

Yesterday is history,  
tomorrow is a  
mystery, but today  
is a gift. That is  
why they call it  
'the present'  
Jiří Kylián

When The Australian Ballet opened its 1997 Sydney season one evening in April, the first work on the programme was Jiří Kylián's *Sinfonietta*. A movingly beautiful ballet at the best of times, that night its performance was particularly impressive. Li Cunxin was the first dancer on stage. He made his entrance with a superb, soaring grand jeté and moved through the next series of turns and jumps with masterly skill. Quite simply, that opening sequence took the breath away and set the scene for a remarkable performance and indeed for a remarkable evening in the theatre.

For this staging of *Sinfonietta*, a work Kylián originally made in 1978, the orchestra had been augmented with the extra brass that the composer, Kylián's Czech compatriot Leos Janáček, had specified in his score. The extra musicians had been placed in the boxes of the Opera Theatre and, as the opening notes were played, the sound surrounded and enveloped us, making Li's spectacular entrance even more thrilling. By the end of the work, as the dancers faced the backcloth, a simple landscape that seemed to stretch into infinity, and lifted the palms of their hands heavenwards, the emotion in the audience was palpable.

Now, in 2005, that evening is a memory, part of history. But the memory of being there, being present, and the memory of the joy that the dancers were able to transmit to the audience, remain in the hearts and minds of those who were there. Those memories are indeed a gift, a gift from Kylián. There is such pleasure in being able to look back on a vivid moment in which present and past time collide in the mind. There is added pleasure in being able to anticipate a future, mysterious time in which there will be similar moments, other Kylián gifts.

But how does Kylián transport us? What is at the heart of his theatrical gifts to us? His work has, of course, changed over time and in fact he has often referred to his earlier pieces as his 'dinosaurs'. But there are some enduring features of his work that we can't fail to notice time and time again, whether we are thinking of his 'dinosaurs' or his more recent creations. Firstly, there is the close relationship between choreography and music. Whatever score Kylián chooses to work from, the movements he creates are always inextricably linked to the music. The diversity of his choreography reflects the diversity of his musical choices. We can contrast, for example, the humour we encounter in his delicious *Symphony in D* (1976), set to music by Franz Joseph Haydn, with the compulsive and unrelenting energy his dancers project in *Falling Angels* (1989), made to music by Steve Reich.

Secondly, there is always an unusual and often quite complex interplay between choreography and visual design. The visual elements Kylián introduces into his works are not restricted to lighting, costumes and sets, although these elements are always significant (even if they sometimes seem disarmingly simple). The visual design of a Kylián work often includes an assortment of props and, more recently, film footage. Consider the luscious *Bella Figura* (1995) with its beautiful play with the stage curtains, its braziers that, towards the end of the piece, illuminate both the stage and our hearts, and its evocative opening before the house lights go down. The elegance of this work, whose dream-like, even surreal qualities are heightened by the inclusion of a whole range of unexpected visual elements, always elicits a deeply-felt emotional response from the audience.

Take too a virtuoso work Kylián made for the Paris Opera Ballet in 1999. Called *Doux mensonges*, or in English Sweet Deceits, it examines the bittersweet qualities of human relationships. But it also brims over with theatrical artifice – another form of sweet deceit. Dancers and singers appear and disappear through trapdoors and, in a fascinating visual conundrum, are seen on film footage that has been shot in the area under the stage but that is projected onstage.

Thirdly, we can't ignore the choreography itself. Consider the three exquisite duets that make up the second part of *Petite mort* (1991). Here is choreography for two people, the duet form, at its finest. The couples connect through swirling movements and twisting lifts. There are occasional tiny quivers of feet or hands. Bodies embrace. Hands hold and touch in unexpected ways. The whole is meltingly smooth. This choreography speaks to us of human interaction at its most intense, of the relationships and connections that make our lives with others special and important.

By contrast, the choreography for *Six Dances*, created in 1986 to music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, looks more absurd than intense. Quite classical sequences are set against exaggerated movements that are full of humour and even deliberate coarseness. This juxtaposition of the coarse and the refined, along with the powdered wigs worn by the men and the soap bubbles that appear towards the end of the piece, make the work both a reference to the era of Mozart and a choreographic spoof on it. We can't help feeling that Mozart would have loved Kylián's *Six Dances*.

Fourthly, and on a somewhat different level, Kylián deals with ideas. Most of his works can be read in a philosophical way. We can go home from the theatre and wonder, ponder and imagine. He is especially interested in time – past, present and future. He likes to examine how we as human beings interact with and behave in time. This interest in the components and the passage of time is expressed concisely in his simple but beautifully reflective and thought-provoking remark about 'the present'. But it also surfaces in quite a specific way in many of his best works.

Jiří Kylián, Matthew Trent  
and Sacha Wakelin rehearsing  
*Stepping Stones* 1996  
Photograph by Earl Carter

It is now well known, for example, that *Stepping Stones* (1991) was inspired by a visit that Kylián made to Australia in 1980 during which he was invited to be present at a tribal gathering of Australian Aborigines. He was especially moved by the words of an old man who, when asked why he danced, famously said: 'Because my father taught me, and I must hand my dance on to my son'. It was the old man's regard for tradition and his belief in the importance of passing on a heritage over time that impressed Kylián. *Stepping Stones* was created in homage to Kylián's own dance heritage, which is that of classical ballet, and to the enduring strength of that heritage because it has been handed down from generation to generation. The title, *Stepping Stones*, adds another layer to the idea behind the work. In a practical sense, stepping stones allow us to move across grass, over water or whatever without trespassing (or falling in). As we pass over certain stones they become the past. The one we stand on at any moment is the present. The ones ahead of us are the future. So we can read the title as a metaphor for the passing of time.

Kylián has an intellectual capacity that feeds into his choreography and that makes his work not just something that we can admire for the craftsmanship we see on stage, but also something that we can, if we choose, admire as a work created by a fine mind. He produces works that move, inspire and amuse, and works that probe into what makes us human and how we behave as people. He is a charismatic choreographer who works both intuitively and intellectually.

*Sinfonietta*, the work that holds within it such joy, the work that is so spontaneous and so passionately expressive of the music of Kylián's Czech homeland, was originally made to be performed by Kylián's own company at the time, Nederlands Dans Theater, at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, USA. Of its first performance Kylián has said: 'The audience which was present at the Charleston premiere never heard the end of the music, because they were already standing on top of their chairs cheering and throwing their programme books into the air'. As happened in Sydney in 1997, that Charleston audience of 1978 received a present. On any night, in any theatre when Kylián works are being performed, we need only to open our hearts and minds as well as our eyes and ears to what he is saying and to what he is asking the dancers to show us. Kylián is a gift-giver.

*Dr Michelle Potter is Curator of Dance  
at the National Library of Australia, Canberra.*