breath, the chair and allows the dancer to improvise and feel the mood of the dance freely.</p>
<p><u>Thematic, emotive and often entertaining subject matter</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bruce's works are essentially about ideas. They may not have an obvious story-line and may be episodic in structure, but they generally include dramatic or emotive elements that make an impact on the audience. Works portray recognisable experiences they are deliberately open to multiple interpretations and he leaves his audience thinking about their experience and free to interpret what they have seen. Bruce's work generally develops from an external stimulus - music, paintings or literature (fact, fiction, journalism, prose, poetry or history). Bruce's work often contains an autobiographical element. <i>Rooster</i> (1991) the lifestyle he remembered from the 1960s. A number of works, particularly those choreographed while his own family was growing up, such as <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981), reflect his love of children e.g. peasant boy arms outstretched like an aeroplane whilst he pivots in a circle. There is an unusual level of political, social and ecological awareness in Bruce's choice of subject. <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981) and <i>Swansong</i> (1987) are concerned with political oppression. 	<p><u>Strong connection with design and the aural setting</u></p> <p>Marie Rambert influenced his belief that dance should be independent of music. For many of his early works the electronic score was added when the choreography was almost complete.</p> <p>Bruce gained confidence in using existing music and commissioning original works from Philip Chambon. Since the early 1980s Bruce has also choreographed to popular songs e.g. Rolling Stones for <i>Rooster</i> (1991). Bruce has collaborated closely with designers. On occasion, Bruce has taken the responsibility for the visual aspects of his productions notably <i>Swansong</i> and the Andean setting for <i>Ghost Dances</i>. <i>Ghost Dances</i> (1981) South American songs and folk tunes by Inti-Illamani. Played mainly on panpipes, sung in Spanish and accompanied by sounds of the wind. The piece begins with wind effects before the music fades in very quietly.</p> <p><i>Swansong</i> (1987) was specially commissioned by Christopher Bruce for Swansong and was composed by Philip Chambon. The music composed is played by various instruments and is modified using a computer/synthesiser. The electro-acoustic accompaniment includes digitally sampled sounds, vocals, a reed pipe and popular dance rhythms. Unaccompanied interludes (silence) enable us to hear the tapping of feet, as the dancers perform. The silence means that the audience can hear the sound of dancers' movements and breath, the chair and allows the dancer to improvise and feel the mood of the dance freely.</p>		

Contribution to Rambert

- As a choreographer the variety and experimentation of Ballet Rambert in the 1960s undoubtedly stimulated Christopher Bruce. His experiences with Walter Gore and Marie Rambert exposed him to the use of narrative and character in dance and to the understated yet universal drama of Antony Tudor's choreography, created in the 1930s and still performed by Rambert.
- Bruce created his first work ***George Frideric (1969)*** for Ballet Rambert and created a further twenty works for the Company between then and the end of the 1970s.
- Between **1975 and 1987**, he was first **Associate Director** and then, as he was increasingly in demand internationally as a choreographer, **Associate Choreographer** for Rambert before returning as **Artistic Director in 1994**.
- When Bruce returned to lead the revitalised Company in **1994** he brought with him **a vision of artistic excellence coupled with innovation**. After **two years of regional touring**, Rambert performed a sell-out season at the London Coliseum in July **1996**, the **first opportunity to see the relaunched Company under Bruce's direction**. The season was a great success and the dancers were subsequently awarded the 1997 Laurence Olivier Award for Dance for that season. **Having been associated with Rambert throughout his career Christopher Bruce was ideally placed to take the Company into its 75th anniversary year**.
- Christopher Bruce had a **strong artistic vision for Britain's flagship contemporary dance company** throughout the eight years that he was Artistic Director.
- When the Company had its relaunch in 1994, it was Bruce's intention **to develop a Company that demonstrated Rambert's heritage and ongoing creativity**. Bruce's programming reflected this through the selection of contemporary dance that was and still is unique in its range.
- Rambert still aspires to perform **work** which is **both entertaining and thought-provoking**, through a **programme which ranges from new and experimental to classics from the past, from the minimal in style to spectacular dance theatre**.
- Bruce's position enabled him to **invite renowned guest choreographers like Jiri Kylian, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp and Siobhan Davies to produce and revive works for the Company**.
- Bruce **also provided opportunities for young choreographers** like Mark Baldwin, Jeremy James and Rambert dancer Didy Veldman **to create new works for Rambert**.
- As a dancer whose skills as a choreographer were nurtured by Marie Rambert, Christopher Bruce also recognised the importance of **developing the talent within the Company**. He regularly offered dancers the opportunity to create their own short works, which were **platformed at 'choreographic workshop'** performances in London.
- Rambert Dance Company aims to build on Christopher Bruce's success after eight years as Artistic Director, following his departure in November 2002. Mark Baldwin the new Artistic Director **inherits a company that has both maintained its rich heritage whilst performing a wide repertoire nationally and internationally. In keeping with the Rambert tradition, the nurture of new choreographic talent from within the company will continue**.
- Rambert continues to tour extensively throughout the United Kingdom, giving approximately 80 performances in 15 different venues each year. In addition, the Company undertakes substantial overseas touring including recent visits to Korea, China, Ukraine, Mexico, America and New Zealand as well as performances in Europe.

Characteristics of style

- Bruce **embraces both a classical and contemporary** movement vocabulary. The style draws on both his ballet and Graham technique training and he uses the long extended lines of ballet but with off-balance tilts and attitudes. Balletic movements such as arabesques, attitudes and jetes combine with the low centre of gravity, a spiralling torso and use of off-balance from contemporary dance. He makes use of weight and the floor in deep plies and lunges.
- The phrasing and dynamics of Bruce's choreography are quite distinct. **Stillness contrasts with fluid action** simplicity and stillness juxtaposed with intricate footwork and fast-paced action are evident in his work.
- Bruce uses **motif repetition and accumulation** in his work where he revisits previous scenes as a device for impressing a theme or idea on the viewer. For example in **'Sympathy for the Devil'**, the last section of dance in ***Rooster***, the dancers re-live highlights from the seven previous scenes in the ballet. Similarly in the final victim solo in ***Swansong***, as the victim draws slowly towards his exit, he re-lives images and motifs from his long interrogation.
- Bruce also uses this **symbolic repetition to shape the structure** of many of his works, where specific scenes or images both open and close a work, reinforcing the idea that a story has been told or a journey has been undertaken. For example ***Ghost Dances*** opens and closes with the three ghost figures standing in suspended motion.
- Bruce demands his dancers to have a **strong sense of musicality and characterisation** and places importance on the personal interpretation of a role by a dancer. For example the role of the victim in ***Swansong***, where much of the dance is simple in structure and not over-complex choreographically, leaving the dancers room to add their own interpretation to the work.
- Movement incorporates **popular and folk dance** where appropriate to give his choreography **universality**. Folk elements can be seen in ***Ghost Dances***, where the dancers perform a chain hold places their hands on one another's shoulders. Other dance styles Bruce has used include **tap sequences** in the interrogation scenes in ***Swansong*** and **flamenco** styles in ***Cruel Garden***.
- Bruce aims to give an essence of these styles rather than reproducing them authentically. Creating the feel of a particular style whilst incorporating the greater movement possibilities of contemporary dance techniques. Bruce also uses **recognisable everyday gesture** and movement in his work. Pedestrian movement can be seen evolving into dance, for example in the rooster 'struts' and 'headpecks' performed by the arrogant male characters in ***Rooster***.

choreographic style

- The **blending of Classical Ballet and Graham technique**, to produce a distinctly **British American-influenced contemporary dance style**, with early influences from Walter Gore, Norman Morrice and Glen Tetley.
- **Balletic influences on movement style are evident in the lyrical and fluid use of dynamics**, open chest and back, peripheral gestures, extended lines, elevations and intricate footwork in the action content, as well as recognisable balletic vocabulary and the use of mimetic gesture.

Examples:

Swansong

Ghost Dances

- **Balletic influences in choreographic style are the close relationship between dance and music** also follows the balletic tradition, as it matches the musical structure, phrasing and rhythm. The opening and closing solos of *Swansong*, (1987) illustrate these stylistic features.
- The influence of **Graham technique on movement style is seen in the use of torso contractions, actions that initiate in the centre, flexed feet, off-balance turns, parallel position, floorwork, a sense of weight, particularly through a low centre of gravity and the use of deep plies in 2nd.**

Examples:

Swansong

Ghost Dances

- Choreographically, the **use of motif development as a structuring device** and the **presentation of serious narrative** or emotional themes using **expressionistic or symbolic approaches where the subject is merely hinted at are derived from Graham's influence.**
- There is a particular **fluid quality to a Bruce work, taken from the contrasting use of weight** (elevated vs. heavy) in Graham and Ballet techniques. It can be seen clearly in the graceful yet feral movement style of the Ghosts in *Ghost Dances*, for example.
- **Bruce blends other dance styles** and sources according to the theme, stimulus and music:
 - Jazz, tap, social dances and popular forms usually linked to era/music/theme
 - Folk dance hints in actions such as small heel and toe actions and travelling steps, and in use of dancers in group formations such as leading and following, circles and chains.
 - Pedestrian, everyday gestures

Examples:

Swansong

Ghost Dances

- Bruce uses **motif development, strong symbolic movements and/or repeated images to highlight emotional intensity.**
- His works are often in an **episodic structure**, linked to the thematic or **musical content. They can be cyclical in form, and semi-narrative.**
- He uses a **wide range of musical sources**, working closely with the **music** in terms of **mood, structure, phrasing and theme.**
- Bruce's works **integrate design, music and dance to present universal themes or subjects.** Generally, the **stage is bare and lighting is used to convey mood.**
- Bruce uses a **wide range of stimuli**: poetry, literature, music, newspaper articles, autobiographical and world events. He **often uses more than one stimulus.**
- His **works often express universal themes** (war, love, personal relationships) and can have **multiple layers of meaning or interpretation.**

