

## My Word

# Dancing to Darwin

Nicky Clayton

I have been given the opportunity of a lifetime: to work with Mark Baldwin, the artistic director of Rambert Dance Company, on the creation of a novel contemporary dance piece to celebrate the life and work of Charles Darwin in his bicentennial year. The original idea came from Stephen Keynes, Chairman of the Charles Darwin Trust and one of Charles Darwin's great grandsons, and it is he who introduced me to Mark. *The Comedy of Change* is a collaborative project that combines my knowledge of evolution and animal behaviour with my research on the cognitive capacities of corvids (the crows and jays) and my passion for dance. I have always been fascinated by the showy displays of clever birds and their extravagant dances but this opportunity has inspired me to think in new ways. As the Scientific Advisor of Rambert Dance Company's Creative Team, my role has been to distill Darwinian ideas about evolution into key principles that inform and inspire movement, energy and musicality. It has also resulted in a film, 'Bird Tango', which can now be viewed on Cambridge University's website as part of their 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary campaign (<http://www.800.cam.ac.uk>).

Working with Mark, who happens to share my love of birds and dance,

not to mention shoes and sports cars, has been tremendously rewarding. It is a huge honour and pleasure to be part of his exciting project in which exuberant courtship displays are combined with nature's elaborate use of camouflage, enhanced with music and design by some of the best contemporary artists in Rambert Dance Company Creative Team, composer Julian Anderson, visual artist Kadir Attia and taxidermist and costume designer Georg Meyer-Weil.

Darwin and dance? For me the connection is clear, thanks to the birds, with their dazzling visual and acoustic displays. Steve Pinker referred to the songbirds as "Charlie Parker with feathers" but some male birds have dancing skills that rival even the most impressive of professional dancers. The styles of dance they perform vary enormously. The male Bee Hummingbird (*Mellisuga helenae*) lives in Cuba, and perhaps it comes as no surprise that, tiny though he is, when he dances he creates the gorgeous swirls of salsa, sparkling like an iridescent sapphire. By contrast, male Blue Manakins (*Chiroxiphia caudata*) can be found in the forests of Argentina, where they can spend 90% of their waking day dancing an 'avian tango' in which an expert leader and an apprentice follower perform a male double act. As only top-notch dancers get to mate, they are a powerful illustration of 'Darwinian principles'.

Even more remarkable perhaps, are the Birds of Paradise, of which there are 42 species on the island of

New Guinea alone. My favourite is the six-plumed Bird of Paradise (*Parotia seppennis*). The idea of camouflage really comes to the fore — one minute they are concealed in the forest undergrowth, but when they dance they reveal their true colours; they jeté across the stage, and then make the most amazing head and neck isolation movements. They have an inflatable 'tutu' which they use to great effect when wooing the ladies, who watch the performance with a critical eye. Despite their similarities in plumage, males vary greatly in their dancing skills, and time really matters because, just like the Blue Manakins, it takes years of experience to become the principal male.

It is these three principles — namely how the natural world can conceal and yet reveal, of how individuals vary because they are both similar yet different, and of how the future becomes the past — that allow females to be so particular in their choice of males, leading to increasingly elaborate and exaggerated dancing displays. That is the nature of change — and why it can be so comical.

The Comedy of Change will premier at the Theatre Royal in Plymouth on 16–19 September, and at Sadler's Wells in London on 3–7 November 2009 (further details can be found at [http://www.rambert.org.uk/comedy\\_of\\_change/tour\\_dates](http://www.rambert.org.uk/comedy_of_change/tour_dates)).

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In rehearsal with Mark Baldwin at the Rambert Studio in tango embrace. For me, tango is the dance of the shoes. (Photo: Kevin Hull, Cambridge Ideas.)