

A Cascade of Brightness

*Southern lights
move around our
planet's poles like
dance partners
matching each
other's steps.*
astronomy.com

In the early twentieth century when Serge Diaghilev was the authoritative entrepreneur behind the glamorous and influential Ballets Russes, the triple bill ruled supreme. Audiences flocked to this kind of programme. It could be, and usually was, entertaining. But it could be, and usually was, challenging and provocative too. It also provided audiences with a tantalising peek at a variety of different styles and moods in ballet. In addition, audiences often saw all the leading dancers of the day on the same night; they had the chance to see rising young talent on stage since the entire company was usually needed over the course of the evening; and they went home satisfied that they had seen a beautifully presented, stunningly danced, varied programme of ballet.

But in the early twenty-first century audiences seem to prefer evening-length works. They feel, we are told, at ease with a clear, well-known storyline that they can follow over the duration of the evening. Why is this? There has never really been a satisfying answer. Perhaps it is simply that tastes change. Or perhaps we even talk ourselves into believing that triple bills aren't popular. Is it a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Southern Lights is a real challenge to the idea that going to the ballet equals a comfortable night out watching a well known story unfold. This triple bill of works by The Australian Ballet's Resident Choreographer Stephen Baynes, all with designs by Michael Pearce and Rachel Burke, is a diverse evening of dance. Baynes's three creations - *Imaginary Masque*, *Unspoken Dialogues* and *El Tango* - take the audience on a journey of discovery into the unknown. It's a journey full of the excitement of the new. Like Aurora Australis, the southern lights that illuminate the sky over Australia, *Southern Lights* is a display of brightness, a shining example of Australian choreography made for a stellar cast of Australian dancers.

Aware, however, of both the privileges and the pitfalls of being commissioned to put together an evening of three works by just the one choreographer, Baynes assembled the *Southern Lights* programme in a very careful and practical way. He began by choosing the work that would close the programme: *El Tango*. This was a work he knew would have the zing to send the audience home feeling refreshed and in good spirits. He also knew that an embryonic idea that he had been toying with for several years, and that eventually became *Unspoken Dialogues*, would make a serious, thought-provoking centre piece. And as an opener what could be more appealing than the theatrical delights of *Imaginary Masque* with its atmospheric music by French composer Maurice Ravel?

In talking about the process, Baynes mused that this was the way Peggy van Praagh worked when assembling a triple bill programme, and van Praagh,

founding director of The Australian Ballet, was one of his early mentors. Many before and after van Praagh have worked in the same way to create balanced triple bill programmes, ones that aim to send the audience home feeling not only entertained, but also moved, challenged and ready to see the worth of a triple bill. And every director or choreographer must hope too that if a triple bill programme is well balanced, audiences will leave with the desire to come again to a similarly diverse evening of choreography.

Baynes's opener, *Imaginary Masque*, takes its inspiration in part from the court masque, a form of entertainment that can be traced back to medieval times when fantastically dressed mummers sang and danced for the pleasure of spectators. It reached a high point in the English court in the early seventeenth century. Then, during the reign of James I, elaborate masques were held with spectacular scenery and effects by architect Inigo Jones, and with major input from poet and playwright Ben Jonson. But Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and Charles I all loved to dance, and even earlier than the seventeenth century the masque was a popular feature of English court entertainment. Kings and queens were not just spectators but participated as well.

Imaginary Masque is danced to selections from three compositions by Maurice Ravel - *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, and *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. In six movements, the work is set on eight dancers, four women and four men, who appear to be caught up in their own playful entertainment or masque. The cast moves from one episode to another and each of the dancers emerges as a different character, only coming into a cohesive group at the end of the work. There is a suggestion perhaps that these episodes unfold as if in a toy theatre, and that the dancers are playing with a dress-up box. Reflecting the texture and rhythm of the music, the choreography is richly layered. But, in homage to the inspiration that he has drawn from the masque, Baynes has also built into the choreography a sense of courtliness as well a feel for the colour and movement that we associate with the masque as a form of entertainment.

Imaginary Masque is a completely new creation, and both its concept and its sets and costumes emerged after many hours of discussion between Baynes and designer Michael Pearce. Pearce's shimmering, diaphanous cloths, which both conceal and reveal the action, play with the idea of ephemerality, which Baynes suggests is audible in the melodic line of the music. The cloths help give the work the evocative and dramatic resonance that Baynes is seeking for the work. They contribute to the question that we cannot help but ask ourselves at the end of the piece: Did those episodes really take place, or is *Imaginary Masque* simply the beautiful fabric of a dream?



The middle work on the programme, *Unspoken Dialogues*, is danced to the *Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1* by Russian composer Alfred Schnittke. It began as a short duet, called *Dialogues*, for Kip Gamblin and Nicole Rhodes at The Australian Ballet's New Moves choreographic workshop in 1995. Baynes made this duet shortly after the premiere of his highly-acclaimed *Beyond Bach*. At the time of the workshop he spoke of the pleasure of being able to go into the studio and simply play with ideas and movements, without the pressure of having to produce a fully-formed piece. 'A personal time,' he called it, and *Dialogues* was aeons removed in style and mood from *Beyond Bach*. Commentators noted at the time that Baynes seemed to be extending his choreographic vocabulary to include movement that was perhaps less lyrical and more urgent and angular than had been noticeable in his previous choreography. Baynes himself spoke of *Dialogues* as being about conflict – "two people not connecting at all."

For *Southern Lights* Baynes developed that early work into a twenty-minute duet using the full Schnittke sonata. He created it on The Australian Ballet's senior male principal, Steven Heathcote, and former principal Justine Summers, returning to The Australian Ballet as a guest artist especially for the occasion. Baynes had worked with Heathcote and Summers on many earlier occasions. He had always admired the strength of their stage presence and the warmth of their partnership, and welcomed the opportunity to work with them again.

Like the early piece from which it grew, *Unspoken Dialogues* has strong overtones of tension and conflict. The two protagonists seem cold, even isolated, and battle to resolve the tensions between them. The final movement of the Schnittke sonata is quite abrupt – "It goes off on a tangent," according to Baynes – and the resolution of the dialogue between these two basically lonely people is perhaps unexpected, even a little pathetic or desperate.

Baynes began work on *Unspoken Dialogues* without any early input from the designer, which is not his preferred way of working. He likes to begin working on the choreography with a clear idea in his mind about what the environment, the space in which the action unfolds, will look like. When discussions with Pearce became possible an idea emerged and Pearce created the suggestion, rather than the reality, of a stark and confining space. We the audience take on the role of voyeur and look as if through a keyhole at the efforts the couple make to reach that resolution to their struggle.

Closing the programme is *El Tango*. Like *Unspoken Dialogues*, *El Tango* also began its life at a choreographic workshop for The Australian Ballet, this time the *Collaborations* programme of 1998. For *Collaborations*, Baynes made a short set of dances for Vicki Attard and David McAllister to a selection of music by Argentinian musician Astor

Piazzolla. The stylish partnership of Attard and McAllister made that early *El Tango* an instant hit and it was admired by Kent Stowell and Francia Russell, artistic directors of Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle. Stowell and Russell asked Baynes to turn it into a one-act work that they could show in a tango-inspired triple bill. The reworked *El Tango*, built around one of the duets originally created on Attard and McAllister, was performed in Seattle in 2002 along with Hans van Manen's *Five Tangos* and Nicolo Fonte's *Almost Tango*.

Since its appearance in the Pacific Northwest Ballet programme in 2002, *El Tango* has once again been reworked. Baynes was moved in the first place to make *El Tango* by fond memories of the tango clubs in Buenos Aires, which he visited in 1982 while on tour with Stuttgart Ballet, the company he was dancing with at the time. In Buenos Aires he could not help noticing the sensuality of the people who frequented these dance halls. He was attracted by the individual narratives that he noticed were being acted out across the halls by each and every person on the dance floor. For *Southern Lights*, inspired further by The Australian Ballet's current principals and senior artists, Baynes re-choreographed some sections, the first movement in particular, to highlight the strength and sensuous qualities of the ten dancers, five couples, he has chosen to dance in *El Tango*.

For *El Tango*, Michael Pearce created an evocative environment that is rather more representational than his work for the other two pieces in *Southern Lights*. And although *El Tango* is the closing item on the triple bill, and is probably the most accessible of the three works, Baynes has deliberately tried to avoid making a slight piece danced to what might be thought of as cafe music. The recording he has chosen to accompany *El Tango* is by the virtuoso musician Guidon Kremer lending weight to the work of Piazzolla who composes, controversially in the eyes of some purists, in the manner of the "tango nuevo".

Southern Lights brightens the stage in 2004. A carefully curated programme, it is resplendent with surprises.

Michelle Potter, Curator of Dance, National Library of Australia