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Transcending Conventions:

A Closer Look at the Effects of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*

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DANC 281 History of Dance Theatre

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The ballet *Swan Lake* has proven itself to not only be visually enchanting and beautifully choreographed, but also a timeless story, becoming one of the most well known classical ballets of all time. It has endured constant retellings and re-imaginings, but the original story's core revolves around the transcendent value of true love, beginning of course with a prince who falls in love with a princess, though she is under a spell that turns her into a swan in the daytime. Reminiscent of other such classical ballets as *Sleeping Beauty*, only the prince has the power to break the spell, while the princess awaits her fate beautifully, and in the case of *Swan Lake*, tragically. One of the most well recognized features of this ballet is Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov's original choreography for the *pas de deux* and chorus of swans featured in Act II and IV. Ivanov, Petipa's assistant, envisioned the swans as ethereal romantic creatures, whose beauty and gracefulness became the epitome of the female mystique. As Vera M. Krasovskaya wrote in her biography of Ivanov, "The second act of *Swan Lake* [...] was in a sense the climax of the Romantic tradition of nineteenth-century ballet..." (Krasovskaya 565). Ivanov's now legendary choreography features a very romantic *epaulment*, many *bouffées*, highly dramatic poses, fluttering "wings," and more quick, but graceful, bird-like movements.

Petipa and Ivanov's choreography has been widely used since its Russian beginnings, and is the common influence of most versions today. Yet a number of choreographers have also rejected this classic choreography and created their own version of the tale. London-based choreographer Matthew Bourne envisioned a *Swan Lake* whose core is still the same, but with a few small changes, psycho-dramatic elements, and one very obvious twist—the swans in his recreation, including the Odette character, are male. In doing this, Bourne effectively turned the gender roles implicit in the classic ballet on its head. In Petipa/Ivanov's choreography and the original role of the cursed but powerless Princess Odette, it is easy to see the way a chivalric and

patriarchal culture influenced the story in its treatment of the male and female characters. Bourne's re-telling of the classic story is influenced by his culture as well, and his new choreographic choices reflect the issues of gender equality and gender roles in dance. What makes Matthew Bourne's version so compelling is that though many of his choreographic choices set it apart from Petipa and Ivanov's original version, he still manages to reinforce the ballet's inherent theme of the transcendence of true love at the same time that he dramatically questions the traditional gender constructions of classical ballet.

There are some fundamental differences between the romantic choreography of Petipa/Ivanov, and Bourne's more theatrical version of the ballet. Besides the dramatic switching of the swans' gender, Bourne also adds new settings to the ballet, including a seedy dance club, and even removes pointe shoes from the production entirely. Bourne himself has stated in an interview on his website that since his version's premiere in 2005, "It's sometimes called a ballet, which worries me, as there is not a pointe shoe in sight, apart from in the little spoof "ballet" in Act One. I would say it is more aptly described as contemporary dance theatre." This is an extreme contrast to the original choreography, which has become the epitome of classical movement in its soft, romantic gestures and dazzling pointe work. *Swan Lake* was in fact the first ballet Bourne saw, the specific version being Peter Darrell's production for the Scottish Ballet in 1979. It differed from Petipa's original as well, though, in that the swans were actually hallucinations in the mind of Prince Siegfried, making the production more of a psychodrama. Still, Bourne was enthralled by the ballet and eventually saw many other versions, including the Royal Ballet's 1987 performance, which stuck very close to the original. Bourne spoke of the experience in an interview with former dance history teacher Alastair Macaulay and said, "Though it's interesting to see the original choreography, that production never made as strong

an impression on me [...] There are ways of doing *Swan Lake* well, and ways of messing it up” (Macaulay 164). Bourne thus became interested in the idea of re-staging *Swan Lake* in an entirely different way, slightly alluding to Petipa and Ivanov’s choreography in parts, but more influenced by his own perception of the characters and themes of the story.

To Bourne, the swans posed the most obvious problem in the original version. He saw the swans as less an image of the perfect ballerina, as Petipa’s version glorified, explaining that, “My vision of the Swan was different, because I saw it more as an animal—even more than a bird in some ways [...] it was always the wildness of swans that I wanted to show” (Juhasz 57). This decision replaced the ethereal white tutus and pointe shoes prepped for *bourees* in Petipa’s telling, with bare-chested, bare-footed men in feathered pants, made up strikingly with a simple black line from their shaved heads down to their nose, resembling a beak. Their choreography was daring and predator-like, full of power and physicality. In Ramsay Burt’s essay “The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity,” he argues Martin Hargreaves’s point about how the gender of the swans really affects the audience, as he states, “Casting male dancers in these roles would not be significant if the swans in *Swan Lake* had not up until then been feminine. [...] In this way both male and female dancing bodies have the potential to destabilize norms” (Burt 154). It is true that the entire basis of ballet relies on what has become “norms,” standards and traditions make the art form, and gender roles are a large part of it, as there are traditionally ways and roles that each gender dances. Bourne’s swans complicate this tradition because they are at once masculine, feminine, and animalistic in his choreography. This questioning caused the production to gain notoriety and the label “the gay ballet,” which Bourne continuously tried to refute with great difficulty, due to society’s definitions of masculinity. Bourne saw first-hand what Burt points out in his essay, that “The spectacle of male dancers [...] is a source of anxiety

where it threatens to draw attention to the otherwise invisible power that enforces inequalities of gender and sexuality” (Burt 152). When people heard that the swans in Bourne’s version were all male, the immediate connotation was that they must be homosexual. A group of men dancing, like a swan, which has been commonly known as a feminine animal, led to the disillusionment of the audience, who had made assumptions before they had even seen the piece.

Bourne actually created the masculine and animalistic energy of the creatures from the vibrant and intense way he has his swans appear on stage, utilizing large leaps, quick turns, and pointed focuses. He takes the high fifth from Ivanov’s original choreography and instead crosses them as if they are wings, which adds a more menacing affect. Still, Bourne echoes parts of the original choreography with the low crossing of the hands at many points, continued emphasis on long lines in arabesques and lunges, and “broken” wrists. In his interview with Macaulay, he states, “... we didn’t want it to look all beautiful and serene [...] To a certain extent, we were remembering the traditional ballet. But [...] we decided to make the swans creature-like as well as bird-like at times. Also semi-human” (Macaulay 168). Mixing the original, familiar, and artfully feminine movements with his more energetically masculine ones, Bourne challenged the singular “male dancer stereotype,” allowing the male swans to be “both predators and full of grace [...] rearranging and crossing cultural definitions of what it means to be a man” (Juhasz 73). He takes this a step further, utilizing the *pas de deux*, which was a central feature of most classical ballets, and for Petipa, was used to display the ballerina as well as depict the dancers falling in love. Bourne’s Act II *pas de deux*, of course, is between two men instead, but still obviously depicting a romantic love, thus challenging how men relate to each other in dance.

This *pas de deux* specifically emphasizes the blurred lines between masculine and feminine movement in his ballet, as here “the representation of the Prince [...] is the antithesis of

the male heroic figure” (Midgelow 54), while the Swan is much the opposite of Petipa’s timid Odette. In the original choreography, it is obvious that, quite in line with Balanchine’s ideas of how women should be portrayed in ballet, the Prince displays Odette as a beautiful object of his affection, and the audience is in awe of her graceful, vulnerable beauty while her male partner simply controls her. Bourne’s duet is set up from the beginning to challenge this traditional formula because of the characters involved. While throughout the ballet, the Prince has been expected to control his emotions and “be a man,” it is when he meets the confident Swan that his true personality is accepted. The duet involves much more sensual touching than in Petipa’s original, as the Prince is not just placing his hand on the Swan’s hips in support, but instead cradles him, and vice versa, indicating that the two have a much more mutual partnership. The Prince and the Swan’s need for affection becomes evident, and seems to directly stem from how throughout the first act. The Prince’s treatment by his mother and those around him seem to indicate society’s goal “to deny [the Prince] emotional display, reinforcing expectations of hegemonic masculine behavior” (Midgelow 55). In this way, it is the women in Bourne’s story that end up symbolizing society’s structured gender rules, and the world of male swans becomes the only place “that freedom, love, and passion can reign” (Juhasz 80). Bourne sets up the *pas de deux* to merge these more romantic, feminine ideals with both masculine and feminine choreography, furthering his commentary on the expectations of male dancers.

In many other ballets, it seems as if the effeminate stereotype of ballet dancers has been attempted to overcome by over-masculinizing movement for the male, placing them as supporters of the female, and becoming in a sense “macho,” as Jennifer Fisher argued in her essay “Maverick Men in Ballet.” Bourne seems to go against this trend by not simply making the men strong, but giving them a vulnerability. His swans are untraditionally athletic and masculine,

but his prince is given the qualities more readily attributed to the prima ballerina. Rather than simply, “making it seem athletically masculine and resolutely heterosexual [...] a common attempt to counter effeminate stereotyping in the ballet world” (Fisher 33), Bourne makes sure to include male characters who share both masculine and feminine qualities. Fisher would argue that this changes the male from being too “macho” to possessing the characteristics of a “maverick.” She believes that this is really what the male ballet dancer should strive to be, as a maverick can be defined as “an irregular, a rebel, someone who is unconventional and unorthodox [...] or] an unbranded range animal” (Fisher 44). These descriptions follow Bourne’s portrayal of men in his ballet very closely, as they are both animalistic and free from convention. His depictions end up questioning society’s set definition of masculinity in this way, portraying it as much more complex than what has previously been accepted.

In line with the goal of providing a more complex idea of masculinity, Bourne himself has said he “wanted to do something more lyrical for men—without emasculating them in any way [...] I wanted to do something beautiful for men” (Juhasz 57). This desire is in contrast to companies who have also re-imagined the male roles in *Swan Lake*, but with different intentions, most notably “Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo.” The company is made up entirely of men who do ballet in drag, creating satirical and generally funny constructions of classical ballets. They have continually been quoted as stating they are not impersonating women, only ballerinas or the essence of femininity. This approach does exactly what Bourne was trying to avoid, as it emasculates men while poking fun at the female role in classical ballets. It is not a serious approach to challenging the male stereotype in ballet, as it instead enforces the idea that you either have to be masculine or feminine as a ballet dancer, but cannot represent both qualities. As Bud Coleman points out in his essay on the Trocks, many critics of the company



have suggested that the humor comes from how, “By adopting female-coded clothing and gestures, men are laughable because they are relinquishing the superiority of their birthright...” (Coleman 14-15). The company definitely doesn’t try to make their male dancers beautiful, as Bourne strove to do for his male swans. Instead, the Trocks goal seems to be to parody the beauty originally central to Petipa and Ivanov’s creation. It is definitely a different way of presenting gender constructs, but does much less for the societal view of a male versus a female role than Bourne’s creation.

It is obvious then, that presenting a homoerotic love story was not the essential reason Bourne chose to do his ballet the way he did. It was not just simply to be the first “gay ballet” or give homosexuals a voice in the classical ballet world. His goal was much larger and meant for the entirety of males who dance. In Clive Barnes’s article for *Dance Magazine* in 1998, he pointed out that, “This gay appeal, made much by the media, can be overstressed. [...] Many children are lonely; many adults seek safety” (Barnes 122). The universal themes of Petipa and Ivanov’s classic version are still inherent in Bourne’s version, despite its radical changes in gender roles. Societal control is one of them, as, in both ballets, there is a large pressure from society to get married. This is a theme that can be applied to both versions because despite the gap in years of each version’s premiere, society has not changed much in this aspect. This desire for companionship is not only a pressure of society, but also an inherent human need, and each ending serves to suggest that acquiring true love is the most desirable goal in life, and, if not found in life, will eventually transcend in the afterlife. Each ballet shows that “society will maintain its order” (Juhasz 57) in the end, much like how, in reality, the versions of *Swan Lake* continue to change, yet these themes are ever present. Whether homoerotic or romantic, the

desire for true love and the societal pressures surrounding marriage and gender norms are still universal.

Bourne's version of the ballet still makes a great attempt at trying to eliminate gender roles completely. His way of choreographing could in fact be the answer to the feminist argument against the portrayal of women and men in ballet. It is an entirely new way of approaching ballet that doesn't simply switch the roles of males and females or satirize them. Instead, his ballet seems to imply that what is masculine and what is feminine is much more complex, and that both attributes can be found in any one individual. What is probably most affective and notable in Bourne's telling is not only the differences it points out between itself and the original; it takes the story a step further and illustrates the power of the human spirit in every person. Bourne's version of Swan Lake pointedly flips the genders and expectations of the story to imply that no matter what the situation or gender, we should most aspire for love to transcend the boundaries of everyday convention.

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