

Swan Lake Revivals

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Petipa/Ivanov's 1895 Revival

In April 1886, Pyotr Tchaikovsky wrote to Peter Jurgenson replying to a request from Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the Director of the Imperial Theatres in St. Petersburg, to choose one of the acts from *Swan Lake* for staging at Krasnoye Selo in a partially open-air performance for the arrival of Alexander III. *"From the four acts it is necessary to choose the second, and not the fourth, as you suggested. It is best from all aspects. And so, don't forget: The Second"*. There is no evidence that this performance ever happened.

Act II of *Swan Lake* was eventually performed on the stage of the National Theatre in Prague¹ under ballet master August Berger in the presence of Tchaikovsky in February 1888 and was repeated a further seven times before the end of April². It is no coincidence therefore that it was Act II that was chosen for the memorial service for Tchaikovsky in St. Petersburg on March 1, 1894, following his death from cholera on November 6, 1893. Vsevolozhsky already had been making plans to restage the whole ballet with new choreography by Marius Petipa prior to Tchaikovsky's death and such was the success of this performance, which had been choreographed by Lev Ivanov³ and with Pierina Legnani dancing the role of Odette, that Vsevolozhsky, the very same year, confirmed his plans to produce the complete ballet, asking Modest Tchaikovsky to rewrite the libretto.

The original production final act had concluded with a storm scene, when the lake burst its banks and flooded the whole stage. According to the set designer Karl Valts, Tchaikovsky, who actively participated in the design of the sets *"insisted that we recreate a real whirlpool – the branches and boughs of the surrounding trees were to break off, fall into the water, and be swept away by the waves. This scene turned out to be very successful and effective, and Pyotr Ilyich was quite taken with it"*. Vsevolozhsky had a different view for his revival writing to Modest in August 1894: *"I am eagerly awaiting the refashioned libretto of the ballet. I hope that you have managed to leave out the flood in the last scene and later on the Prince taking the crown from the head of his beloved swan and destroying it? All this is confusing. I cannot order the scenery until the story is decided upon, but there is plenty of time"*.

Modest's changes to the libretto resulted in a different story from the original even though it retained its key elements. He omitted Odette's complex backstory deleting all references to her grandfather and evil stepmother and the magic crown that protects her is now just a crown to show she is royalty. Odette is no longer a supernatural creature, a swan maiden or good fairy, but a mortal princess who has been abducted and placed under a spell by an evil forest creature. This creature is now Von Rothbart who assumes the form of a gigantic owl. In the original 1877 version Prince Siegfried is an arrogant, selfish person who is beguiled by

¹ When the inauguration of the theatre was celebrated in September 1883, the head of the ballet company was once again Julius Reisinger, choreographer of the original *Swan Lake*.

² <http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/inscenace/969>

³ The choreography fell to Ivanov because Petipa was ill.

Odile simply through her beauty even though Benno tells him she is not Odette, and in the end, he kills Odette by ripping off her protective magic crown and throwing it into the lake. In Modest's new version, Siegfried is a heroic fairy tale prince who finds his royal duties tiresome and would prefer to go hunting but falls in love with Odette. He now has a focus and mission to his previous aimless life – to rescue Odette from her evil imprisonment and take her as his wife. It all ends badly, but not because Siegfried betrays her as in the original version but because he is the victim of a deception. Odette is no longer condemned to death drowning in the lake but to forever remain a swan under Von Rothbart's power. Consequently, the lovers decide to commit suicide together rather than live apart, which breaks the spell and kills Von Rothbart. This tragic finale that had been proposed by Modest was eventually tempered by the addition of a closing apotheosis (credited to Vsevolozhsky) in which the two lovers are reunited into another happier world⁴.

The original four acts were reduced to three by converting the original Act II lake scene into Scene 2 of Act 1⁵. Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov collaborated on the ballet choreography; Petipa staging Act 1, Scene 1 and Act 2 (originally Act I and Act III) and Ivanov staging Act 1, Scene 2 (originally Act II the lake scene) and Act 3 (originally Act IV). Thus, the dichotomy of the palace scenes being French and the lake scenes being Russian in feeling, even though the scene of action is set in Germany. The divertissements⁶ of the new Act 2 (the original Act III) were divided between them – Petipa choreographing the Spanish Dance and the *Mazurka*; Ivanov choreographing the Neapolitan Dance and the Hungarian *Czárdás*. The new Act 2 is largely an excuse for presenting a series of character dances, a traditional feature of ballets in this time.

Ivanov's Act II lakeside choreography for Tchaikovsky's tribute performance was retained unchanged, Petipa writing in his working notes: "*the second scene is composed*". According to the Marius Petipa Society, the *Grand Pas d'action* of Act 1, Scene 2 was originally choreographed by Ivanov as a *pas de deux à trois* in which Odette was partnered by both Siegfried and Benno. The society states that the popular belief that Ivanov had invented Benno for the 1895 staging solely to help the aging Siegfried, Pavel Gerdt, who had proved unable to meet the physical demands of partnering the prima ballerina, is thus a myth⁷. The dance became a *pas de deux* when Nikolai Legat in the late 1890s and early 1900s

⁴ The sight of Odette and Siegfried seated on giant swans in the clouds was considered rather absurd. In Soviet times the tragic ending was substituted for a happy one where Odette and Siegfried triumph over Von Rothbart and survive.

⁵ To avoid confusion, the original 1877 four acts, and all modern four-act versions, will be referenced in Roman numerals and the new three act version of 1895 in common Arabic numerals. Thus Act II is the original 1877 lake scene; Act 2 the 1895 ball room scene (formerly Act III).

⁶ Petipa was an enthusiastic proponent of divertissements (National or character dances) which replicated real-life balls of the 19th century. They also helped supply the dancing that the *corps de ballet* was contractually entitled to throughout the second half of the 19th century.

⁷ It was Alexander Oblakov, as Siegfried's friend Benno, who did all the lifting of Odette in the first lakeside scene while Gerdt (now aged 50) only mimed. And it was Alexander Gorksy who danced the solos of the Black Swan *pas de deux*. Four years earlier in the title role of *Calabrino* Gerdt, according to reviewer Nikolai Bezobrazov, "*had renounced dance, restricting himself to adroit partnering*". Thus, despite the Marius Petipa Society's view, Ivanov likely choreographed a *pas de trois* rather than a *pas de deux* because Gerdt was unable to carry out the demanding lifts.

succeeded Gerdt in the role of Siegfried as he chose to partner Odette alone and other danseurs followed his example. According to ballet historian Roland Wiley, Legat only earned reproaches from the reviewers for doing so.

The famous *Black Swan Pas de Deux* of Act II was originally composed by Tchaikovsky as a *pas de deux for Two Merry Makers* in Act I⁸, but Petipa transferred it to Act 1, Scene 2 as the Black Swan *Grand pas de deux*. It was the virtuoso Italian *prima ballerina assoluta* Pierina Legnani who was responsible for inserting the famous 32 *fouettés* which she had first introduced to Russia in the 1893 *Cinderella* of Ivanov and Enrico Cecchetti⁹. Some later dancers considered the 32 *fouettés* to be a “*vulgar trick*” and would perform a *manège* of turns instead. Petipa, although he obviously allowed it as a crowd pleaser, was not a fan of such acrobatics himself stating in an interview for the *Peterburgskaia gazeta*: “*Ballet is a serious art, in which plastique and beauty must hold [?] the eye, not all possible kinds of jumps, meaningless spinning and legs lifted higher than the head. This is not art, but – I repeat – clownery*”.

Italian-born Riccardo Drigo, the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatre’s chief conductor and composer, extensively revised the music adding a new ending and a variation for Odile from Tchaikovsky’s *Opus 72 for Piano*. In addition to the ballerina’s solo in the Black Swan *pas de deux*, these included the *Valse bluette* at the beginning of the last act (i.e. waltz of the black and white swans), and the romantic reconciliation music between Siegfried and Odette in the same act, before the arrival of Rothbart and the start of the final storm scene.

Another interesting difference from the 1895 production to today’s standard version is in the character of Odile. She was simply Von Rothbart’s daughter, an evil enchantress and not a Black Swan. She wore a royal blue costume with multi-coloured, glittered designs with no feathers or swan designs. According to a 1901 review, Legnani’s successor in the role of Odette/Odile, Matilda Kschessinskaya¹⁰, wore “*an elegant black dress*” but there is no mention of feathers or swan designs. A 1914 photograph of Tamara Karsavina as Odile shows her wearing a similar simple black dress containing no feathers or swan designs. The first time Odile appeared as the “Black Swan” was in a 1920 revival of Gorsky’s 1901 production. In the West, the tradition of the “Black Swan” spread after a 1941 production staged in New York when Tamara Toumanova danced in a black costume in an effort to distinguish Odile from Odette. However, there had always been black swans in the final scene, Ivanov keeping

⁸ As detailed in my blog on the original version it was danced by Siegfried and an anonymous peasant.

⁹ It was in 1893 as the Princess in the ballet *Aladdin* at the Alhambra Theatre in London that Legnani first performed a series of 32 consecutive *fouettés*, the first ballerina to do so. She cheekily credited her ability to perform this move to her ballet shoes from Italy that had “*a rather Indian canoe shape in front*”.

¹⁰ Kschessinskaya (aka Mathilde Kshesinskaya) was the first Russian ballerina to successfully perform the 32 *fouettés*. She was tiny with short stocky legs and thus lacked elevation. Pretty, but not beautiful she made up for it with her charm. One reviewer wrote that she emptied Petersburg’s flower shops with every appearance, and she accumulated more jewels than even Marie Petipa. Marius Petipa despised her as, because of Tsarist connections (mistress of the future emperor Nicholas II of Russia), she boasted, put on airs and flaunted her connections to secure a monopoly on her favourite roles. She used these connections so ruthlessly that Vladimir Teliakovsky on assuming the directorship of the Imperial Theatres in 1901 recalls how the chief *regisseur* would appear in his office and say: “*Kshesinskaya has sent me to say that she will be dancing such and such a ballet on such and such a date*”.

Petipa's plan of having them enter and weave their way through the white swans to add to the sense of doom. Few productions today retain these black swans in the final act.

The new version premiered in January 1895 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg as a benefit performance for Pierina Legnani, who performed the roles of Odette/Odile and featured Pavel Gerdt (Siegfried), Stanislav Gillert (Wolfgang), Aleksandr Oblakov (Benno) and Aleksey Bulgakov (Von Rothbart). In this new production, as had been the case since the 1880 production, the original autograph full score was not performed in its entirety.

However, as discussed above, three piano pieces by Tchaikovsky were inserted by Drigo into the ballet. The ballet received a mixed but better reception than the 1877 production with Legnani enchanting the audience. The Hungarian dance (Alfred Bekefi) and *Mazurka* (Marie Petipa¹¹) were unanimously praised.

Key References:

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<https://petipasociety.com/swan-lake/>

20th Century Revivals

Today there are hundreds of different stagings of *Swan Lake* around the world, many returning to the original four-act format but using Drigo's revision of Tchaikovsky's score. The first revival was Alexander Gorsky's for the Imperial Bolshoi Ballet in 1901. It was notated in the Stepanov notation method, as was his 1907 production. A distinctive change by Gorsky was the addition of a court jester to the first and second acts to replace the character of Benno, Siegfried's friend. This jester, still retained in most Russian and Eastern European productions, is the most irritating ballet character ever conceived, and I cannot help but agree with the sentiment of one critic who wrote: "*If I could have got my hands on the crossbow, I would have shot the Jester*".

In the early part of the 20th century most stagings did not comprise the full ballet, often just a two-act version (e.g. Diaghilev's Ballet Russes) or one act version (e.g. Balanchine) focused on material from Act II. One of the more important full-length ballets, because it largely remained faithful to Petipa/Ivanov's 1895 three-act staging, was Konstantin Sergeyev's 1950 production for the Kirov/Mariinsky Ballet¹². Today, it is one of the few versions to still include the black swans in the final act. There are of course some changes from the 1895 staging. Sergeyev kept the pesky jester character introduced by Gorsky in Moscow and in Act 2 the jester dances a solo variation to music that Tchaikovsky had originally intended as *Dances of*

¹¹ Marie's costume was adorned with 12,000 rouble's worth of diamonds.

¹² The production was filmed in 2006.

the Corps de Ballet and Dwarves. In Act 1, Scene 2 he has Odette enter through a formation of swans that looks from above as if it outlines the shape of a swan's wing, an idea conceived in 1933 by Agrippina Vaganova. The mime passages in which Odette tells Siegfried her story immediately after her first entrance on stage were removed. In Act 2, the six princesses presented as potential brides to Siegfried are all dressed identically and as such, they all look the same to Siegfried. The final change is that Sergeyev reverted to the original happy ending of 1877 with Siegfried tearing off one of Rothbart's wings thus dooming him and breaking his spell over Odette.

In October 1964, Rudolf Nureyev staged a new four-act production for the Vienna Staatsoper Ballet with himself as Prince Siegfried and Margot Fonteyn as Odette/Odile¹³. His production was loosely based on Petipa/Ivanov's version but with a greater focus on Siegfried. Ivanov's second act was preserved almost intact (except he used four instead of two big swans) but only the black swan variations remain from Petipa. Nureyev added several solo numbers for Siegfried so that the story and action is focused on the prince, adding psychological depth to the story. Nureyev's reinterpretation is among the darkest. There is no happy ending, nor are Siegfried and Odette united in death; instead, Rothbart, who is also a bird, flies away with Odette in his claws as his prey while Siegfried drowns in the lake.

Despite disagreements in the leadup between Nureyev and Fonteyn about the substitute solo for Odile in the Black Swan *pas de deux*, and arguments with the orchestra over rehearsal time and tempos, the gala premiere was a triumph, achieving 89 curtain calls (and thus entering the Guinness Book of Records). Nureyev's production has now become a modern classic.

However, to my mind, both Sergeyev's (Act 2) and Nureyev's (Act III) ballroom scenes have a major structural problem. The dramatic moment of Odile's unexpected arrival at the party is completely deflated when Siegfried immediately escorts her away, abandoning his own party guests and the dancers waiting to entertain him. Hardly the expected behaviour of a prince skilled in courtly manners. His tutor Wolfgang¹⁴ would have been appalled. And what is one to make of Rothbart, an uninvited and unknown guest who takes the liberty of plonking himself down on the throne beside the Queen as if he too is royalty? It is a wonder she did not have him thrown out for his impertinence¹⁵. All these problems could have been avoided if the arrival of Rothbart and his daughter Odile took place after the character dances and not before.

Nureyev made a new version for the Paris Opéra Ballet in 1984, replacing their first complete version of the ballet made by Vladimir Bourmeister in 1960 and that had been in their repertory for over 20 years. Nureyev must have recognized the problem with the ballroom act as in this new version he reordered the dances, such that the national dances intended to entertain the party guests occur before the presentation of the princesses and thus

¹³ The production was filmed in 1966.

¹⁴ Nureyev's Wolfgang is no longer a buffoon but a manipulative character who is the double of the evil magician Rothbart.

¹⁵ In David Hallberg's 2023 *Swan Lake* for The Australian Ballet the Queen at least shows a look of horror as Von Rothbart dares to sit next to her.

before Rothbart and Odile's arrival, which follows immediately after Siegfried's rejection of the princesses. As with Sergeyev's 1950 version, the princesses are all dressed alike to emphasize that they are non-entities of no interest to Siegfried.

Swan Lake made its London premiere in May 1910 at the Hippodrome music hall, danced by a company of Russian dancers, but including only two scenes. The choreography was a mixture of the Petipa/Ivanov version and Gorsky's. The following year Serge Diaghilev's company performed a condensed version at the Royal Opera House with Kschessinskaya dancing Odette/Odile and returned in 1912 with Tamara Karsavina leading the cast. In subsequent visits by Diaghilev's companies only the second act was performed. The first British production of the complete ballet was staged by Nicholas Sergeyev¹⁶ in November 1934 with Alicia Markova dancing Odette/Odile and Robert Helpmann as Prince Siegfried.

A more famous, or at least long lasting, production for The Royal Ballet is Sir Anthony Dowell's 1987 four-act staging which, in an effort to replicate the 1895 production, includes details normally dropped in 20th century productions. These include Odette's mime scenes of Act II where she explains her plight to Siegfried and a group of child dancers among Odette's swan maidens. Dowell required Odette to mime as if she was speaking to help clarify her story. While Odette wears a traditional white tutu adorned with small wings, the *corps de ballet* wear long full skirts hiding their legs – closer to what the 19th century *corps de ballet* looked like. The *corps de ballet* includes young dancers from the company's ballet school as small swans. Dowell also commissioned a new Act I waltz from David Bentley that features the prop stools, allowing for variable levels, and a maypole with moving ribbons that were originally used in the 1895 production. Instead of the traditional medieval setting, Dowell placed the ballet in 1890's Russia, with Act III being a masked costume ball to which he added Frederick Ashton's popular version of the Neapolitan dance created in 1952. Siegfried wears a military uniform, and his cadet friends have a more prominent role in the opening scenes of Act II. Dowell also retained the black swans, who enter and weave their way through the white swans in Act IV. In the finale, Odette and Siegfried throw themselves off a cliff into the lake below, united in death and thus destroying Rothbart. After some 30 years, Dowell's ballet version was retired from The Royal Ballet's repertoire in 2015.

Liam Scarlett then produced a lavish new four-act version for The Royal Ballet (premiering in May 2018 and still the current version as of June 2024). Scarlett kept the big classical *pas de deux* and *corps de ballet* numbers such as Act II in their entirety but brought his own style to Act I and the character dances in Act III, although retaining Frederick Ashton's Neapolitan duet. Act IV was completely his own choreography. He also gave the swans their tutus back, replacing the long skirts that had hidden the dancer's legs in the previous version. Historian and critic of the performing arts Alastair Macaulay was not impressed writing in *Dancing Times*: "*superficially glamorous but strangely unmoving*" while critic Jim Pritchard thought it "*dramatically inert, the storytelling somewhat muddled*".

¹⁶ Petipa's *régisiseur* in St. Petersburg who when he fled Russia in 1917 brought with him a tin trunk full of notation books for ballets such as *Giselle*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*.

***Swan Lake* in Australia**

Swan Lake made its first appearance in Australia in 1934 when the Dandre-Levitoff Russian Ballet presented Act II at Her Majesty's Theatre in Brisbane. The Russian ballerina Olga Spessivtzeva created a sensation. Colonel de Basil's various Russian touring companies followed presenting Act II in 1936, 1938 and 1939-40. It was not until 1943 that the second act was presented by a professional Australian company – the Kirosva Ballet in Sydney. The Borovansky Ballet¹⁷ staged Act II in 1944, and it is worth noting that in 1957 Margot Fonteyn made her Australian debut as Odette with them. For the 1957-58 season the Borovansky Ballet staged a full-length version, however, the first full-length *Swan Lake* in Australia had been staged by National Theatre Ballet in February 1951 at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne, with Lynne Golding as Odette/Odile and Henry Danton as Siegfried.

Swan Lake was chosen for the inaugural performance of the newly created The Australian Ballet in November 1962. Staged at Her Majesty's Theatre (formerly the Empire Theatre) in Sydney the leading roles were danced by guest artists Erik Bruhn, a product of The Royal Danish Ballet, and his former fiancée Sonia Arova, a Bulgarian ballerina known for her strong balances on pointe. The newly formed company of 46 dancers was so short of funds that the premiere was danced in front of refurbished sets from the defunct Borovansky Ballet, and the costumes were also hand-me-downs. The following year, ABC TV simulcast *Swan Lake* to an audience of five million. The company's most admired dancers, Kelvin Coe and Marilyn Rowe, returned as guest artists and French guest Sylviane Bayard danced Odile in Act III. For the 1964 season, Margot Fonteyn (aged 45) and Rudolf Nureyev (aged 24) were the guest stars. Audiences flocked to see them. Since 1962 *Swan Lake* has played a recurring lead role in the life of The Australian Ballet: four productions and 659 performances of the work through the company's 60-year history.

The Australian Ballet's new Artistic Director David Hallberg's first commission in 2023 was a new *Swan Lake*. Inspired by Anne Woolliams' 1977 production for AB, albeit with new sets and costumes, this creation was the centrepiece of the company's 60th anniversary celebrations. It is a traditional version, but with the first and second acts merged into one. Most of the original choreography was retained with the court acts danced in front of conventional built sets, but for the iconic white acts a contemporary design of projected light and simple, abstract forms was utilised to focus audience attention on the choreography. The storytelling is kept to a minimum with Prince Siegfried drawn as a lonely character with even his usual companion, Benno, missing. In this version Siegfried destroys von Rothbart and releases the swans from their spell but dies and is not united with Odette.

West Australian Ballet (WAB) performed Act II of *Swan Lake* as part of its 1960 season which also included Kira Bousloff's (the company's founder) *Kooree and the Mists* that successfully melded Aboriginal movement with ballet technique to music composed by James Penberthy¹⁸. The latter ballet received a standing ovation at the premiere, but the West Australian newspaper critic only praised the real harp that was played for *Swan Lake*. Act II

¹⁷ The dominant Australian dance company in the 1950's.

¹⁸ This ballet was telecast nationwide by the ABC.

of *Swan Lake* was included the following year in a tour of central and northern regions of Western Australia.

It was not until November 2022, as part of its 70th year celebrations, that WAB performed its first full length *Swan Lake*. In consultation with Artistic Director Aurélien Scannella and local Noongar Leader and Guide Barry McGuire, Krzysztof Pastor (responsible for the libretto and choreography) lifted the ballet out of its usual European setting and placed it in 19th century colonial Fremantle and Perth in the early days of settlement. Comprising four acts, the ballet opens with a prologue featuring a traditional Noongar story performed by Noongar artists – a Black Swan song and dance that dates back thousands of years and that had not been performed in public since 1901.

The ballet retains the classical white acts of a traditional *Swan Lake*; however, Odette (a loosely portrayed metaphor for the land) is the only white swan, the *corps de ballet* all black swans¹⁹. Von Rothbart the villain, is replaced by William Greenwood, a shapeshifting²⁰ greedy property developer who wants to build on the land; Odile is his daughter whose objective is to seduce Sebastian Hampshire (Prince Siegfried) to prevent his interference with her father's plans. Odette and Odile are thus played by different dancers. The ballet has a tragic ending. Odette is forced into the lake, Sebastian following her into the water and both drown.

The usual divertissements of Act III are included, although contributing nothing to the plot, but spread throughout the ballet to less disrupt the flow of the story. The story itself feels a little woke and in the words of one reviewer it appears to be “*offering a lesson in environmentalism and Noongar wisdom*”. Furthermore, the integration of indigenous dancers and the classical *corps de ballet* is non-existent, neither dancing together. Not surprising when one style is very grounded involving foot stomping to connect with the earth: the other light and airy, the swans *en pointe* reaching up to fly in the sky.

Swan Lake was a box office success for the company, bringing in revenue of A\$1.7 million. The company also saw it as making significant strides toward reconciliation for WAB. It was unfortunate then that its planned reprisal as the November/December 2024 Christmas ballet had to be abruptly cancelled after the results of the 2023 Voice Referendum saw the Noongar Artists withdraw their support²¹.

¹⁹ The black swan is the official state emblem of Western Australia, appearing on the flag, coat of arms and other iconography and the first European settlement was on the Swan River named after the black swan. The black swan also featured in the traditional stories of the indigenous peoples.

²⁰ Greenwood changes to a wedge-tailed eagle, rather than into the traditional owl, under whose magical control Odette is trapped as a European white swan until a man declares his love for her. Odette is protected by both the Noongar dancers and the *corps de ballet*.

²¹ In 2023, Australian voters were asked to approve an alteration to the Australian Constitution to allow Indigenous Australians to make representations to the parliament on matters concerning them. The referendum was soundly defeated nationally, not because the Australian people are racist as supporters of the referendum claimed, but because the government could not explain what powers the body would have plus a widely held belief that no one group should have rights not held by others.

Radical Variants

There had been several radical interpretations²² of *Swan Lake* prior to Matthew Bourne's all-male version. First staged at Sadler's Wells theatre in London in November 1995, this ballet has been performed all around the world including Perth; at the Burswood Crown Theatre in 2007. It returned to Australia in 2014 (Sydney and Melbourne only) and now is more accessible via the movie version (it has been filmed three times), which is still screened from time to time (last Perth screening in 2019). The ballet celebrated its 30th anniversary in the December 2024/January 2025 season at the Sadler's Wells theatre.

Men impersonating women and dancing *en travesti*²³ is a tool employed in ballet to enhance the humour of a role (Widow Simone in *La Fille mal gardée*) or to enhance the evil nature of a character (Carabosse in *The Sleeping Beauty*, the stepsisters in *Cinderella*, or the witch Madge in *La Sylphide*). It is also used to portray an ugly or old character, particularly in roles that require more mime than dancing. Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo²⁴ is an all-male troupe of dancers who perform classical ballet excerpts *en travesti* to bring humour to ballet. Not to everyone's taste and unfortunately for them, the better they succeed in providing humour the more the actual dancing skills they display escape appreciation.

But Matthew Bourne was not about creating a humorous parody – quite the opposite. In an early interview with Nadine Meisner in the Independent he said: "*It would be ridiculous to do a spoof. You won't dare laugh at the swans. They aren't funny, they have a very masculine presence*". To human eyes a swan is a beautiful and graceful female vision that one sees glide serenely across a calm lake. We do not see nature's reality; that the swan appears graceful because it fears no predator. It is far bigger and stronger than any other creature in its natural habitat. For Bourne, who watched film of a swan attacking a fishing boat, it was "*the strength, beauty and the enormous wingspan of these creatures*" that suggested to him "*the musculature of a male dancer much more readily than a ballerina in a white tutu*". It was only by using men could he bring out the swan's more violent nature, particularly in the final act. He also made the prince the emotional centre of the story; the swan represents to the prince everything he wants to be - strong, beautiful and free.

Another variant of note is Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake* for Australian Ballet which, although set in the Edwardian area, was loosely based on the relationship between Lady Diana to then Prince Charles and his relationship with Camilla Parker Bowles. The first commission of Australian Ballet's new Artistic Director David McAllister, this big and expensive four-act

²² In Peter Darrell's 1977 *Swan Lake* for Scottish Ballet, Siegfried is seen as an opium-smoking prince who searching for an impossible love, encounters the pure Odette in an opium-induced dream. Matthew Bourne saw Darrell's *Swan Lake* as a student and followed Darrell in making Siegfried the centre of his story; John Neumeier's 1976 *Illusions – Like Swan Lake* made Siegfried mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, obsessed with swans and with his wife Natalia as the Black Swan. In 1987, Mats Ek created his own *Swan Lake* for Cullberg Ballet featuring androgynous, bald-headed swans, dressed in tutus and danced by both men and woman.

²³ The word means 'disguised' in French

²⁴ The name is a parody on the company Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo formed in 1932 after the death of Sergei Diaghilev and the demise of his Ballet Russes. Les Ballets Trockadero was actually formed in New York in 1974 and 50 years later in 2024 it had performed in over 43 countries and 667 cities.

version of *Swan Lake* premiered in Melbourne in September 2002 and was later to tour the world including London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Shanghai. It was the most seen Australian Ballet work of the decade, clocking up 159 performances – there was not one traditional *Swan Lake* performed by the company in that entire decade.

The focus of the story is a love triangle with, unusually, the roles of Von Rothbart and Odile combined into that of a Baroness. The scheming Baroness is Black Swan-ish in that she wears dark dresses and black fur. The innocent Odette gets to marry her prince in the first act but realizing she has not won his heart she becomes distressed and by royal command she is committed to a sanatorium. It is there (Act II) that the troubled Odette hallucinates of swan-like maidens much like herself. In Act III, Odette escapes the sanatorium to appear uninvited at an evening party given by the Baroness. Dressed in chiffon-winged white, Odette's beauty and purity of spirit finally win Siegfried's love but when the jealous social-climbing Baroness attempts to have Odette returned to the sanatorium, she escapes to the lake (Act IV) to join the swans in death leaving a bereft Siegfried behind.

Murphy returned the Black Swan *pas de deux* to its original position in Act I, from its now traditional place in Act III, and pared out a lot of non-essential music such as some of the national dances and the endless variations. Part of the appeal for the principal dancers in Murphy's scenario is the latitude they have in approaching their central roles. To quote Sydney-based journalist Deborah Jones: *"It is possible for Odette to be sweetly innocent, other-worldly, sad and watchful or emotionally fragile; for the Baroness to be truly in love, a cool siren, a sexy minx, or a manipulative power-seeker; for the Prince to be torn, an opportunist, a sensualist, emotionally stunted"*.

In December 2011, Jean-Christophe Maillot reworked *Swan Lake* with the writer Jean Rouaud (1990 French literary Prix Goncourt winner) as *LAC* for Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo. Comprising four acts plus a filmed silent prologue, the story features a Machiavellian family with the prince faltering between good and evil, innocence and eroticism. In *LAC* the story is recast such that the Von Rothbart figure is transformed into the central character and the Queen's dark counterpart, Her Majesty the Night. The mime scenes are gone, the aggressive jerky and fast paced choreography and music often clash and anticipated solo and *pas de deux* are danced at an unexpected pedestrian pace. This is a ballet that places narrative at its centre rather than the aesthetics of the lake scenes.

In French choreographer Angelin Preljocaj's environmentally messaged 2020 version, Rothbart is a wealthy industrialist (but also sorcerer) planning to drill the lake and construct a chemical plant while Odette is a young environmentalist who wants to protect the lake and the swans. Siegfried's father is in league with Rothbart whose daughter (Odile) is there to snare Siegfried and persuade him to go along with the development plans. Preljocaj opts for a tragic ending - the plant is built, the lake poisoned, the swans die. The music is largely Tchaikovsky's, 90% from *Swan Lake* and 10% from his other works (Tchaikovsky's Second and Fourth Symphonies) but also includes some electronic music. There are no tutus or pointe shoes, just bare feet. Although a radical story line, in many ways this is a traditional *Swan Lake* just without the fantasy. Here the evil is real.