

# CHRISTOPHER BRUCE'S 'SWANSONG'

A photograph of a male dancer, Christopher Bruce, in a dynamic pose. He is wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and dark blue trousers. His arms are raised and spread wide, and his body is arched back. He is positioned in the center of the frame. To his left, a black wooden chair is visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

DECEMBER 1987



# **'SWANSONG'**

## **BASIC INFORMATION**

### **(CHRISTOPHER BRUCE, 1987 )**

**Choreographer:** Christopher Bruce

**Premiere:** December 8th 1987 (32 mins long)  
(Jersey Opera House)

**Genre/style:** Contemporary inc. tap, ballroom/music hall,  
ballet

**Accompaniment:** Phillip Chambon

**Set/Costumes:** Christopher Bruce

**Lighting:** David Mohr

**Director:** Thomas Grimm

**Company:** English National Ballet

**Movement and Form:** Seven sections interlinked with  
tapped out questions and the exits and entrances of the  
guards (interrogators)

# CONTEXT OF THE WORK AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE:

Swan song is concerned with political oppression. A deliberately disturbing dance showing a victim being tortured by a variety of means. It shows both the aggressive and sadistic element of interrogation and how brainwashing, humiliation and playing with emotions may all be part of a long, nerve wracking game.

Swansong is all about hooliganism amongst corrupt authorities, about the injustice towards the defenceless.

The guards end of as losers as they beat up the prisoner and are left looking at the chair where the dead body must be imagined. The victim's spirit escapes and is free at last.

Bruce uses different popular dance styles to sinister effect. The interrogators perform tap routines to indicate the questioning of the victim, and to allow him to join in and dance with them.

The dance was originally created for three males, but has been performed since with a mix of genders.

# **SOURCES OF INSPIRATION:**

- **A novel by Oriana Fallaci – ‘A Man’ which describes the torture of a hero, that was condemned to death in 1968 for the attempted assassination of a Greek dictator. Saved from death he spends three and a half years in a tomb like cell. He describes his interrogation and torture in the book.**
- **A collage of ideas creating several possible narratives.**
- **A prisoner of conscience.**
- **Experiences of the Chilean poet Victor Jara under the ‘Junta’ of the 1970’s (on which ‘Ghost Dances’ is also based).**

# IDEAS BEHIND THE TITLE:

- The swan is often used to represent death in other ballets i.e 'Swan Lake', 'The Dying Swan'.
- In the dictionary there are two different definitions for 'Swansong':  
a persons last work or act before death or retirement etc.  
a song like that fabled to be sung by a dying swan.  
(the swan only sings at the point of death)
- A poem about a swans final song before death:-  
*The Silver Swan*  
*The silver swan, who living has no note,*  
*When death approached unlocked her silent throat,*  
*Leaning her breast against a reedy shore,*  
*Thus sung her first and last and sung no more;*  
*Farewell all joys, O death come close mine eyes,*  
*More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.*  
Anon c.1600

# OTHER FEATURES:

## DANCE STYLES USED:

- Tap – the questions and answers
- Ballet – In the dances lyricism, arabesques, attitudes & jetes etc.
- Social dance – soft shoe/tango style performed by the guards.
- Contemporary – low centre of gravity in the solos, deep plies, spiraling torso and off balance positions.

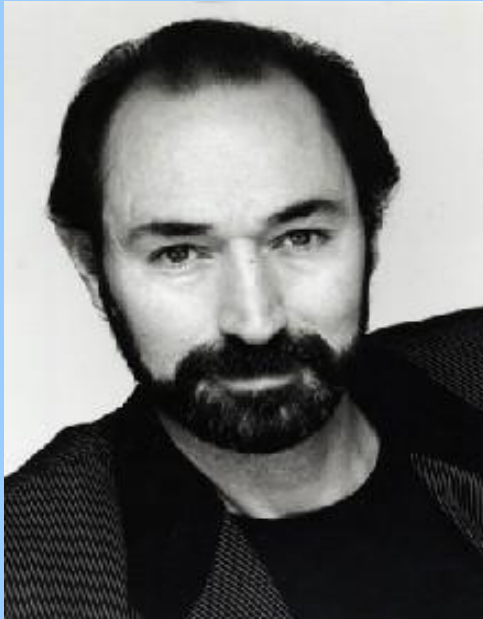
## MUSIC:

- Composed by Phillip Chambon in tandem with the choreography.
- Interludes between each section are unaccompanied to hear the tapping and increase the tension.
- Solos have a more lyrical sound and include reed pipe music and electro acoustic sounds.
- One of the solos is performed in silence.

## OTHER POINTS:

- Performed in a theatrical setting.
- A narrative piece of work.

# CHRISTOPHER BRUCE- A BRIEF HISTORY AND GENERAL FEATURES OF HIS WORK



- Bruce was born in Leicester in 1945.
- He trained at the Ballet Rambert School, which he later choreographed for.
- He then became choreographer for English National Ballet, then Houston Ballet.
- Bruce is now Artistic Director of Rambert.
- Bruce prefers an audience to keep an open mind about his works, often avoiding programme notes and specific statements. However, he does recognize that his pieces are concerned with ideas rather than being abstract pieces of dance, there is usually strong imagery.
- Some of his works have an autobiographical element
- Several of Bruce's works express his political, social and ecological awareness.
- His dances generally develop from a stimulus such as music, painting or literature, but he selects themes which can be conveyed through dance.
- Bruce chooses a wide range of music, from popular songs, world music, classical, contemporary, to specially commissioned scores in close collaboration with the composers. The dance often responds closely to the music.
- The design is an extremely important contributing factor to the whole, but Bruce is concerned that any stage setting does not intrude into the dance space and that the costumes allow for freedom of movement. He works closely with designers and sometimes creates his own designs. Lighting is always also significant.
- Bruce uses a blend of dance techniques, notably ballet and contemporary. His own contemporary training was in Martha Graham technique and strong use of the back and a low centre of gravity are important elements in his choreography. In addition dependent on the work he is researching, he uses another technique. He aims to give an essence of these styles rather than reproducing them authentically.
- He sometimes uses 'everyday' movements, such as gesture incorporated in to the choreography.



# SECTION 1 - QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

- Introduction of interrogation theme.
- Reference to vaudeville and tap dance styles and steps.
- Movements of pushing, pulling, balancing and lifting between interrogators and victim.
- Use of chair to balance the victim's weight.
- Question and answer sequences with foot tapping



# SECTION 2 - TEA FOR TWO

- Interrogators put on hats, red nose is fastened on victim.
- Movements drawn from ballroom dance with a syncopated rhythm echoed in the music.
- Victim is forced to imitate interrogators' movements.
- Interrogators' attitude to victim shifts to extremes, e.g physical violence followed by indulgence.

# SECTION 3 - FIRST SOLO FOR THE VICTIM

- Slow and lyrical movements and music. Extended body line, arabesques, leaps.
- Victim moves along diagonal line within the shaft of light from the source, upstage left.

# SECTION 4 - SLOW TRIO

- Interaction between all three dancers with use of body weight transference and flow.
- Use of body contact to maneuver and lift.
- Chair used as a prop throughout the sequence.



# SECTION 5 - SECOND SOLO

- Solo for the victim, performed without accompaniment.
- Movements are slow, long and sustained.
- Chair is used in a variety of ways.

# SECTION 6 - CANE DANCE

- Interrogators re-enter with canes.
- Tap dance and vaudeville routine used again. Jazz dance style movements for hips and legs.
- Victim uses chair to defend himself from the interrogators' canes.
- Victim finally collapses, apparently dead.

# SECTION 7 - FINAL SOLO

- Victim rises from the chair and dances a solo, with controlled movements, arms resembling wings.
- Interrogators stay frozen in position, either side of the chair, throughout this section.
- Victims solo is directed towards the shaft of light upstage left, but also refers back to the chair and the frozen position of the interrogators
- Victim exits towards the shaft of light.





# COSTUME & PROPS



## PRISONER

### Description:

- Pink/faded red T-shirt
- Jeans
- Jazz shoes
- Red nose

### Contribution:

- Shows he is an everyday/normal person
- Stands out between the guards
- Red to signify blood/death
- Shows lines of body
- Red Nose used to humiliate the prisoner
- Shows Character
- Hear tapping of feet

## INTERROGATORS

### Description:

- Khaki coloured shirt and trousers
- Jazz shoes
- Peaked caps
- Canes

### Contribution:

- Gives sense of uniformity and that they are part of the same group/organisation
- Shows lines of body
- Caps used to joke around
- Canes used to aid their savage dance and attack the prisoner
- Shows character
- Hear tapping of feet



# SET & LIGHTING

## SET

### **Description:**

- Black box
- One wooden chair
- Abstract
- Lighting becomes the feature of the set

### **Contribution:**

- Suggests a location/gives the impression of a prison cell
- Chair is used as a prop – as prison bars, shackles, a safe haven etc.
- Lighting defines the space that the dancers perform in and gives the impression of a confined space

## LIGHTING

### **Description:**

- Mostly white lighting used focused on centre stage, around the chair.
- When the prisoner performs his solos a single white shaft of light comes from upstage left
- Some blue and red used

### **Contribution:**

- Shaft of light suggests a pathway to heaven/freedom, or the light coming in from a high window
- The lighting defines the areas in which the dancers perform in
- The lighting is plain and stark to suggest the empty, cold feeling of the prison cell

# ACCOMPANIMENT

## DESCRIPTION:

- Tapped out questions and answers
- Tango style accompaniment
- Silence in one of the solos
- Electronic score
- Cries and crashing sounds
- Solos have calmer, slower and gentler accompaniment whereas trios are generally faster and livelier

## CONTRIBUTION:

- Silence creates an eerie atmosphere and allows you to focus on movement
- Music and dance at times are in direct correlation and at other times mutually co-exist
- A Change in section signifies a change in accompaniment
- Sounds can be likened to that of cries of a bird and prison doors slamming

# MOVEMENT COMPONENTS

- A fusion of contemporary, ballet, tap, tango and jazz
- Solo's are lyrical involving a lot of turns, leaps and arabesques along the diagonal shaft of light
- Trios centre mainly around the chair, with the guards mainly against the prisoner. Movement includes a lot of manipulation and lifts.
- There is a lot of dynamic variation from fast and aggressive to slow and lyrical