

Compare and contrast 'Ghost Dances' and 'Rooster' by Christopher Bruce.

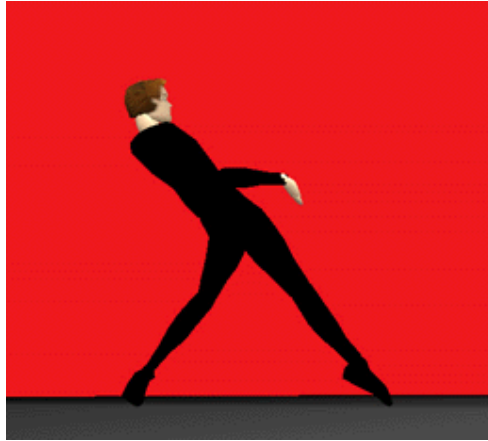
Christopher Bruce was born in 1945 and at the age of 13, he was awarded a scholarship to the Ballet Rambert School. His inspiration to start choreography came after he danced the leading role in Glen Tetley's production 'Pierrot Lunaire' in 1967. His choreographic career has now spanned more than 30 years and he has been hailed as 'The Nureyev of contemporary ballet.' Bruce remained closely related to the Ballet Rambert School, choreographing and dancing for the company until 1987. He continued choreographing for a wide range of companies, including the 'Australian Dance Theatre Cullberg Ballet' the 'English National Ballet,' 'Houston Ballet' and 'London Festival Ballet'. He created 'Ghost Dances' in 1993 for the 'Geneva Ballet Company' and 'Rooster' in 1991, which was an instant hit. He has choreographed for musicals, plays, operas, television and video and he was awarded a C.B.E in the Queen's honours list in 1998.

'Rooster' is an example of a choreographer creating movement which directly links to the musical lyrics; in this case, the dance was inspired by the music of the popular 60's group, 'The Rolling Stones'. When asked what the inspiration was for the creation of 'Rooster' Bruce said that it was his love of the music and nostalgia for the 60's.

'Rooster' is a strong theatrical dance and Bruce has incorporated some elements of commedia dell'arte and clowning in the piece. Others in the same mould include 'The Dream is Over' (1987), using the music of John Lennon and 'Moonshine' using Bob Dylan's renowned style. In stark contrast some of his work contains a political message, for example 'Swansong' and 'Ghost Dances.' In Bruce's own words, the latter came about because 'of the stories that I heard first hand, about the situation in Chile..... I just wanted to make a dance piece which suggested the suffering of the innocent people who got caught up in the violence.' 'Ghost Dances' is Bruce's tribute to the oppressed people of South America.

'Rooster' is a light-hearted piece of dance, yet it contains a certain pathos as it makes reference to isolation and rejection, highlighted by 'As Tears Go By'. It is also a statement perhaps about the way young men treated girls in the 60's and it reflects that time. There is a comparison made between a strutting cockerel and a young man dressed up to go out;

sexual suggestiveness is supported by the animal behaviour of the cockerel.



At the beginning of 'Rooster' only the single, main character can be seen on the simple, barren stage. The silence is broken when the music is gradually faded in. Similarly, there is movement of one dancer only in 'Ghost Dances.' There is no music at the start of the dance either, only the slow drip of a tap, which acts as a beat for the dancers, and the howling of the wind.

The medley of 'Rolling Stones' songs used in 'Rooster' are extremely vibrant and Bruce paid particular attention to the lyrics to form his ideas for the various movements; for example in 'Sympathy for the Devil', he illustrates the words 'pleased to meet you', by the elaborate bows made by the dancers. Similarly, the themes of love, rejection and loneliness are captured in the dances, which relate directly to the words in the songs.

The music used for 'Ghost Dances' is in direct contrast to the heavy pulsating beat of 'Rooster's' rock 'n' roll music. The chilling sound of the tap dripping added to the sharp, angular movements of the dancers introduces the tone of the choreography.

The music which accompanies the folk dancers is typical Chilean music. Pan - pipes and guitars create a South American, Latin feel, This is clearly very different in style from the music used in 'Rooster's' 'Paint it Black', but a similar Latin influence can be seen. However, unlike 'Rooster', the choreography of 'Ghost Dances' is not influenced by the music itself; it is the idea and theme which creates the movement, that of death and overcoming the suffering caused by the political situation in Chile.

A similar choreographic device is used in both dances, in that the main characters are viewed for a few movements in silence before the music fades in. These freeze frames are used for dramatic effect in the first section of both pieces. Neither dance however has elaborate sets because Bruce believes that dancers need plenty of space to perform.

The lone dancer in 'Rooster' begins by performing the 'Rooster strut', a motif used throughout the eight medleys of separate dances in this piece. The quick, sharp movements of the male 'rooster' adjusting his tie and combing his hair, symbolise the main characteristics of the dance; the style is arrogant cocky, and self opinionated. This birdlike characteristic is also present in 'Ghost Dances'. Christopher Bruce describes his Ghosts as having 'hung around for millions of years, lying on rocks, like ...animals. They'd become birds and lizards as well as men.' These animals are symbolic creatures, who are dynamically strong and powerful, acrobatic and alert with sudden movements of stillness giving the impression of listening, like a predator. In contrast, the powerful contracting and relaxing movements of the 'De ad' in 'Ghost Dances' symbolises their hopelessness and isolation in the same way that these feelings are also reflected in 'As Tears Go By.' A similar movement vocabulary and mood is used to express rejection and despair in both pieces.

Lighting is used effectively in both dances; the light for 'Rooster' is dim; only the centre of the stage is lit to highlight the first dancer performing the 'strut'. The blueish tint creates a sensual mood which adds to the charisma of the dance. The lighting for 'Ghost Dances' bears some similarities and adds to the theatrical style and characterisation of the newly -dead passing through a cold, mountainous purgatory, highlighted by the dim green light. Unlike 'Rooster' however ,the mood created is one of mystery and apprehension.

Unlike the undecorated stage of 'Rooster', 'Ghost Dances' has a backdrop of the typical South American countryside. This and the tunes used in the piece, immediately presents the audience with the folk influence on the dance, together with the steps of folk dancing used in conjunction with classical and contemporary dancing. Bruce creates his own folk steps based on general understanding of the folk form; the steps are universal as they are not tied to any specific culture.

In contrast to 'Rooster', which is all on one level 'Ghost Dances' has several rocks on the set providing levels. These rocks are used by the Ghosts to stand on and hide behind.

The costumes for 'Rooster' are simple but effective. They emulate rather than copy exactly the 60's fashion scene. The women wear combinations of black and red which is themed throughout the various costume changes. The black trousers and garish colours of the men's shirts, reflect the dazzling, flashy mood of the swinging 60's. The contrast made by the three masked, grey, skeleton – like ghosts in 'Ghost Dances' is starkly different. I think Bruce wants to represent the fact that people can adopt a different identity behind the screen of a mask and a frightening tension is created by these skeletal figures. The fact the other dancers are dressed in traditional costume that appears worn and old symbolises their distress. The skull-masks cover the full face. They were inspired by photographs of Bolivian masks with hair and feathers attached. The ghost's masks are modelled, painted and textured to suggest the last shred of flesh might be still attached. They have dark, hollow eyeholes. This places an emphasis on the empty sockets while enabling the dancers to see clearly through their masks.

The structure of the two pieces would seem to differ, but each is essentially episodic. 'Rooster' is clearly made up of 8 separate dances, each based on a different Rolling Stone song, but which none -the-less have recurring motifs and movements which link the dances. 'Ghost Dances', which uses six pieces of music (two songs and four other folk tunes), appears to be seamless, one section of dance running into another. Another feature that both dances have in common is the multiplicity of movements in conjunction with one another. At one point in 'Rooster' the audience view early court dance steps like the minuet, (which are repeated in several sections) jiving and slow dancing. Similarly, in 'Ghost Dances' we see the same pattern when large groups are dancing; the use of duets also feature in 'Not fade Away' 'Play with Fire', and 'Ghost Dances'.

Each dance is divided into clear sections. ('Ghost Dances' having eight and 'Rooster' having seven). However, 'Ghost Dances' has more of a narrative feel and flows easily from one section to the next. In both dances, each section has its own story to tell. Both pieces have a powerful female solo. In 'Ghost Dances' the woman runs searchingly, this is repeated in her solos throughout the dance. Facing the audience with arms stretched in front, she jumps back bringing her curved arm up and over her head in a series of movements that are described on the original Benesh score as 'reaching forward hopefully', 'a heart broken sob' and 'symbolically wiping tears from her face'. Similarly in the strong, sorrowful, female performance in 'Rooster's', 'Ruby Tuesday', there is

an emphasis on yearning arabesques and off – balance, turning movements which smoothly propel the dance.

One of the recurring motifs in ‘Rooster’ is the characteristic jumps of the male dancers, which suggests a chicken trying to fly. This emphasises the fact that the men seem to perform the most energetic choreography and that they are continually showing off.

Christopher Bruce’s style is quite distinctive and in both ‘Rooster’ and ‘Ghost Dances’ there is evidence of the slow, controlled movements of classical ballet and the less stylised evocative interpretation of contemporary dance which is often linked to a theme or a message. For the men in both ‘Ghost Dances’ and ‘Rooster’, a similar acrobatic theme can be seen.

The style of the both of these dances relates to a particular theme, that of the arrogant male, typical of the 60’s, reflected in the preening, strutting cockerel of ‘Rooster’ and the purgatorial suffering of the Chilean people in ‘Ghost Dances’ as shown by the inclining of the head from one side to another and the recurring motif of the three ghosts kneeling with arms outstretched across each others shoulders.



Bruce also makes use of strong jumps, leaps and turns, as at the beginning of ‘Ruby Tuesday’ and equally strong leg and arm movements in ‘Ghost Dances’; the latter contrasting with the drooping of the head and arms to symbolise the hopeless situation of the Chilean people.

Effective use is made by Bruce of the cannon device where the dancers follow on after each other as in 'As Tears Go By' or, alternatively one dancer performs a sequence, then is joined by others. This has a very powerful and mesmeric effect when used by the ghosts in 'Ghost Dances', thus emphasising the fluidity of the movement.

Although in his two dances Bruce conveys very different themes, there is a similarity of pattern and movement interpreted and demonstrated by the dancers to create the mood he intended.

The dancing in both of these ballets reveal the nature of the characters. The set positions and stiff upright stance often adopted by the three ghosts in 'Ghost Dances' reveals their strength and power. Similarly, the men in 'Rooster' give the impression that they admire themselves by their continual combing of their hair, adjusting their ties, the stylised posing and brushing specs of dust off their suits.

At the end of the first duet in 'Ghost Dances', two of the ghosts lift up one of the men whose body convulses and then lies still, characterising the suffering and death of many of the Chilean war victims. In contrast is the amusing, light-hearted characterisation of the young men in the 60's. The continual use of character related motifs in both dances also helps to emphasise character traits and expresses their mood and feelings.

Despite the fact that 'Ghost Dances' depicts a moving narrative, I personally prefer 'Rooster.' This is because, like Bruce, I happen to love the pulsating rhythm of 60's music and more particularly, that of the 'Rolling Stones'. I think that 'Rooster' has a greater variety of expression and I find it a far more entertaining theatrical piece of dance. I believe it evokes a feeling of well being in the viewer which I personally think to be an essential aspect and ingredient for a successful dance.

Bibliography:

- [www. Google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk) – Christopher Bruce
- Student notes ‘London Contemporary Dance Theatre.’
- B.B.C programme on the life and works of Christopher Bruce.
- Video of ‘Rooster’ performed by the Geneva Ballet Company.
- Video of ‘Ghost Dances’ performed by Houston Ballet.