

## GCSE Dance Assignment Study

### Christopher Bruce

Christopher Bruce was born in Scarborough in 1946. As a child he caught Polio, so started dancing to strengthen his legs. He started training at 13 years old at the Ballet Rambert School, and then at 17 he joined Ballet Rambert, soon to be acknowledged as one of the most gifted performers of his generation, and remembered particularly for his performances in Glen Tetley's 'Pierrot Lunaire' and 'Cruel Garden'. Bruce was the last major choreographer to have been taught by Dame Marie Rambert.

After his training, Bruce went on to become a famous international dancer and is now known as one of Britain's greatest living choreographers for his ability to create emotional pieces that fill the gap between classical and contemporary dance. Some of his best known pieces include: 'Swansong', 'Cruel Garden', 'Sergeant Early's Dream', 'Rooster', 'Ghost Dances' and 'Moonshine'.

He has received many awards including two Evening Standard Awards for 'Outstanding Artistic Achievement'. This award is a great achievement, with him being the second individual in the dance world to ever receive two. He was also awarded a CBE in 1998 and in 2000 was made an Honorary Doctor of Art by De Montfort University and in 2001 was made an Honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of Exeter.

### 'Ghost Dances'

'Ghost Dances' is one of Christopher Bruce's more-known works. The first performance was in 1981, in Bristol. Ballet Rambert performed the dance, consisting of eleven dancers, 3 ghosts, 8 dead – 3 male, 5 female. The total running time for the dance was thirty-four minutes.

The composer was Nicholas Carr, who worked with samples from Intillimani, and the London Musici Orchestra played the accompaniment.

Christopher Bruce was also the designer. He worked along side Belinda Scarlet and Sarah Mawhinney. Between them they created the beautiful South American background, the ripped costumes of the Dead, and the 'barely-there' costumes of the Ghosts. They also worked with Mark Wheeler, who made the Ghost masks, the John Campbell Studio, who painted the backcloth, and Wig creations, who made the wigs for the dancers. The lighting was designed by Nick Chelton.

'Ghost Dances' is set in the road between life and afterlife, the passageway to the next world. The dead are telling a story about their life before they pass on, sometimes these are happy memories, other times they are sad, or of when they died. The dance is set in South America, telling of the hard lives they have. But this dance also has an

allegory; it tells of the oppression in SA, with simple symbolism and indigenous dance movements to convey the plight of the innocent people down the ages, and their courage in the face of adversity.

### 'Swansong'

'Swansong' is another of Christopher Bruce's more-known works, receiving royalty treatment with a world premiere. This premiere was at the Teatro Arriaga, Bilbao in Spain on the 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1987. The British premiere was shown at the Jersey Opera House shortly after, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1987. The London premier wasn't for another six months, finally being performed at Sadler's Wells Theatre 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1988. Rambert Dance Company then performed it for the first time at the Theatre Royal, Norwich on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1995. The Dance is 32 minutes long.

The music for Swansong was composed by Philip Chambon. The sounds are 'digitally sampled, varied versions of acoustic sounds'. This included pan pipes, vocals, and breaks where the dancers' taps can be heard.

Christopher Bruce was the designer. The stage was bare, like a cell. There is one prop and that is a wooden chair, which becomes intertwined with the prisoner as he uses it to defend himself, as both a weapon and shield. Christopher Bruce also designed the outfits for the dancers. The two guards wore khaki trousers and shirts, and the prisoner wore jeans with a faded red t-shirt.

David Mohr was in charge of lighting. The focal point in the lighting is on the dancers and the chair, and at the end the light is at the side of stage. This gives the impression that he is going to a better place, into the light.

There are just a total of three dancers through out the dance. The English National Ballet video uses the same men used for the world premiere, the British premier and the London premier. Although created for a male cast, it is suitable for anyone to dance.

'Swansong' is set in a blank cell and is about the interrogating of a man by two guards. He is being humiliated and tortured by the two prison guards. At one point, the prisoner is on the chair and the guards put a red nose on him.

### Themes and Outlines

There is an element of similarity as both pieces depict a scene of bullying, depression, where one has a leadership over another, whether it is righteous or not. You do not necessarily find this though, unless you read further into the dances. The first impressions for 'Ghost Dances' are of life after death; what it is like to die and move on. For 'Swansong' they are of a captive being forced into admitting something.

## Different Dance Styles

'Ghost Dances' and 'Swansong' are quite internally different. They both have a balletic contemporary basis, but then are built upon incorporating different styles. 'Ghost dances' includes a folk dance style, with elements from animal and bird movement; whilst 'Swansong' has a mixture of modern jazz, and tap.

## Movement and Content

During 'Ghost Dances' there are a lot of interesting movements which have been derived from the different dance styles added in. My favourite has to be when the ghosts are in a line, place their hands round each others shoulders and they pause. Then their heads and feet turn suddenly to the right. From there they move in an almost Egyptian style. The Ghosts move unlike humans and a lot of their movements actually symbolise creatures. There is a roll on the floor on their backs, looking as though a dog, and another move where they stand on one leg and raise their arms up, as though a bird flying. The Dead's movement is very normal in this respect, dancing as humans would, which also is very native to South America. There is also a high level of elevation, which is exciting as they move gracefully through the air, almost as though a ghost.

In 'Swansong' there are also a lot of interesting moves, but they are less so than 'Ghost Dances' as they are less original. There is some tap content when the guards are interrogating the prisoner; tap-steps and accentuated stamps. When the dancers are dancing together, it is more balletic in style, with arabesques, pirouettes and glissades. There are also some acrobatic moves with handstands and rolls. At the end of this piece, where the prisoner is in the light, he too does a bird like movement, on one leg, arms raised to shoulder level. This links the two pieces even more.

## Accompaniment

Both dances have accompaniment. 'Ghost Dances' has music all the way through and it changes for each individual dance but it keeps to the same type Andean folk music style. At the beginning there isn't a fixed music but a set of random sounds e.g. popping noises. The music was composed by Nicholas Carr and is played live every time by the London Musici Orchestra.

'Swansong' doesn't have much music through it, only at certain point when there is a major change in the dancing e.g. when the victim has been sitting on the chair but then is forced up and pushed so he falls backwards into the arms of a guard. The music is of an

electronic style as it is digitally sampled and varied versions of acoustic sounds and was composed by Philip Chambon.

I think the best accompaniment is the music for 'Ghost Dances' because it flows and sounds nice where as the music for 'Swansong' comes in short bursts and doesn't sound that nice.

## Costume

The costumes for 'Ghost Dances' were obvious costumes to portray their characters; For the Dead, torn, ragged everyday clothes, and for the inhuman Ghosts, who had been dead a while, cloth. The Ghosts also have skeleton masks and painted skeletal bodies.

They also wear torn ragged skirts and have bands, around their top arms, and thick anklets made out of the same material. They also have very scraggy hair, which looks clean and very un-kept. None of the dancers wear anything on their feet. Belinda Scarlet and Sarah Mawhinney designed the costumes along side Christopher Bruce and Mark Wheeler.

In 'Swansong' the guards wear a khaki coloured uniform without any noticeable military design. The prisoner wears jeans and a faded red t-shirt. There isn't any major make up and they look clean and like everyday normal people, only there're not because they're guards and a prisoner. The designer was Christopher Bruce.

I prefer the 'Ghost Dances' costumes because they are more interesting.

## Set

The set for 'Ghost Dances' is a beautiful backdrop depicting a sky and in front of it there is a wall with rocks between the wall and curtain, all at the back off the stage. The set is rather plain but there is plenty of room for dancing so it's suitable. The John Campbell Studio painted the backdrop.

'Swansong' has an even plainer background, as it is just pitch-black darkness, apart from a few lights that focus on the dancers, and a chair. Christopher Bruce controlled the happenings of designing the set.

I'm not sure which background I prefer because the darkness helps you to focus on the dance itself and not its surrounding but then a set is good because it blends and gives more of an idea where the dance is set.

## Lighting

The lighting for 'Ghost Dances' is very moody, dark and superbly fits to the theme. There are sections of the dance where the lights are

lighter but the light is mostly a blue tinge dim light. ▲At the beginning when it is just the dead on the stage, and there isn't any music but the noises, the lights are very dark and very blue but you can still see the dance clearly.

'Swansong' only has a few lights that only stay focused on the dancers. It stays like this although the dance apart from the end, all the lights go out and there is one light from the side quite high up, to indicate a window, and all you can see is just the prisoner walking towards the window, as the rest of the stage is dark so you can't see the guards or chair anymore.

I prefer the lighting in 'Ghost Dances' as it fits extremely well because it's moody and dark and this usually symbolises death. I also prefer it because there is a reason for being as dark as what it is where as 'Swansong', there isn't.

## Reviews and Comments

'Ghost Dances' and 'Swansong' both got good reviews each but one maybe classed better than the other.

Jenny Gilbert, a critic for The Independent newspaper, went to watch 'Swansong' at Sadler's Wells in London, and gave the dance a bad report. For starters she called her article 'this ballet is simply torture' and then continued to say, "Whenever Christopher Bruce's 'Swansong' is on the bill, amnesty is there." ▲Amnesty means a general pardon, so what Jenny is saying is that when you see this dance, there has to be a pardon for it being terrible. I think this is unjust as I enjoyed watching 'Swansong' and the London Evening Standard would agree with me as Edward Thorpe, another critic, had this to say; "Bruce's clever choreography is simply moving because... he shows us the triumph of the human spirit over oppression." 'Swansong' has also been claimed as a modern classic.

'Ghost Dances', has also been classed as a classic only this time a great contemporary classic and has said to be "powerful, atmospheric and very moving" and The Sunday Times said that it is "exhilarating and poignant."

▲After watching both dances, I have come to the conclusion that neither dance is better than the other. 'Ghost Dances' has a range of beautiful and cleverly mastered manoeuvres that make the dance creepy and highly interesting to watch. There is a particular movement that I found highly interesting and fitting to the dance, the three ghosts each put their arms round each others shoulders and straighten them so they are holding the shoulders of the next ghost, standing in a straight line, they all suddenly move very swiftly and smoothly, to the right. It is highly interesting to watch because they perform in unison and they move so straight and swiftly that it fits the style of the dance so well, you have to notice it. It's an extremely creepy move. In 'Swansong' the movements flow better because there aren't as many

jumpy sort of moves and most movements are relaxed. Compared to 'Ghost Dances', 'Swansong' is a calmer dance because although the theme of the dance is more fight and bully picks on victim, the movements are more relaxed and don't start and stop as much as what they do in 'Ghost Dances'. In my opinion, 'Ghost Dances' is the better dance when it comes to these times off moves because if the moves are jumpy and sharp, then that raises more awareness of the audience and they are more alert than if they were watching basically a school fight but with more meaning, because that's what 'Swansong' looks like, the bullies pick on the victim.

'Swansong', I think is the better dance when it comes to the set, stage and background. I like the way that everything is black and there is just a random chair. I like this because it makes the watcher focus more on the dance than the background or what else is happening on the stage. In 'Ghost Dances' the set, background and stage setting are perfect to match the dance but where the background curtain is full of interesting and murky colours, this catches the viewer's attention and their minds could be drawn away from the dance itself and to the background. Also there is a wall and what is meant to be rocks at the back of the stage but where the light is dimmed, the viewer may not be able to tell if the rocks are rocks or bushes, this then could divert the attention of the viewer.

In my opinion, both dances are highly interesting to view and some critics agree but others unfortunately don't.

## Conclusion

My favourite dance would have to be 'Ghost Dances'

In conclusion, 'Ghost Dances' and 'Swansong' are both interesting and moving dances to watch but I prefer 'Ghost Dances' because the movement content and the moves themselves are more emotional and interesting than 'Swansong'. 'Swansong' doesn't have much unison and it's the unison used in 'Ghost Dances' that makes it highly interesting to watch.

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