

Queensland  
**Ballet**

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR LI CUNXIN

A photograph of three dancers in ghostly costumes. They are wearing white skull masks and have dark, fringed, and beaded costumes. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting their forms against a dark background. One dancer is kneeling in the foreground, while two others stand behind them.

# GHOST DANCES

Production Notes for the Classroom



## The Production

### THE PRODUCTION

Since 1981, when *Ghost Dances* was first performed by Ballet Rambert, the production has been performed by Nederlands Dans Theater, Australian Dance Theatre, Cullberg Ballet, Zurich Ballet, Ballet Gulbenkian, Houston Ballet, Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève and most recently Queensland Ballet. As such, *Ghost Dances* has had a tremendous impact on the dance world.

Audiences in many countries have delighted in its distinctive, rhythmic movements performed to haunting South American tunes.

The representation of the oppression of ordinary people, symbolised by the sinister ghost figures, gives the work much of its resonance, even more than 30 years after its premiere.

### CHRISTOPHER BRUCE

#### CHOREOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

After studying at the Ballet Rambert School, Christopher Bruce danced with Walter Gore's London Ballet and later joined Ballet Rambert in 1963. While with Ballet Rambert, Bruce held various roles including dancer, associate director and associate choreographer, experiencing both classical ballet and contemporary dance repertoire. Since then, Bruce has worked with companies around the world, choreographing for a wide range of productions including musicals, plays and operas.

### BRUCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

As a choreographer, Bruce established early on that he was politically aware, often using human rights themes as a source of inspiration for his works, such as *for these who die as cattle...* (1972) which conveys his feelings on the futility of war.

During the 1970s, Bruce became particularly interested in South America and General Augusto Pinochet's coup in Chile. In this time, Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected communist government of President Salvador Allende, who in their three years of office had aimed to redistribute wealth and land, and improve health and education services for their citizens. The intense period during and following this coup was brutal and resulted in an estimated 35,000 Chilean deaths, with thousands more people imprisoned and tortured.

**Choreographer and Set Designer** Christopher Bruce

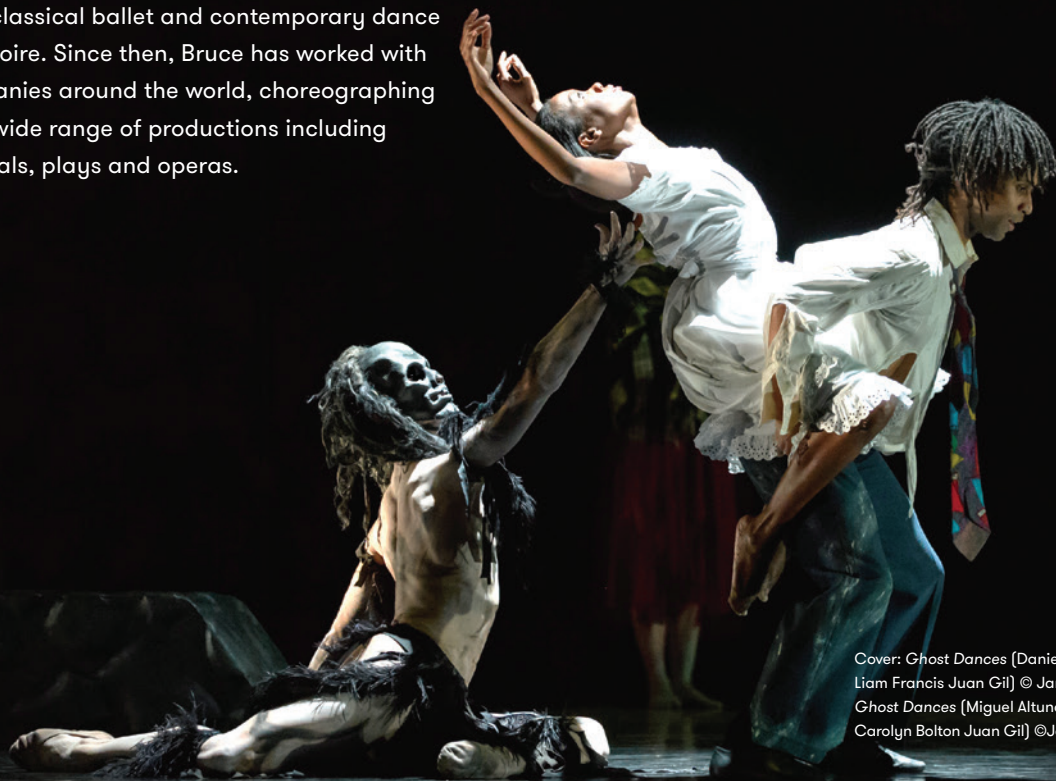
**Music by** Inti-Illimani

**Costume Designer** Belinda Scarlett

**Lighting Designer** Nick Chelton

**Lighting recreated by** Cameron Goerg

**Cast 11 dancers** (five women and six men)



## The Production



### INSPIRATION

*Ghost Dances* was developed after two key moments.

Bruce received a letter from dancer Joan Jara, the widow of Victor Jara, a Chilean folk singer and songwriter. Victor Jara's involvement with dissident Chilean political groups led to his murder in 1973.

Bruce was also approached to create a work by the Chilean Human Rights Committee, in response to the killings and torture occurring throughout Chile during the Pinochet coup.

Sympathetic to the committee's cause, *Ghost Dances* contains a range of political and cultural viewpoints, displayed through the themes communicated and the choice of instruments and movements used. Though the music provides a clear South American context, the nationality of the Dead is irrelevant. The political themes of social oppression, freedom of speech, liberty, war and political unrest could apply to other countries where people suffer and lack fundamental human rights.

Bruce noted in Ballet Rambert's 1981 *Ghost Dances* programme that his purpose for creating the production was "for the innocent people of South America, who from the time of the Spanish Conquests have been continuously devastated by political oppression."

### SYNOPSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

*Ghost Dances* is a one-act dance work which explores stories of love and compassion, as death — in the form of three skeletal Ghost Dancers — awaits their next consignment of Dead. During the course of the production the Dead pass diagonally across the stage, re-enacting moments from their lives as they journey from life to death.

The precise relationship between the Dead is open to a range of interpretations. Costumes indicate they are from a variety of social (city-dwellers and common folk) and cultural (European and South American) backgrounds, though their unified entrance and exit of the space indicates they exist together as a community.

One interpretation of the production could be that as the Dead wander from life to death they remember or reflect on moments from their lives. Another interpretation could be that as the characters continue their lives they are aware of the constant threat of death that many people experienced during the Pinochet coup in Chile.

## The Production

### MOVEMENTS

Bruce's artistic and choreographic experiences of different dance genres can be seen in *Ghost Dances* where he combines aspects of folk and social dance with that of classical ballet and Graham-based modern dance. The movement inspired by folk dance does not reflect any specific cultural context but includes elements such as precise and intricate footwork, sideways-moving line dances, chain and circle dances, and spinning turns.

Contemporary aspects of the movement can be seen in the deliberate use of flexed feet, parallel aesthetic in the lower body, spiralling movements, off-balance tilts and grounded movement. Although there is no formal mime, gestural movements such as sighs are performed with the purpose to create an atmosphere.



### MUSIC

Bruce first heard the haunting and ebullient music of the Chilean group, *Inti-Illimani*, two years prior to choreographing *Ghost Dances*. Falling in love with the music, Bruce used a range of *Inti-Illimani*'s songs and folk tunes for *Ghost Dances*, incorporating South American instruments such as the North Chilean bombo (drum), Mexican guitarrone (guitar) and Colombian tiple (guitar).

### COSTUMES

Bruce was inspired by South American cultural rituals such as the masked dances in Bolivia, which in turn took their inspiration from fertility dances and ancestor worship. The link to these inspirations can be seen in the Ghost Dancer's costumes, particularly their masks and matted hair.

### SET AND LIGHTING

Based on a photograph of a South American landscape, the backdrop depicts an arid scene with a clear sky which appears to be the view from the dark mouth of a cave, suggesting an entry to the underworld.

Throughout the production, the lighting becomes progressively lighter for each section, though a green wash over the backcloth is used during the linking sections where the Ghost Dancers are most active. This gloomy wash creates an eerie atmosphere.

## The Production

### STRUCTURE

The structure of *Ghost Dances* is episodic, where individual dances created to each song or piece of music can stand alone as a complete work. Through these distinctly different sections, the production is presented in narrative form, with the ending reflecting the opening of the work.

The production is comprised of the following seven sections where each one involves the Dead re-enacting their life and then their death. Motifs are repeated between sections, creating choreographic unity.

- **Opening and *Ojos Azules*** — The opening section commences with the three Ghost Dancers looking intently upstage left. Bruce has described them as being hungry to devour the next group of the Dead, performing bird-like, reptilian movements. The Dead then enter, walking slowly with blank gazes, appearing to wander aimlessly.
- ***Huajra*** — A ‘folk lament’ where three women and three men perform a lively dance which becomes increasingly weightier and consumes more space. The three Ghost Dancers intrude violently, throw the men to the ground and take the men’s places to partner the women until the women too are killed, as if hanged above the Ghost Dancer’s heads.
- ***Dolencias*** — A duet for a man and woman which may be interpreted to represent the experience of Victor and Joan Jara, or the experience of all the partners of ‘the Disappeared’. The woman’s hopeful arm reaches and the couple’s urgent embraces and lifts may reflect their awareness of the imminent threat that the man will be taken away and executed. The section concludes with the man first being lifted high by two Ghost Dancers and then left limp on the floor, while the woman watches despairingly.
- ***Papel de Plata*** — A playful, flirtatious and youthful dance featuring small and neat folk steps performed by one of the men. After partnering three of the women, the man comes face to face with a Ghost Dancer, who calmly leads him away.
- ***Mis Llamitas*** — Another playful and energetic dance between a man and a woman. One motif features the woman holding the man’s tie, while he moves in a llama-like walk as she leads him across the space (possibly referencing a teasing game from their childhood). The section concludes with the woman falling into the arms of a reclining Ghost Dancer, who then stands triumphantly over her.
- ***Sicuriadas*** — This is the only section performed by all of the Dead and acts as the climax of the production. While the Ghost Dancers lurk upstage watching, the Dead perform heroic and defiant gestures which create a more positive and hopeful mood than the other sections.
- ***Ojos Azules*** — The Ghost Dancers stealthily emerge from behind the rocks upstage. They slowly and deliberately walk downstage between the Dead, who crumple as they pass through. As the Ghost Dancers perform the chain-dance motif, the Dead assemble in their initial group formation to complete their progress off downstage right. The Ghost Dancers then assume their opening positions, gazing upstage left, awaiting their next consignment of Dead.



## Q&A with Dawn Scannell, Stager

### What does it mean to be a stager?

**Being a stager is a tremendous privilege** and responsibility where it is my utmost duty to sustain the integrity and intensions of the choreographer's movements, beyond just the shapes and positions. As a stager, you have to physically demonstrate the work and understand the choreographer's thought processes and feelings about the movement. Only then can you capture the essence of the movement.

Through this role, I am always learning. Since 1987, I've worked with Christopher as a dancer, ballet mistress, rehearsal director and now stager, and I am still learning about his works.

### What does being a stager entail?

**For a ballet I haven't previously danced,** I watch every video of the performance and rehearsals I can access, which includes different interpretations of the work. From the different videos, I select the version I believe the choreographer intended. If I am unable to ascertain the intention I ask the choreographer directly.

I watch the videos in slow motion a lot so I can determine exactly where the movement is coming from — the impetus and movements' pathways through the air and on the floor. I usually take several months to learn every movement physically, writing detailed notes and drawing movements. This provides me a full physical and verbal vocabulary with which to demonstrate the movement and be able to discuss with the dancers the specific details.

This process is much easier and faster if I've performed the piece previously, such as in the case of *Ghost Dances*, which I performed with Li Cunxin and Mary Li in the American premiere.

There are actually two staggers for Queensland Ballet's *Ghost Dances*, myself and Steven Brett, Christopher's Associate Director. After I leave, Steven will work on the movement of the dancers to place the piece on the stage with lighting.

### How did you become a stager for *Ghost Dances*?

**Throughout my dancing career,** I always tried to help other dancers understand the piece that we were creating or rehearsing, similarly to how Li Cunxin and Mary Li used to help me. After I retired as a principal dancer for the Houston Ballet, I was invited to be a ballet mistress for the company.

As a result of working with several different choreographers as a dancer and then as a ballet mistress, I was approached to stage their work. I now stage three different choreographers' works including Christopher Bruce, Stanton Welch and Trey McIntyre.

### What have you enjoyed most about your role as a stager with this production?

**I love everything from demonstrating the steps** to explaining the fine details. Each choreographer has their own voice, vocabulary and thought process and I love being able to help dancers develop an understanding of these. One thing I enjoy in particular with *Ghost Dances* is working out how to approach the movements with different dancers so that they can perform them accurately with the integrity of Christopher's movement.

## Q&A with Dawn Scannell, Stager

**What are some key movement motifs performed in *Ghost Dances*, what themes do they communicate to the audience and how?**

**For me there's no key movement motifs.** Rather *Ghost Dances* is a holistic experience where each moment is one of many. The piece is not literal and Christopher purposely provides space for each audience member to think, feel and interpret what they see and observe.

**This work is known to communicate cultural and political viewpoints that may be sensitive to yourself and others. How have you approached these sensitivities with Queensland Ballet's dancers?**

**I have intentionally not discussed** the cultural and political viewpoints with Queensland Ballet's dancers. I want the dancers to experience the steps as they are without any preconceived ideas or pretence prescribing how they should perform the movements.

With Christopher's work, I commence with the shapes and movements as they will speak for themselves — they tell the story. By doing this, the dancers embark on a journey where through performing the movements many times, they begin to feel what is happening around them and the movements then express what they are already feeling. It's an infusion.

If Christopher was here, he would express the context of the piece in his own way, discussing the reason why he made it and the purpose — which is always very fresh in his brain and heart. When Steven Brett arrives, he will discuss more of this contextual information with the dancers.

**Has *Ghost Dances* changed or developed each time the work is staged with different companies from around the world? If so, how?**

**Over time, there have been some definite changes** that Christopher has made such as pointed feet that are now flexed, which I have to teach when I re-stage the work. In this instance, I teach *Ghost Dances* in the purest form that I know how. When Steven arrives, he will fine tune the whole piece again.

**How has working with Christopher impacted you personally and professionally?**

**Working with Christopher changed my dancing life** and I matured emotionally. He changed my career and opened my eyes to a whole other world and view of dance. He influenced how I approached acting roles within classical ballets and to be mentally and physically conscious for each individual movement. He made me realise I wasn't just recreating the movements we had learned and created in the studio, instead they needed to become live. They were real, and I was living them.

# Queensland Ballet

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