

The new interpretation of works

Le lac des cygnes (*Swan Lake*), have you heard of it? Definitely. And the first name "*Giselle*", spelt with two "l", does it mean something to you? Yes, for sure! Both are part of the great ballets of the choreographic repertoire which, although created in the 19th century, continue to be danced today throughout the world. Yet, even though spectators today know the story and the musical score, do they know when they purchase their ticket for "Swan Lake" or for "Giselle", which version of the work they are going to watch? Because these ballets, which have become great classics of their genre, have been revised many times. Choreographers have revamped them, breathed new life into them, explored their themes so that they could propose highly-personal interpretations... occasionally very far removed from the original.

This approach owes a great deal to the increasing popularity of contemporary dance, which privileges the idea of the author's dance, advocating particular choreographic language, specific to each artist. It also owes a lot to the conceptions of Rudolph Nureyev for whom, reproducing a piece of work exactly the same as the original is a pure example of sterile conservatism. In his opinion, a reproduction has to be seen from a new angle and has to express a unique point of view. And he put this view into practise, by creating his own, exclusive version of the greatest ballets.

As soon as a work is reproduced, is it not inevitably transformed? Because the bodies are different and the steps, the figures are no longer danced in the same way. When choreographers reproduce a ballet, they take the liberty of incorporating little extras, modifications to the partition, the characters, the sequences... It's a sign that the dance is well and truly alive! And revisions, no matter how unusual they are, definitely contribute to breathing life into the choreographic repertoire and to enriching it. They are proof that the works in question deal with major themes, which lend themselves to a host of perspectives.

And Giselle became crazy...

"Giselle" by Adolphe Adam / "Giselle" by Mats Ek

Giselle is the tale of a young peasant girl who falls in love with Albrecht, the Duke of Silesia, who has vowed to be faithful to her, yet lies to her about his real identity. When she learns of his betrayal, she goes mad and dies. Like other young girls who have died before their wedding day, Giselle is reincarnated as a Wili, one of these ghostly female spirits who appear at night, in the forest, and take revenge on men by luring them to their death by dancing. But she was able to convince them to let Albrecht, who was tormented by remorse, remain alive.

Created in 1841 by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot of the Opéra de Paris, *Giselle* is a pantomime ballet. It includes scenes that are not danced but mimed, which aim to

develop the narrative line. It is the case for this extract, taken from the classical version and revamped by Yvette Chauviré for the Scala. Hilarion, the gamekeeper who has fallen in love with Giselle, reveals to her the trickery that she has been a victim of. "You love this man", he says to her, "well, look, he is not who you think he is". He then unmasks his rival by brandishing the sword that the duke had hidden, as proof of his rank. Then he sounded the arrival of the hunting party. Bathilde, who is supposed to wed Albrecht soon, is surprised to see him there. When Giselle discovers their affection for each other, she flips completely. "Look", she says to Bathilde, whilst holding up her ring finger. "This man promised to take me to the altar". "Do not be fooled", replies the noble fiancée with contempt. "He has promised a wedding ring to me". Struck down by this revelation, Giselle breaks down.

In Mats Ek's revision, there are no codified gestures. The first act ends with a sad pas de deux where Giselle attempts, with the awkwardness of despair, to embrace the man that she loves. She relives the steps and the figures that she had danced with him, when he was courting her. Then, refusing Hilarion's help, she locks herself into repetitive movements and withdraws into a dance of fury. Her mind falters. Here, there is no duke, and no hunting party. The Swedish choreographer transposed the action to a more recent and more realistic context. Albrecht is a city-dweller, a socialite. For a bit of fun, he seduced a young girl from the country, who was simple-minded, naïve, yet sincere and generous. The fantasy world of the second act turns into a study of mental alienation. Giselle goes mad, but she does not die. She is committed to a psychiatric institution. Although watched over by nurses, she joins the Wilis, whose white tutus have been replaced with straitjackets. Albrecht, desperately wishing to repent, pays her a visit, whilst Hilarion, powerless, witnesses her psychic delirium.

The metamorphoses of the swan

"Le Lac des cygnes" by L'Opera National de Perm / "Swan Lake" by Matthew Bourne / "Lac" by Jean-Christophe Maillot

Swan Lake also proposes a variety of denouements, depending on the version performed. And there is a myriad of them. The many changes made to Marius Petipa's and Lev Ivanov's choreography in 1895 in Saint Petersburg impacted the order of the scenes, the ending and the secondary characters. Bourmeister's 1953 version, which remained on the Opéra de Paris' repertoire for a long time, has a happy ending, which conformed to the Soviet ideology of the period: the lovers are reunited and triumph over evil. Which was not the case in the original version!

Here, the Perm National Opera presents Makarova's version. During his 21st birthday ball, Prince Siegfried is commanded by the queen to choose a fiancée. But the young man yearns for the freedom that his obligations deprive him of. One evening, he takes refuge by a lake where he meets swan ladies, victims of a wicked genie. He falls in love with the most beautiful among them, Odette. Learning that only eternal love will save her from this spell, the prince vows to be faithful to her. Von Rothbart, the magician, is determined to jeopardize this plan. He arrives at the ball, arm-in-arm with his daughter Odile – the black swan – to whom he has duplicated Odette's features. Siegfried, believing that it is the woman he loves, declares that she will be his future bride and, without being aware, betrays his real true love.

Here is the scene of seduction of the second part of Act 1. Odette displays all her grace and beauty to Siegfried. This is the same sequence that we come across in this extract of SwanLake. However, in Matthew Bourne's version, the swan is dressed in masculine finery. Just like the corps de ballet, comprising men exclusively who have exchanged wispy tutus for trousers made of feathers. And, although the choreography also imitates the movements of the bird and flight, like in the arm movements, the connotations it expresses are far more worrisome. The swans turn out to be sensual, yet virile and threatening. Because the excitement of the prince, seduced by the swan, is accompanied by a disconcerting revelation: that of his homosexuality.

The ballet, transposed to the context of the royal court of England during the 1950s, places greater emphasis on the solitude of the main character, who is misunderstood and imprisoned by the responsibilities of his status. Through these two aspects, the swan represents the desire and the fear that the prince feels to proclaim his difference. Back at this time, the revision made by the English choreographer drew attention because of its boldness. Yet, in 1984, Rudolph Nureyev had proposed a highly psychoanalytical version, in which he suggested, although less explicitly, the repressed homosexuality of the prince. The choreographer-dancer was, as such, the first to make Siegfried the main character of the ballet, instead of the swan-lady, as was the case in Petipa's version.

For Jean-Christophe Maillot, it is the actual subject of the story that completely changes. Because, as he says, "The Lake, either we hijack it, or we sabotage it, or we attack it head on". He chose the third option and called upon the playwright Jean Rouaud, who drew a cosmogenic tale from the original storyline. The swans were divided into two rival forces: the day and the night, life and death, animality and humanity. And if the White and the Black were danced by two individual performers, it was to show that both carried a duality within themselves. And here, von Rothbart is represented with feminine features. Goddess of the night, she gave birth to an illegitimate daughter (fathered by the king) – the black swan – who was brought up with the prince and another young girl. Noticing that love was growing between the two latter, she took the young, white lady away to her chimerical kingdom and transformed her into a bird. A rare occurrence... this metamorphosis of woman to bird is represented choreographically.

The swan as a sign

"Swan Lac" by Andy Degroat" / "Swan Lake" by Raimund Hoghe / "Daddy..." by Robyn Orlin

In the following three revised versions, the prince, the birds and the spell, no longer hold centre stage. Because it is not so much the story that these choreographers have taken possession of but the work as a whole, in the shape of a monument of choreographic art. An icon of classicism, the "Lake" emerges as a vector of political and social significations, irrespective of its argument and its protagonists. And as the utmost ballet reference, it also gives food for a purely choreographic treatment, which can take on bewildering airs. For Andy Degroat, this is expressed through the introduction of rock music as a counterpoint to Tchaikovsky's score. A trio of dancers embodying the swans stride along the stage in a repetitive, geometric perambulation, whilst volte-facing and pivoting. In the next scene, their costumes reveal the characters of the prince, his lover and the magician. Even their dance is not illustrative. It is expressed through the impetus of the music, exploiting borrowings from academic vocabulary: grands jetés, turns, ports de bras. Through his radical nature, his occasionally minimalistic language, the American choreographer, who now lives in France, delivers a "post-modern" version of the "Lake" that has disorientated the balletomane public.

During Raimund Hoghe's Lac des cygnes (Swan Lake), certain members of the audience expressed the same incomprehension and left the theatre during the performance. Because the German choreographer had produced an extremely distorted version of the ballet, based on symbolic images that worked by contrasting the emotional intensity of the music and the quasi inaction of the performers. Such as here, in this rather stiff porté between the prince and the swan, where the impossibility of their relationship is revealed. When Hogue was young, he dreamt of dancing the "Lake" but nature cast a bad spell on him by giving him a deformed body that he would remain imprisoned in forever. So, he used it as the subject of introspection based on ideals and standards of beauty, where he directed the bodies of prestigious dancers to which he confronted his own.

As a vector for an aesthetic ideal, Swan Lake, as an artistic piece of work, also refers to white Western culture. And it was in such terms that Robyn Orlin took it on, to describe the South African society that she came from. In *Daddy...*, she does not genuinely revise the ballet but uses it to evoke white supremacy during Apartheid. The black dancer, who powders herself with flour, symbolizes racial discrimination: does her colour not

exclude her ipso facto from the procession of white swans, and at the same time, from the ruling classes?

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Other new interpretation of works

"Giselle"

"G", Garry Steward, Austrian Dance Theater, 2008.

"Giselle ou le mensonge romantique", Maryse Delente, Ballet du Nord, 1995

"Giselle Créole", Frederic Franklin, Dance Theatre of Harlem, 1984.

"Pour Giselle" ; Michel Hallet Eghayan, 1982.

"Le Lac des Cygnes"

"Illusions – comme un Lac des cygnes", John Neumeier, Ballet de Hambourg, 1976

"Le Lac des cygnes", Bertrand d'At, Ballet de l'Opéra national du Rhin, 1998.

"Svansjön", Mats Ek, Ballet Cullberg, 1987.

Credits

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