

northern  
ballet

# A SIMPLE MAN



## Contents

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Introduction

Page 2

### **Lowry's life**

Page 3-4

Scenes & characters

Page 5-10

Costumes

Page 10- 12

Set

Page 13-14

## Creative Team

Devised, directed and choreographed by Gillian Lynne

Music by Carl Davis

Production design by Tim Goodchild

Tour lighting by Matthew Millward

## Introduction

This resource pack is designed to give teachers an insight into Northern Ballet's production of A Simple Man, to enable teachers to prepare students for a visit to the theatre or to use this production as a stimulus for creative work in the classroom.

Choreographed by Gillian Lynne, A Simple Man is a ballet about the life of Salford artist L S Lowry and the characters in his paintings. It was commissioned by the City of Salford as part of the L S Lowry Festival in 1987 to be televised by BBC Television and was first performed as a live ballet at the Palace Theatre in Manchester in November of that year. Enjoying huge success, A Simple Man won the Huw Weldon BAFA Award for best TV Arts Programme in 1987 and was nominated in 1988 for an International Emmy. It also marked the reappearance of two of the best loved British performers, Christopher Gable, who originally played Lowry, and Moira Shearer who played his Mother. The production follows Lowry's search for his subject as a painter, his relationships with his mother and the girls, both real and imagined, who came into his life. It celebrates a man who is widely regarded as one of the most important English painters of this century.

Creating a ballet for the screen which then would be adapted for the stage threw up some questions for Lynne during the choreography process. As Lynne states, *"We needed to make decisions purely for a television concept first, and not think at that point about the stage production. That was difficult, and I hope I have got it right. I don't think you can conceive something for TV and stage at the same time. So I had to make it work for television, and then look again and see how to transfer it to the stage."*

The challenge for Lynne and the dancers lay in Lowry's paintings. Without simply bringing to life any one of the canvases, A Simple Man evokes the spirit and mood of the paintings. As Lynne states; *"I was very worried at first at the fact that I was working in a classical company, and whether that technique could work to bring to life paintings that people always think of as 'pin men' or 'matchstick figures'. But only one third of Lowry's work was in fact like that. I had seen other characters within his life that I could put on pointe, and so use the Company's classical technique. That has been one of the interesting things, trying to wed the classical passages to the industrial side of his life, so that it doesn't look like two different works stitched together."*

Looking back over the last 40 years A Simple Man can clearly be identified as a turning point in the company's history. It has become a well-loved signature piece of Northern Ballet that demonstrates the versatility of the company.

## Lowry's Life

One of the most remarkable things about Lowry as a painter is that there is a large amount of documentary material about his life that has been discovered since his death. There appear to have been many interviews with him, and one of his most famous quotes provides the title for this ballet, A Simple Man.

*"I'm a simple man and I use simple materials"*, Lowry said of himself and his art.

However, Lowry was anything but a simple man. He lived a double life for 42 years, working as a rent collector by day and a painter by night. In the early days, he painted in the bedroom of the house he lived in with his parents, around whom he built his life, and spent much of it searching for their approval. Sadly for Lowry, it never came. His mother Elizabeth had not wanted children and as Lowry Grew up, she thought him ugly and awkward. A keen pianist, it is thought by some that the piano may **have been the only true love of Elizabeth's life. Seen as a failure at school in her eyes, Lowry's wish to be an artist did not please her.** She was a worshipper of respectability and openly disliked his art, insisting he get a proper job, at least for appearances sake. Although she dominated his life, he remained devoted to his mother and persevered with his painting un-rewarded. She was the focus of his life until she died in 1939, when Lowry was 51. He was said to be inconsolable, and the loss nearly drove him mad. Lowry spent the rest of his life alone, living in a village just on the edge of the Peak District from 1948 until his death in 1976 where he painted some of his most famous pictures.



Although he never married, there were a number of young women Lowry helped and encouraged as artists. Some of these relationships are well documented; more interesting though are the girls who were never clearly identified. One of these, whom no one ever met, is seen in a painting called Portrait of Ann. He also spoke of a girl called Maud.



Other pictures of girls were discovered after he died; pictures that seem to show frustration and repression. Ann, Maud and the girls have never been tracked down. The images always appear to have haunted him.



An important theme for Lowry was the solitary figure; the man or woman alone or in some way disconnected from his surroundings. He seemed to find some affinity with these odd, eccentric creatures.

*“To see them eating, to see them running to catch a train, is funny beyond belief, they all think they can do what they want, but they can’t you know. They’re not free. No one is.”*

Lowry

Lowry was clearly moved and inspired by the hopeless, and the often-helpless condition in which human beings find themselves. He expresses this emotion in another common theme, that of the sea. Lowry was a regular visitor to Sunderland, on the Northeast coast. Looking out from his seaside hotel, he could indulge in his passion for the ocean. He claimed to have been fond of the sea all his life.

*“It’s the battle of life...I sometimes think, ‘what if it suddenly changed its mind and didn’t turn the tide? If it didn’t stop and just came on, and on and on and on. That would be the end of it all’.”*

Lowry

A similar mood is present in the industrial landscapes, the paintings for which Lowry is best known. Although he hardly painted any industrial scenes throughout the last 20 years of his life, these are the paintings that provide our strongest impressions of the artist and his work.

These themes, together with details of Lowry’s life, are what have inspired the creation of the ballet.



*“They’re real people, sad people. I am attracted to sadness and there are some very sad things. I feel like them. Every human being stands alone in the last extremity. That is the way I see it.”*

Lowry

## Scenes and Characters

When Lowry painted people, movement was suggested through particular positions which define the character, some of which the dancers mirror closely. In developing the movement, choreographer Gillian Lynne has tried to remain true to each of the characters.

*“They can’t suddenly go leaping off into a series of jetees, and pirouettes and tricks: the people Lowry painted would not have done that. I have tried to find movements that are valid as the pictures come to life, but still quite interesting dance wise. I think that the pictures have imposed a discipline on me, if I am true to my subject. I can’t just take these characters and make them start to dance in a way that might have nothing to do with the picture: that’s the part that is both interesting and difficult in this work.”*

Gillian Lynne



To help the dancer to be psychologically truthful and accurate to the character, whilst choreographing, Lynne set most of the steps with an image and accompanying text. For example, the original statement that Gillian gave the dancers playing Lowry was of a man waiting, but packed with energy. Lowry is an unloved creature, striving against all the odds, he does not form any close relationships with a woman or man. He has an intense curiosity for life. Lowry is motivated by his curiosity; his eyes are always forward and shoulders back to emphasize this. His whole upper body and arms are stiff to show he is not a relaxed character. He is always summing up, “shall I paint this or shan’t I, is it any good or not?”



Lowry's distinctive movement is inspired by an image of him being blown down the street, as though he were a glove puppet being operated by a hand that was too big for him. His movements have an angular, uncoordinated gauche feel. It is as if his eyes and the images he sees lead him. This means his weight is always slightly forward, creating a tottering movement. In the prologue, Lowry is just looking at the people and does not have a way of relating to them. He eats a sandwich and lies alone on a wall to think, and at the end of that scene he suddenly realizes that painting them is what he has to do.

As Lynne explains; "As for the technique, it is nearly always the people, the dancers first resolving into the picture, the order in which Lowry saw it. And that is much harder than doing it the other way round, starting off with the still pose and then moving on from there."

## Prologue

Painting: Mill Worker (1912)

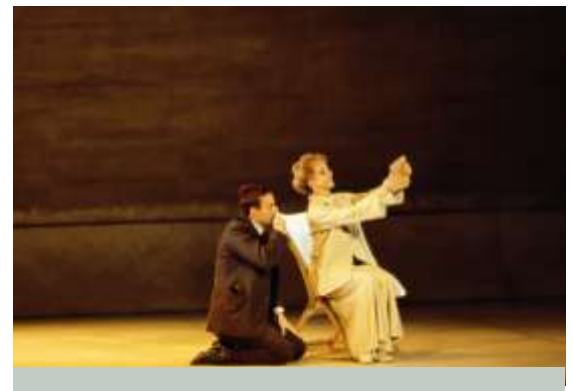
The prologue is used to introduce two things, not only the world which Lowry inhabits, but also the world as seen **through Lowry's eyes**, the colours and the shapes as he begins to see them. The stillness of the dancers directs the audience's focus onto Lowry. Lynne took all of the dancers positions at the beginning from the paintings, then thought of those people as six characters in search of being a painting. They have to make themselves entrancing enough for Lowry to paint, so they actually push their movement a bit, as if they are saying to Lowry, *"Look, this is interesting, paint it."*



## The Golden Room

Painting: Mother Sewing (undated)

**Elizabeth Lowry (Lowry's Mother)** – Bitterly disappointed that her own career as a pianist never took off and disappointed in her son, never understanding any of his paintings. The feeling behind her movement is expressed at the very beginning, from the first sigh as she sits sewing *“What am I doing this for, my life is wasted.”* She is very possessive about the piano and her movements towards it are very strong. The twisting movements represent her frustration and internal anger, and the jerky movements with Lowry, almost like a stomach ache, show her frustration towards him. She fakes frailty in order to manipulate Lowry, and keep him close.



Lynne thought of this scene being happy so pictured it as a Sunday where everyone is relaxed.

## Spring Street

Painting: Father Coming Home (1962)

**Street Characters** – Their movement contrasts with the inhibited gestures that happen between Lowry, his mother and Ann. The drunken man and his wife use huge and furious movements. Repetition of movement of a central character is used to create the busyness of the streets. All the things that go on simultaneously, the little pockets of people all telling different stories and the reactions of groups of people to what is happening near them create a natural street scene.

*“The fight”* links well with the image of the drunken man having been chastised by his wife and subsequently coming across a couple of louts in the street from whom he would normally distance himself from.



Nymphet Girls – Taken from line drawings found **after Lowry's death**, they offer a frivolous moment in the choreography, which is fun and flirty.

## The Three Anns

Painting: Portrait of Ann (1957)

The Anns – Three Anns are used to represent three different angles or points of view of Ann. They show **Lowry's** yearnings for her and also his different thoughts on how to paint her. Lynne thought that she was the kind of girl Lowry would have been interested in going out with, in having an affair with. She had the idea that if he saw the girl in red crossing the street and rushed over to her he might have spluttered out, ***"Would you like to come to tea?"***

The Anns use classical ballet language; therefore they are one of the few characters on pointe. She is a very strong character, and it is felt that Lowry was longing for a relationship, but his mother always got in the way.



## Spring Street Reprise

Courting

Painting: Courting (1955)

Lowry has a dream scene with Ann, which explores the relationship he might have liked to have with her if his mother had not posed an obstacle.

## Waves

Painting: The Sea (1963)

Painting: Tennis Player (1967)

The Sea is a calming, restful image, and the sound of the **water washes away all Lowry's frustrations. The dancers' movement is controlled and the use of canon creates the effect of the waves lapping.**

Maud (girl with tennis racket) - Lowry met Maud whilst on vacation on the North East coast. She is a breath of fresh air to Lowry.



The movement in the solo is incredibly free, as if she is on a cliff top by the sea with the wind in her hair and the warmth of the sun on her face. Dancing on pointe using classical ballet language, she moves with ease and grace.

## Going to Work

Painting: Seated Man (1964)

The industrial landscapes, with all the comings and goings to and from the mill are expressed through a lot of vigorous movement in unison, including a clog dance. The clogs are used to create a sense of the hustle and bustle of the daily work routine, and they represent the chattering of the women and conversations that would have been taking place.



Groups of dancers recreate parts of factory machines using large, isolated movements.

## Coming from the Mill

Painting: Coming from the Mill (1917-18)

*A Simple Man* culminates in a celebration and expression of the industrial landscape and the dignified hard-working people who populated it. The movement changes from being closed and grounded, to open and free as the workers leave the mill and feel the fresh air.

## Epilogue

Painting: Man in a Doorway (1964)

Painting: Man in a Trilby (1960)

Reflecting back to the Prologue, the central figure with the white face is the man Lowry discarded at the beginning of the production. It is as though that person has been stalking Lowry all his life, and right at the end he tries to paint him again and this time, because Lowry has developed and found his style, he **accepts the character. That decision of Lowry's radiates the man, and brings together a group of** characters from an extraordinary cross-section of society. This represents Lowry finding his destiny, which was to paint those kinds of people, the ordinary people that he found on the street.

The final bow – The characters saying to Lowry **“You are the Master,”** they are projecting 50 years ahead to when he became famous.

## Costumes



Tim Goodchild designed both the set and costumes. A full biography can be found at <http://www.theatredesign.org.uk/desbio/tigo.htm>

Many past collaborations meant Lynne and Goodchild had a good trusting relationship and a shared vision for the production. They were very clear from the start that the dancers had to represent the people painted in the pictures **rather than “real” people**. To create this Goodchild used slashes of paint on the costumes, which they painted as the dancers were wearing them.



The dancers’ make-up is also very prescribed to help achieve this effect. They wear a thick white base of make-up on their faces, have black eyes and either black or red lips.

To make the characters look as if they had just stepped out of a Lowry painting, Goodchild uses natural fabrics, wool, cotton and silk. These fabrics dye well and the cloth hangs and moves effectively. He researched how clothes were made in the **1920’s and 30’s in the Salford area, and had the women’s shawls hand knitted from different coloured scraps of wool, by women who lived around Halifax and worked in the woolen mills**. He also studied the paintings very closely, copying them in detail, an example of which is the black lines around the **men’s jacket**.



When the production was transferred from the screen to the stage, some of the costumes had to be changed. For example,

when the sea scene was filmed the dancers had their faces, hands and feet made up to be an extension of their costumes, which had blue and white swirling lines painted on them. However, during the production, the dancers in the sea scene have very quick costume changes before and after so there is no time to apply a change of make-up. Instead, pieces of blue tights are used to cover their heads and hands, and blue socks for their feet. To facilitate this quick change further, the dancers have their sea costumes on underneath their other costumes.

To accurately reflect the characters in the paintings, some of the costumes have been made too short or too big as the people in the paintings would have often been wearing hand-me-downs which didn't fit them properly. The loose fitting clothes also give the dancers a greater freedom of movement, and allow each costume to fit a number of dancers in the different casts that perform on different nights.



The **men's shoes** needed to appear like hob-nailed boots, which would have been inappropriate to dance in, so Gamba designed and made boots especially for the production. These boots are soft with thin, pliable soles and a large padded front on it to look like the heavy boot. The Father, who does not do a lot of dancing, wears a soft boot without the padded front so that he can use his feet for jumping.

The **women's clogs** were made to measure the original cast in 1986 and came from **Walkley's Clogs** in Hebden Bridge. However, as dancers have changed over the years, they now wear whichever clogs fit best. Backstage carpets are used around the wings so that the dancers do not make any noise as they rush off stage to change their shoes for the next scene.

There are approximately 100 different costumes in the production for the thirty-four dancers.

## Set

Lowry's paintings are used on back drops to create the location in which action is taking place. For example, the painting *'Coming from the Mill'* is used to set the dancers in an industrial landscape and create the scene of workers going to the factory.

The paintings at times depict how Lowry sees a character or how he feels. For example, after his mother dies he retreats within himself, wracked with grief and the self portrait of him from this time is used to further display his state of mind.

Originally, blackouts were used between scene changes but this has since been changed so that the action is continuous and scenery coming on or off in the light has been incorporated into the production. For example, the dancers move the props such as the bed and the piano and the chairs, making it become part of the action.

A Simple Man is a ballet which attempts to blend fact, from Lowry's life, and fantasy, through the exploration of real and imaginary characters he painted. We see street scenes he painted come to life culminating in a celebration of LS Lowry's life, passion for his art and legacy he has left behind.

