



### David Bintley's Inspiration for '*Still Life*' at the Penguin Café

'*Still Life*' at the Penguin Café was created in 1988 by David Bintley, then resident choreographer with The Royal Ballet. In 1993 Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet transferred to Birmingham and changed its name to Birmingham Royal Ballet. On the retirement of Sir Peter Wright, David was appointed Artistic Director of the company and he brought "*Still Life*" at the Penguin Café into BRB's repertoire in 1996.

David's initial inspiration for the ballet came from the highly unusual music of Simon Jeffes' Penguin Café Orchestra and the album sleeve illustrations created by Emily Young. The first thing that struck David was the oddity of the naked creatures – part human, part penguin – and the surreal café setting:

**'It was a unique kind of world and I was intrigued by the combination of 'world music' and the philosophical idea of the Penguin Café being an escape from the real world... a parallel universe.'**

Set against this image, the driving relentless beat '**like constant rain**' of one particular section of Jeffes' music seemed especially significant, reminding David of a concluding sequence in an Australian film called *The Last Wave* in which a great flood from Aboriginal myth arrived to cleanse the world. **'I had a vision of Noah's Ark.'**

David then found David Day's *Doomsday Book of Animals*, and came across a paragraph describing the senseless destruction, by two Icelandic fishermen, of the last mating pair of Great Auks and their single egg. This text, along with the archetypal images of the biblical flood and Noah's Ark, acted as a catalyst, helping to shape David's ideas into what was to become the first ever ballet to examine the issue of extinction and mankind's responsibility to protect and preserve global diversity, not only in relation to animals but also of cultures and lifestyles.

In many ways the work stands alone among David's ballets, distinctive in terms of structure, movement style and content. He himself describes it as **'an odd piece – not really like anything I've done before or since.'** The ballet is a series of divertissements, each one focusing upon a different species from the official endangered list. The quotation marks in the title are important. '*Still Life*' is the name of the cabaret being performed at the Penguin Café and the Great Auk is the enigmatic compere, providing, both literally and thematically, a link across all the scenes.

Each species in '*Still Life*' has a distinctive movement identity and an appealing set of 'personality' traits, all rooted in the choreography. David set out first to capture the essence of how each animal moves and is perceived: so the Penguin waddles and flaps her wings uselessly, the Flea springs about and causes havoc, the Zebra walks, stoops and poses and the Rat twitches and scampers mischievously. From this starting point, David allied each animal with a sympathetic dance genre and location from around the globe: so the springiness of the Flea is incorporated into an English Morris Dance; the cheeky liveliness of the Monkey is danced as a Latin American street carnival and a 'Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers soft shoe shuffle' reflects the majestic elegance of the Ram. The Zebra's acrobatic poses and strange, sinewy movements were based on photographs of Kenyan bushmen and call to mind the mystic rituals of African witch doctors. His movement is starkly offset by the cool predatory

chic of the female models, grouping and posing for invisible cameras, and whose upright, rigid gestures are clearly intended to represent the distorted priorities of the fashion-obsessed West.

David was also concerned to colour each section with the sense of ‘other-worldliness’ that the Penguin Café had inspired for him. So, instead of striving for authenticity in the popular dance forms, he took only the general flavour and characteristic elements of each, using them to generate original movement material that nonetheless captures the essence of each genre “like a radio station you can’t quite get – fragments, bits and pieces, images.”

*‘Still Life’ at the Penguin Café* is quite clearly a ballet, adhering to what are generally regarded as traditional ballet ‘rules’: the work uses a large cast, with gender-roles rigidly adhered to: men lift and support women, never vice-versa; the piece has extravagant and detailed costumes and sets, and there is a lightness and ease in the deportment of the dancers and in the classical steps and poses which pepper the work. Nonetheless the work is decidedly ‘unclassical’ in its extensive use of popular dance forms, its tackling of a modern political theme and in the fact of its being more expressionist than narrative in style.

There is also much in the movement that is more readily allied to a modern dance idiom. The Zebra, for example, relies heavily upon Graham derived torso contractions and twists, while the models have movement fashioned from everyday gestures such as reaching into a handbag for lipstick and gazing at oneself in a hand-held mirror. Such devices are extremely unusual in ballet and more often seen in the New Dance of Lea Anderson and Trisha Brown. The apparent randomness of timing in that section and in the final flood scene are also stylistically more typical of contemporary work and the typical ballet trademarks of turnout and pointe work are rare: turnout is used for expressive rather than aesthetic effect to capture the ‘waddling’ motion of the penguins and the one time a dancer goes up on pointe in the piece is to generate humour as she staggers and jumps as a flea.

David quite deliberately chose to exploit the quaint, comic and whimsical potential of his subject matter, a decision which led some critics to decry the work as superficial and trivial. He is however unperturbed by such criticisms. **‘It’s a piece with a message but I didn’t want it to be a ‘preachy’ piece. I think that some people completely miss the point.’** The point for David Bintley is that, in real life, it is also easy to simply revel in romantic and sentimental spectacle without lingering too long over the uncomfortable message.

If you have the opportunity, take time to probe beneath the surface of the work, and to think about its construction. In particular, look out for the two ‘theatrical shocks’ in the piece; moments when the light whimsical façade is suddenly punctured by a disturbing realism.

**Text adapted from *‘Still Life’ at the Penguin Café* GCSE Study Notes, written by Dr. Christine Lark, BRB’s Education Projects Manager. The notes, CD and video of the ballet are available for purchase from BRB’s Education Department.**