

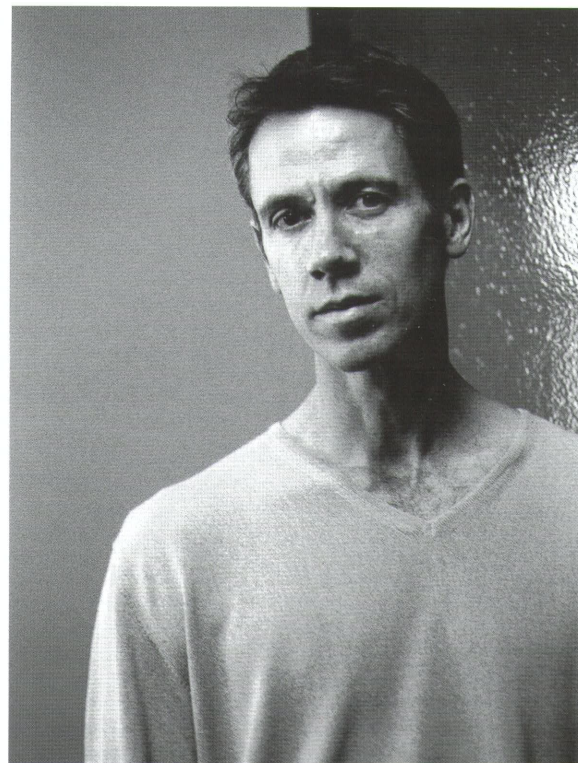
# Stephen Baynes, the man and his art

Stephen Baynes is a serious thinker. He is also musically literate and an unashamed classicist. He has been a resident choreographer with The Australian Ballet since 1995 although his talent as a choreographer first came to prominence in 1986 when he made *Strauss Songs* for Ulrike Lytton and Paul de Masson at a choreographic workshop for the Australian Ballet. Since then he has created a succession of memorable works not just for The Australian Ballet but for regional companies in Australia, and for major international companies as well. *Catalyst*, *Beyond Bach*, *1914*, *At the edge of night*, *Requiem* and *Molto vivace* come immediately to mind. But there are many others including the three works in the *Southern Lights* programme - *Imaginary Masque*, *Unspoken Dialogues* and *El Tango*. No doubt there will be more in the future. Baynes is there for the long haul.

But what makes Baynes tick? He admits that making dances hasn't become any easier over the years. He is, nevertheless, articulate about his choreographic approach. Three strong ideas define it.

Firstly, it is music that is his initial inspiration. Choosing the music sometimes takes many months, especially if he is using a range of different compositions in the one ballet. Then, once the music is chosen, Baynes likes to find a dramatic line in it. It may not be an obvious, linear narrative. It may well be more like an internal dialogue, a reflection, something unspoken, a thread. But there has to be what he refers to as a "truth" that emerges from the music. The movement he then creates reflects that truth. Choreography for him is a three dimensional evocation of the music he has chosen and the dancing must always spring from this dialogue with the music. Only then can the choreography communicate with an audience.

Secondly, Baynes believes that the choreographer needs to be very clear about what it is that appeals to him about the art form, what it is that he wants to share with the audience. For Baynes, art in general and ballet in particular has no need to be apologetic. He likes the idea that ballet and its vocabulary has something special to offer that needs to be cherished. Ballet has an inherent worth that goes beyond the idea that art has to entertain. It can, of course, be entertaining but it also has a value that transcends anything that might be considered superficial.



Thirdly, Baynes likes his works to be imbued with the personalities of his dancers. And it is here that George Balanchine is an inspiration. For Baynes it is not just the choreography that enables the audience to be swept along by the story, the idea, the unspoken message. Dancers must play their part too. He likes his dancers to be mature and have a strong presence on stage, as he believes was the case with Balanchine. The way a particular dancer imbues the choreography with his or her personality is important to him and he chooses his casts very carefully. He choreographs so that a dancer's individual qualities are highlighted.

Looking beyond these three ideas, at the very heart of Baynes's work is a deep respect for classical ballet and its makers. All his works are a reflection of that respect.

*Michelle Potter, Curator of Dance, National Library of Australia.*