

## Lorca's poetry in motion



### **The great Spanish writer has proved irresistible to choreographers. Ismene Brown assesses his influence**

'WHEN the moon comes out, the bells fade away, and the impenetrable paths appear...'

In Spanish, that verse, its four short, spare lines and instant neck-prickling sense of place, can only be Lorca. Federico Garcia Lorca, who was born a century ago next month, lived a turbulent life, and was shot dead by thugs at only 38, was Spain's greatest poet of modern times.

Little about him fitted Catholic conventions. He was homosexual, rebellious, fiercely attached to the peasant myths and traditions of his native land, Andalusia. He recited his poems like the old balladeers - they would die if written down, he said - he championed the almost lost traditions of flamenco, digging out the old songs and music, writing more, material for future flamenco performers such as Antonio Gades to turn into modern theatrical fire.

Outstandingly handsome, he fell in with Manuel de Falla, the composer, with Luis Buñuel, the film-maker, with Salvador Dali, the painter (whom he fell for, as well). Lorca's dreadful, mysterious death at the hands of Franco's brigands in July 1936 (his body was never found) was, in tabloid terms, the only way to go for such a death-obsessed firebrand.

All of these ingredients, richly egged, appear in *Cruel Garden*, the dance-drama about Lorca's life made by Lindsay Kemp and Christopher Bruce for Rambert Dance Company, which next week Bruce is reviving on a national tour to mark Lorca's centenary.

It's hard to think of another writer who has held such an intense interest for choreographers. Two of Lorca's plays - *Blood Wedding* (1933) and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936) - have attracted constant attention, in flamenco, ballet and contemporary dance styles.

Both have simple, tautly tragic stories, with love, sex, stifling social conventions and bloody deaths. *Blood Wedding* is about a bride who runs away with a married man. *Bernarda Alba* is about a house full of sisters, whose only chance to escape spinsterhood is for their eldest sister to marry.

The hieratic, stylised language doesn't easily work for today's British theatre audiences, as Ted Hughes's version of *Blood Wedding* for the Young Vic found in 1996; but poetry and dance have an affinity - both deal not with literal meaning but allow malleable interpretation of timeless images and magnified feelings.

Earlier this year, on its Dance Bites tour, the Royal Ballet showed one of the best Lorca-inspired ballets, Kenneth MacMillan's *Las Hermanas* ("The Sisters"), based on *Bernarda Alba*. It is probably only coincidental that MacMillan played a key role in the first full ballet version of a Lorca: Alfred Rodrigues's *Blood Wedding*, made at Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet in 1953. By the time he created *Hermanas* 10 years later, he was hitting a Lorca craze midstream. No fewer than four versions of *Bernarda Alba* coming out around the world during the Sixties, including one by the American, Alvin Ailey (*Feast of Ashes*). More recently the Swedish Matz Ek and Miami City Ballet's Jimmy Gamonet have added versions.

*Bernarda Alba* was natural MacMillan territory, as the former ballerina Monica Mason recalls. "Kenneth made it for Stuttgart Ballet, and he would have been hugely attracted by the claustrophobia of this house and these young repressed women - it was right up his street." Mason was the Jealous Sister in the Royal Ballet's 1971 staging.

More difficult to deal with is *Blood Wedding*, because it wraps a human tragedy with a poetical device.

The Moon is cold and needs blood to warm itself; it sends Death off to come up with something. Death selects an unhappy Bride and a restless married guest at her wedding, and fixes an ending that, as in *Bernarda Alba*, leaves everyone miserable but society's rules fulfilled.

Antonio Gades and Carlos Saura cut out the Moon and Death in their stirring flamenco film *Blood Wedding*, wrapping the family tragedy instead in the offstage preparations.

But you were never going to catch Lindsay Kemp giving up the chance to use a Moon in his version, made in collaboration with Christopher Bruce for Ballet Rambert in 1977. Kemp is famously florid, a theatrical inventor who can hit some to the heart with his fanciful pantomime ideas and leave others shuddering at the messy cliché of it all.

It isn't surprising that the camp Kemp was wild about Lorca, given that this was a gay poet in bullfight country who met a sinister end. "His corpse was never found - I do love missing bodies," Kemp told me.

Christopher Bruce was (and still is) another passionate Lorca fan. At 33 he was a prodigious choreographer who had already done one dance based on Lorca poems (*Ancient Voices of Children*). As the most exciting male modern

dancer in Britain, he was also the obvious person to be Lorca.

"I think of myself as Cocteau to Chris's Massine," Kemp archly told critic Jan Murray in 1977. A Cocteau drawing inspired the title, *Cruel Garden*, a pierced bull and its bloodstains forming flowers; Massine was the heterosexual choreographer whom the Russian ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev adored.



TODAY Bruce recalls his delight at doing something completely different from Rambert's repertory. "We got together on the floor of Lindsay's flat and we devised a scenario. People criticised it for not having enough dance - it's got a lot more now - but if you are looking for just dancing steps you are missing out. When you read a Lorca poem it seems to go very deep, even a line. That's his genius. When the moon rises, in the first poem that you hear in our piece, it talks about how you don't eat oranges under a full moon but green, cold fruit - such a strange thing. And you may say, what the hell does that mean? But actually it doesn't matter, it's what it evokes. It's a gift to movement."

The scenario mixes elements of the poet's life with a 'Blood Wedding' mime, a Buster Keaton scene (Lorca wrote a rejected script for Keaton), a flamenco café and of course the matador's grisly death. A Pierrot-like Moon and a demonic figure called Lizard stalk through proceedings, and Lorca has climactic tanglings with a sexually forceful Bull man. At the time of the opening, Bruce's choreography and performance in these sections was found convincing even by those who doubted the work, but the sexual messages were just too, too Kempishly semaphored for the audience.

Probably, I suggested to Bruce, today's audience, softened up by the explicit dance-theatre of DV8 and Javier De Frutos, among others, will readily respond to the gay angle.

"*Cruel Garden* paved the way for a lot of theatre work that was to touch on such subjects," replied Bruce. "Certainly the gay issue was big in America in the recent revival at Houston, but everything is metaphor; there is always ambiguity.

"You are the bullfighter at the start, but you are also the poet, a symbol of light and purity. The cape dance is a lament, the lament Lorca wrote for the bullfighter Ignacio Sanchez Mejias, for the poet's own life, for art, for life under the Fascists. The bull is maybe a fascist thug, maybe a sad animal in the ring, or maybe he is that dark, dangerous stranger you are attracted to that you know you should stay away from.

"That's the thing about Lorca, he didn't stay away from danger, he was tempting fate all the time."

Bruce is shrewd. Rambert is struggling financially and needs a popular hit; *Cruel Garden* has proved successful with audiences. But more than that, Lorca's centenary brings back to popular consciousness a figure of imperishable charm.

For the Nirvana generation, as for the Jimi Hendrix generation, what could be more resonant than a poet of glamour, secret yearnings and visionary sight, who died young and violently?

*Rambert Dance Company's 'Cruel Garden' is at the Apollo, Oxford, from May 6-9 (01865 244544), and touring*