

*Flying solo*

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Liz Lea is in the Collections Study Room at the National Gallery of Australia watching Micheline Ford, the Gallery's head textile conservator, unwrap replicas of Ballets Russes costumes. Although not works of art in themselves, these carefully-made replicas are treated with appropriate deference. Layers of acid free tissue rustle as Ford gently lifts the costumes out of their storage boxes. Lea, independent dancer and choreographer and artistic director of Canberra Dance Theatre, is about to select one or two of these costume replicas to wear in the one woman show she will present shortly in association with the Gallery's current exhibition, *Ballets Russes: the art of costume*.

Eventually Lea decides on two costumes by Leon Bakst: a brigand's costume of tunic, breeches and cloak from *Daphnis and Chloe*, and from *Le Carnaval* Pierrot's costume with its long, long sleeves, olive green pom-pom buttons and black ruffle at the neck. Her mind races as she imagines how she will integrate the costumes into her show. How easy are the costumes to get on and off? Will she have time to make two quick changes? What was the choreography like for the two characters who originally wore these costumes? Can she reflect this choreographic style a little in her own work?

Lea is presenting a double bill that will take the audience to two separate Gallery venues. First up is *Bluebird*, which Lea will perform in the unique outdoor setting of the Gallery's Australian Garden. The audience will then be asked to move indoors to the James O. Fairfax Theatre for *120 Birds*. The Gallery's replica costumes will feature in *120 Birds* when they will be part of a parade of costumes.

*120 Birds* premiered in 2010 at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and was originally made for a cast of four. But Lea has rescripted it as a personal solo. Despite this somewhat dramatic alteration to what British critics described as 'a gem' and 'a fabulously ambitious little show', *120 Birds* in solo format will follow the same storyline as the larger work. It will still tell the story of a fictional dance company, Company Elle, touring the world in the 1920s in the way the Ballets Russes companies did. Lea will narrate the adventures of this imaginary company, its glamorous escapades, its often problematic predicaments and the dance crazes that characterised the early decades of the twentieth century.

Lea initially drew inspiration for *120 Birds* from the international tours made by the legendary ballerina Anna Pavlova. Pavlova and her company criss-crossed the globe performing in exotic destinations in India, Ceylon, Japan and Egypt, and even in far-flung Australia at a time when travel by air was not an option, and when communication was not the instant phenomenon we know today. On her travels Pavlova collected birds – hence the title of Lea's piece. One newspaper even reported that while staying at the

exclusive Hotel Australia in Sydney Pavlova allowed her canaries to fly freely around her suite confining them to a cage only when she took them with on her on her daily, chauffeured drive.

A further source of inspiration for *120 Birds* came from archival film footage sourced from the National Film and Sound Archive during Lea's residency there in 2009 as a research fellow. Although hoping to find footage of Pavlova in Australia she did not find as much as she hoped for. Instead she became fascinated with archival footage of the dance crazes of the period as well as footage shot in Australia of the Ballets Russes dancers on tour here in the 1930s. *120 Birds* grew in scope to incorporate this footage.

'The footage became a background to the story', she says. 'It gives a wider context to tours by visiting companies and becomes an integral part of the work'.

*Bluebird*, which premiered in London at the Royal Opera House in 2005, also draws inspiration from a dancer working in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The American modern dancer Ruth St Denis was fascinated by Egyptian, Indian and other 'oriental' styles and created her own interpretations of these dance forms. One work, *The Legend of the Peacock*, St Denis made especially for outdoor performances at garden parties. It involved a costume with a long peacock train, which St Denis manipulated throughout the work. So the next step in Lea's peacock story involved a purchase in London of 70 metres of blue silk, which Lea then had flown back to Australia where she set about designing and sewing the remarkable costume she wears in *Bluebird*.

Of the two works in Lea's one woman show, *Bluebird* reflects most closely the concept of 'the art of costume' on which the Gallery's Ballets Russes exhibition centres. Those 70 metres of silk sometimes appear to engulf Lea. But at other times they billow out or trail behind. The costume is ever changing and often seems to have a life of its own. Although *Bluebird* was first performed indoors, Lea has had so many requests to perform it outdoors that she now prefers it that way.

'It becomes a challenge', she explains. 'Usually the wind becomes an added element. I need to work with what happens on the spot. *Bluebird* then becomes something of a site-specific work. It also looks back more closely to the source of my inspiration, which was an outdoor piece'.

Like the touring companies that fascinate her, Lea spent a childhood on the move. She and her family lived in Malawi, Bangladesh and Pakistan before Lea went to boarding school in England. Her dance training was in London at the London Contemporary Dance School and at Akademi, an organisation focusing on South Asian dance forms. In India she trained at the Darpana Academy in Gujarat state. Her choreography draws on a diverse range of sources with the strongest influences coming from Western contemporary forms and the Indian style Bharatanatyam. Her dancing is sassy and

strong and at the Edinburgh Fringe she was described by one commentator as 'the glamour puss dancer-choreographer'.

*Bluebird* had its Australian premiere in Canberra in 2006. *120 Birds* has never been seen in Australia. This performance is an exciting initiative from the National Gallery of Australia. It will be shown once only.