

David Bintley

By Judith Cruickshank





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But “creative” in Bintley’s book doesn’t mean only his own choreographies

Christmas 2010 at Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB) will see the premiere of a new version of Cinderella. Choreographer will be the company’s Director, David Bintley and by my reckoning this will be either his twelfth or fourteenth full length ballet, depending on how you classify the extensively revised and re-thought versions of his *Cyrano* and *Sylvia*.

It’s an impressive total in a choreographic career which has lasted just over thirty years, especially taking into account the number and variety of short ballets he has also created. Add to that the fact that since 1995 he has been Director of this important classical touring company, steering it through the redevelopment of its home theatre, the Birmingham Hippodrome.

Operating without a proper base was difficult enough, but when the building work ran considerably over time, it caused the company serious financial problems, not least because the profitable Christmas season had to be cancelled. Happily, all that lies behind BRB and its dancers, and Bintley can now concentrate on his stated ambition when he became director: to make BRB the most creative company in Britain. In addition to the Tchaikovsky classics – mandatory repertory for a “Royal” ballet company – in productions by former director, Peter Wright - BRB dances ballets by Frederick Ashton, George Balanchine and Kenneth MacMillan plus a healthy number

of creations or re-stagings by outside choreographers. And under Bintley’s leadership the company has resurrected two works by the Royal Ballet’s founders which had been believed to be lost: Ninette de Valois’ entertaining *The Prospect* before us and Ashton’s beautiful and moving *Dante Sonata*.

David Bintley was born in the Yorkshire town of Huddersfield in 1957. He trained at the Royal Ballet’s Upper School and on graduating in 1976, joined the Sadler’s Wells Royal Ballet, the predecessor of BRB. He had already shown signs of choreographic talent with a production of *The Soldier’s Tale*, created when he was only 16, and he was fortunate that Peter Wright, then Artistic Director of the company, provided him with both encouragement and opportunity.

Just two years after his professional debut as a dancer he made *The Outsider*, based on the novel by Albert Camus and the same writer’s *A Happy Death*. The music he used was Josef Boháč’s *Suite Drammatica*, a portent of intelligent and unusual musical choices to come. ▶

E=mc² © BRB, Bill Cooper

In 1982 came the premiere of his first full-length ballet, *The Swan of Tuonela*, based on episodes from the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. Again foreshadowing a continuing theme in Bintley's work, there were wonderful chances for the company's men to show their virtuosity, though the ladies were hardly neglected.

In Ashton's *La Fille Mal Gardée* he gave an excellent rendering of Alain, the hapless suitor, and was also outstanding in the travestie role of the heroine's mother, Widow Simone. He assumed Ashton's created role as an Ugly Sister in that choreographer's *Cinderella*, played Bottom in the *Dream* and the Red King in de Valois' *Checkmate*. Most notably he danced the title role in *Petrushka*, giving a performance that few in recent decades could equal and none surpass.

From being both performer and resident choreographer with the Sadler's Wells troupe, in 1986 he moved to Covent Garden as resident choreographer where he produced two contrasting and lasting hits. Danced to music by William Walton, *Tombeaux* is a purely classical piece with an underlying melancholy and mystery whereas *Still Life at the Penguin Café* is a series of witty dances, which carry a heartbreaking message about man's ability to destroy his world, when you look behind the laughter. For most choreographers today a specially commissioned score is a novelty. For Bintley it's the norm, especially with his

full evening ballets. Of these, *Hobson's Choice*, an early success, still remains one of the most popular. A broad comedy, based on a popular play first produced in 1916 it combines humour, sentiment, strong characterizations, elements of folk dance and pure classical virtuosity. *Beauty and the Beast*, by contrast is a straightforward re-telling of the fairy story, full of magical elements.

Created for the Stuttgart Ballet, *Edward II* is a highly dramatic retelling of the story of the hapless king. But the two-part *Arthur*, despite some effective moments, suffered from an overload of ideas. Bintley however, is not shy of reworking a ballet; witness his version of *Sylvia*, which was successfully given a new life some years after a lukewarm initial reception. And with *Cyrano*, which proved a flop when first made on the Covent Garden company, he went so far as to have a new score written for the second version which has proved a hit with both audiences and critics.

But it is perhaps with his one-act ballets that Bintley best demonstrates the wide range of his interests and musical tastes. He can produce pure dance works such as *Galanteries*, danced to Mozart or *The Seasons*, a virtuoso realization of the Glazunov suite. The *Protecting Veil* was a danced meditation on different aspects of the mother of Christ while in total contrast, one of his most popular short works has proved to be *The Nutcracker Sweeties* a wonderfully imaginative and entertaining

Bintley himself was a quite remarkably gifted character dancer.

suite of dances to Duke Ellington's jazz take on the Tchaikovsky classic. His latest piece, $E=mc^2$, is yet another departure based on his reading of David Bodanis' book on the "most famous equation in the world". Here again Bintley has used a specially commissioned score, this time by the Australian composer, Matthew Hindson.

It is a four part work based on the components of the equation; Energy, Mass, Celeritas (the speed of light) with a short interpolated passage called Manhattan Project which recalls the development and eventual dropping of the first atomic bomb. Costumes are by Kate Ford and the elaborate and beautiful lighting, which effectively serves as décor, is by Peter Mumford.

What makes this piece so effective is that using a classical vocabulary Bintley manages to differentiate the theme of each section so successfully and provide a very real feeling of constant, explosive energy, slow, solid mass or speeding light. The exception is Manhattan Project which consists of a brief solo for a woman in a mourning white kimono, with white painted face and carrying a blood red fan which she manipulates as she slowly twists this way and that. At first she moves in silence and then comes the sound of a massive explosion as she moves out of sight into the darkness at the back of the stage.

There are some beautiful moments in the piece, from the opening when we see a group of dancers in silhouette shooting their arms skywards and out before bursting into swift movement around and across the stage. Mass opens with a brief glimpse of a woman who appears to be floating high above the stage. A moment later we see that she is being held at arms length above the heads of her partners. And the skipping, tripping, movement in Celeritas leaves one feeling exhilarated and energized.

Some critics have described $E=mc^2$ as marking a new development in Bintley's work. As he was about to begin choreographing, Bintley described himself as being "particularly excited and particularly terrified". I would say that it is certainly the most sophisticated choreography I've seen from him so far. From a difficult, abstract idea he has managed to make something both illuminating and entertaining. It's a happy portent for next season's Cinderella.



Elisha Willis as Roxane and Iain Mackay as Christian © Bill Cooper