



Appreciation

'Still Life' at the Penguin Café by David Bintley, the Royal Ballet

This lovely ballet was created in 1988 for the Royal Ballet. It is now in the repertoire of the Birmingham Royal Ballet. There are seven scenes, each linking with the overall theme: Bintley's concern for endangered species, including man. The original idea came from the music and pictures of half-human half-penguin creatures in a sophisticated café setting, used on the album cover of Simon Jeffes's *Penguin Café Orchestra*.

The Great Auk penguin species became extinct in 1844 due to being thoughtless killed by humans. The ballet has scenes about the characteristics of many different endangered species, and 'Still Life' is the name of the cabaret held in the café. The penguins are a link running through the work. The music is orchestral, and its qualities inspired Bintley's choice of animal for each separate piece of music and scene. The set for each scene is different and acts as an appropriate setting for each animal or place. The costumes are realistic, with complex masks or make-up and appropriate clothing, to leave no doubt in the audience's mind as to which animals are being represented. The style of dance in each scene differs from one to another, ranging from American hoedown, modern ballet, English Morris dance, ballroom, and stage to minimalist mime. I have described the content of the first five scenes, which refer to the threat to the animal kingdom. These were the scenes recommended by AQA when this work was previously on the GCSE specification.

Scene 1

There are two parts to this scene: the penguin waiters and the café.

(a) The penguin waiters

This scene has a painted backdrop, centrally placed, just forward of upstage. It depicts icebergs, the sea and the sky, and has the authentic feel of the penguins' natural environment. A male voice tells us, in a very serious manner, about the fate of the Great Auk and possible problems ahead for mankind, as a camera pans over the backdrop and rests on a dancer dressed in a long-tailed black suit, a realistic penguin mask, yellow leg warmers, black ballet shoes, a white bow tie and waistcoat, and black gloves. The dancer is carrying a tray holding three pink glasses in his right hand and is pointing his left index finger upwards as if to say, 'Now, listen hard.'

Three dancers arrive in canon and travel through the space with waddling steps, in turnout, with hops, jumps and polka steps in various motifs. It is a rhythmic,

Studying two set works

light-hearted dance, with solo phrases and group work seen as they trace a figure of eight around and between each other, as if serving drinks in a crowded place. White circular follow spots are focused on each penguin throughout this short trio. This part ends as the backdrop flies up to reveal the setting for part (b). The downstage area is in blackout as the penguins move upstage.



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Dancing in style in the Penguin Café. Section 1: 'Still Life' at the Penguin Café by David Bintley, Birmingham Royal Ballet

(b) *The café*

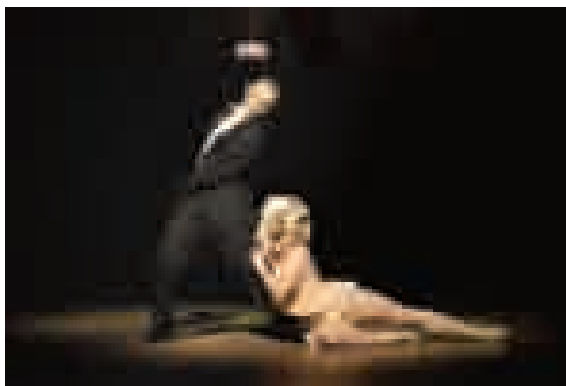
A much larger backdrop upstage sets the scene of an upmarket, elegant tearoom or café, with pictures of big windows, tables and chairs, plants and drapes. There is a warm glow to the lights and the floor is decorated by a gobo design of lacy green patterns. Standing centre upstage are a couple, the lady wearing a long evening dress and her partner a dinner suit and a penguin mask, in a ballroom hold. This is almost a dream environment with a close relationship between an animal and a human.

The scene involves a large corps de ballet who dance ballroom-style steps in pairs as the waiters intermingle with their trays. The music is similar to that in part (a), but fuller, more fluid and rhythmic, as they swoop, dip, swing and turn in pairs. They leave the dance floor to take their seats in a filmed set of tables and chairs, awaiting the 'Still Life' cabaret.

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Scene 2: Utah Longhorn Ram

This is a scene for a solo female and five male dancers. The soloist wears a full mask, resembling a ram, and a long, cream evening dress and satin-heeled shoes; the men are in evening suits. They all move in a style of dance associated with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and extravagant American musicals of the 1930s and 40s. Her male escorts line up behind her and take it in turns to swing her and lift her horizontally as a group. As she spins forward her skirt is peeled off and she is seen in a frilled leotard and flesh-coloured tights. Downstage becomes dark as she and her partner dance together in a follow spot, and the backdrop changes to a huge, rust-coloured rock. The duet takes prominence as



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the four men skip in pairs and travel upstage before exiting. The music has a lilt and flow to which the duet continues with lively steps, skips and elegant ballroom moves, until she is lifted and lowered to end the dance at her partner's feet, lying along his left leg.

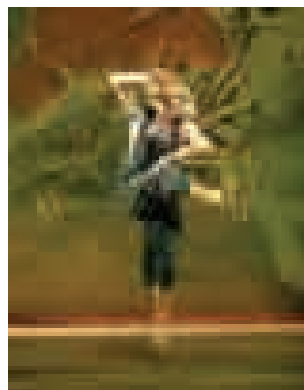
They then move towards the filmed café scene to a round of applause, and all the penguin waiters stand to welcome them back. The film clip ends as the camera focuses on a sole figure centre stage.

Final position of a duet. 'The Utah Longhorn Ram' from *'Still Life' at the Penguin Café* by David Bintley, Birmingham Royal Ballet

Scene 3: the Texan Kangaroo Rat

The black curtains open to reveal a new setting — a full-width backdrop of magnified cacti, which make the rat seem very small. The backdrop does not extend higher than halfway up the back curtain. Twitching is a characteristic action of rats and is a prominent motif in this solo.

After awakening in a shaft of light with a series of foot and head twitches, the dancer travels with hops and skips. He is wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt and denim dungarees, with soft pink dance shoes and a full head mask with whiskers. It is a lively, quick-moving solo with a sense of American hoedown actions and style, with slapping knee gestures as the dancer hops around and a side shuffle with digging elbows. It is a fun solo with some gymnastic, even street-like movements, as the dancer takes his weight on all fours and scurries, leaps and turns, staying close to the floor.



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Slapping motif by the Texan Kangaroo Rat, from *'Still Life' at the Penguin Café* by David Bintley, Birmingham Royal Ballet

The filming of this solo is interesting as there are top shots looking down on the animal and moments filmed from behind, as the rat appears to be close to the dancers in the café. The lighting is bright on the stage and the dancer is within a follow spot at all times. The solo has a false ending, as the dancer lies and twitches as if going to sleep, but suddenly gets up, scratching furiously as if he is bothered by a flea, and travels towards and exits USL to applause from the café, seen again as a film clip.

Scene 4: the Hog-Nosed Skunk Flea

This scene has one female dancer as the flea, dressed in a bright orange catsuit with black or gold circular designs around the body and limbs, pointe shoes, and a half mask with antennae. She follows five male dancers onstage, who are dressed in complex Morris dance costumes, with black shoes, white leggings, black breeches with coloured braces, long-sleeved white shirts and fancy hats with ribbons in similar colours to the braids hanging behind their heads. She is mischievous and jumps from one to another, leads them into a tangled heap, and is quite clearly frightened as she squeals when they try to swat her with their sticks. The male dancers seem clumsy, awkward and heavy-footed by comparison to her delicate, lively, quick actions.



Jumping in unison:
the Hog-nosed
Skunk Flea from
'Still Life' at the
Penguin Café
by David Bintley,
Birmingham
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The set is another large backdrop, this time of animal fur, which is where one might find a flea. The stage floor has a plain, light brown wash, and the flea is within a spotlight throughout the dance. The music is rhythmic and orchestral,

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and the steps clearly match the timing and speed of the music. She is lifted and passed backwards over their heads before following them as they exit, only to jump on the back of the rear dancer, and exits with them to USR as they skip, turn and hit each others' sticks. Blackout heralds the end of the scene.

Scene Five: the Southern Cape Zebra

The back curtains open to reveal an African landscape at sunset, with a striped pattern projected on the floor and a dancer dressed in an all-in-one black-and-white striped catsuit, a headdress with the design of a zebra face, and a white tassel in each hand, which look a bit like short tails. He has a mane running from the top of his head to the base of his spine. The eight models enter, each wearing



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a white or black-and-white stole over a black sleeveless velvet top, full striped skirts, long elegant black gloves, high-heeled black shoes, and skull headdresses perched on top of slick dark wigs.

The dance has three styles which, with the music, convey the place, the animal and the clothing that might have been made from that animal. The Zebra shows a sense of African dance in his travelling jig steps, and contemporary dance in his balances, turns and extended shapes. The models move in sophisticated measured walks,

The Southern Cape Zebra poses in front of the models in 'Still Life' at the Penguin Café by David Bintley, Birmingham Royal Ballet

using hand and facial minimal **pedestrian gestures** and some flexed foot, high-leg poses, which could be contemporary in style. They group together, a bit like a herd, and look nervously one to another, just before the zebra is killed. A red light picks him out spinning and falling to the floor. The camera switches to the models, who appear to be looking in hand mirrors and absorbed in themselves and their make-up. As they exit, the camera picks out the Great Auk hovering over the dead Zebra, then returns to the models departing, and back again to the Great Auk beside a blood-red patch. We see him turn sadly away from the sight. The stage goes into blackout.

Tasks

Use the information on *Swansong* and 'Still Life' at the Penguin Café to answer the following questions.

Swansong: general facts

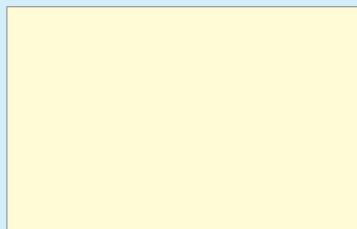
Copy out these statements and fill in the gaps.

- 1 *Swansong* is a dance in ___ sections.
- 2 It was choreographed by C_____ B_____.
- 3 There are ___ dancers: ___ men and ___ women.
- 4 The whole dance lasts approximately ___ minutes.
- 5 The composer of the music is P_____ C_____.
- 6 It is an e_____ acoustic score.
- 7 Four different sounds you can hear are: _____, _____, _____ and _____.
- 8 An item of furniture on stage is placed _____. It can be described as _____.
- 9 The lighting designer is D_____ M_____.
- 10 The costume designer is C_____ B_____.
- 11 The dance was originally performed in S_____ in 198_____.
- 12 It was performed by London F_____ B_____ Company.
- 13 Two other companies that have performed *Swansong* are _____ and _____.
- 14 It was first performed in London in 19_____ at _____ Theatre.
- 15 Identify one moment in *Swansong* when lighting is important.

- 16 Describe what the interrogators are wearing.

Swansong: set and placings

- 1 Mark an X to show where the chair is on stage.
- 2 Draw the pathway of the special light feature seen in Sections 3 and 7.
- 3 The interrogators enter the stage one after the other. Show where they enter and go to.
- 4 How does the movement in Section 3 end?



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'Still Life' at the Penguin Café: general facts

Copy out these statements and fill in the gaps.

- 1 'Still Life' at the Penguin Café is a dance in _____ sections.
- 2 It was choreographed by D_____ B_____.
- 3 There are _____ dancers in the Utah Longhorn Ram.
- 4 The whole work lasts approximately _____ minutes.
- 5 The composer of the music is S_____ J_____.
- 6 The music is played by an _____.
- 7 What do we hear before the first dance starts?
- 8 The lighting designer is John B_____.
- 9 The costume designer is _____ n G_____.
- 10 The dance was originally performed by The _____
in 19 ____.
- 11 Name the dancer who danced the Texan Kangaroo Rat.
- 12 There are _____ dancers in the the Hog-nosed Skunk Flea: _____ male and
_____ female.
- 13 It was first performed at _____ in London.
- 14 Describe the backdrop in the Southern Cape Zebra.
- 15 The floor lighting colour in Section 2: the Café is _____.

'Still Life' at the Penguin Café: music

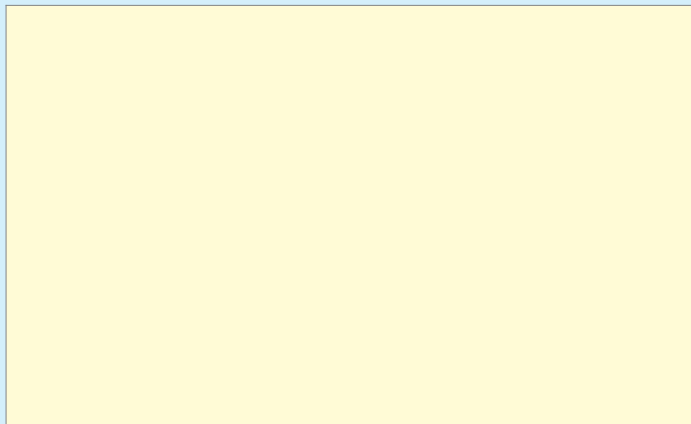
- 1 Can you name the music for the three sections?
- 2 Describe the qualities of one piece of music you named in question (1).
- 3 Identify two dance actions performed to this piece of music and say how they relate to it.

'Still Life' at the Penguin Café: costume design

- 1 Choose one animal seen in 'Still Life' at the Penguin Café and describe what the dancer is wearing.
- 2 Many of the dancers wear masks in this work. Name a different animal from that you chose in question (1) and describe the mask in detail.
- 3 The Morris dancers do not wear masks. How do their costumes tell us they are Morris dancers?
- 4 Describe briefly the costumes worn by the ladies in the café.

'Still Life' at the Penguin Café: set and placings

- 1 Using an X, show where the first dancer starts on the diagram below.



- 2 There is a backdrop depicting an icy place. Write B on the diagram to show where this is on stage.
- 3 The first motif of the first dancer travels from DSL. Draw an arrow on the diagram to show the direction and pathway on the stage.

Essay

Using the information provided, compare Section 3: First Solo of *Swansong* with Section 3: the Texan Kangaroo Rat of *'Still Life' at The Penguin Café*. Write your answer as an essay, with an introduction, paragraphs and a conclusion. It should be personal, with examples taken from each work to prove you know them both.

Dance tables

The facts in the following tables outline how old a dance work is, the company that first performed it and where it was performed. You could create similar tables including the facts of each dance work you have seen.

Four of the dances detailed in Table 21 have been on the AQA written paper as possible set works. There are resource packs produced by the dance companies and NRCD, as well as CD-ROMs from Arts Pool and Sound Moves Music Company available on most of these works.

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Dance work	Choreographer	Company	Number of dancers	Composer	Accompaniment	Set designer	Lighting designer	Costume designer
<i>Bird Song</i>	Siobhan Davies	Siobhan Davies Dance	8	Andy Pink	Eclectic mix	David Ward Sam Collins	Adrian Plaut	Genevieve Bennett
<i>Dance Tek Warriors</i>	Doug Elkins	Union Dance	6	David Byrne Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan	Eclectic mix	Bill Deverson		Ursula Bombshell
<i>Faultline</i>	Shobana Jeyasingh	Shobana Jeyasingh Dance	8	Scanner Errollyn Wallen Singer: Patricia Rozario	Eclectic mix	Dick Straker	Lucy Carter Film: Peter Gomes	Ursula Bombshell
<i>Ghost Dances</i>	Christopher Bruce	Houston Ballet	11	Inti Ilimani	South American folk	Christopher Bruce	Nick Chelton	Belinda Scarlett
<i>Nutcracker!</i>	Matthew Bourne	New Adventures	18 4 actors	Tchaikovsky	Classical	Anthony Ward	Howard Harrison	Anthony Ward
<i>Overdrive</i>	Richard Alston	Richard Alston Dance	11	Terry Riley	Electronic hocketing		Charles Balfour	Jeanne Spaziani
<i>Perfect</i>	Kevin Finnan	Motionhouse Dance Theatre	5	Sophy Smith Tim Dickinson	Eclectic mix	Simon Dormon	Mark Parry Film: Caroline Bridges	Claire Armitage
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Kenneth MacMillan	The Royal Ballet	20+	Prokofiev	Classical	Nicholas Georgiadis		Nicholas Georgiadis
<i>Rosas Danst Rosas</i>	Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker	Rosas	18	Peter Vermeersch Thierry De Mey	Minimalist	Thierry De Mey	Thierry De Mey	Rosas
<i>'Still Life' at the Penguin Café</i>	David Bintley	The Royal Ballet	20+	Simon Jeffes	Penguin Café Orchestra	Hayden Griffiths	John B. Read	Hayden Griffiths
<i>Swansong</i>	Christopher Bruce	English National Ballet	3	Phillip Chambon	Eclectic mix	Christopher Bruce	David Mohr	Christopher Bruce

Table 21 Details of eleven dance works set by AQA