

A ballerina in a white tutu with her arms raised against a blue background. The ballerina is wearing a white tutu with intricate detailing and a tiara. Her arms are raised high, and she is looking upwards. The background is a solid light blue color.

Queensland
Ballet

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR LI CUNXIN

SWAN LAKE

Production Notes for the Classroom

Contextual Information

Choreographer Ben Stevenson OBE after Petipa and Ivanov

Composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Conductor Nigel Gaynor

Music performed by Queensland Symphony Orchestra

Costume and Set Designer Kristian Fredrikson

OVERVIEW

One of the greatest ballets of all time, *Swan Lake* is generally presented in either three or four acts and conveys the theme of good versus evil. Since the original 1877 production, *Swan Lake* has been re-staged and re-choreographed for companies all around the world, often using Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov's 1895 production as the basis.

Swan Lake is celebrated for the dual role of Odette and Odile, where each character is usually performed by the same dancer, requiring the performer to seamlessly balance artistry with virtuosic technique.

Julius Reisinger's 1877 production

The first production of *Swan Lake* was choreographed by Julius Reisinger to the music of Russian composer, Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky. Performed by the Bolshoi Ballet, the production premiered in 1877 at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow.

This premiere was not well-received, with near unanimous criticism concerning the dancers, orchestra, stage sets and Reisinger's choreography, which was considered unimaginative and unmemorable. In spite of the poor reaction to the premiere, the ballet nevertheless continued to be performed with numerous versions being choreographed over time.

Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov's 1895 production

One of the most influential versions of *Swan Lake* is Petipa and Ivanov's 1895 production, first performed by the Imperial Ballet at the Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg.

Choreographically, Petipa was more interested in form and structure than communicating a narrative to audiences. He aimed to communicate meaning metaphorically through more abstract movements than through storytelling and mime. These intentions were reflected in his use of well-defined formulae such as the grand pas de deux which consists of an opening adagio, variations for the two dancers and a coda.

Though focusing on structural elements, Petipa and Ivanov's *Swan Lake* still communicated a narrative, which differed from Reisinger's production by changing:

- Odette from a fairy swan-maiden to a cursed mortal woman;
- the ballet's villain from Odette's stepmother to the magician Von Rothbart; and
- the death of Odette and Prince Siegfried at the hands of Odette's stepmother to the act of committing suicide together.

OTHER NOTABLE PRODUCTIONS

Swan Lake has been re-staged and re-choreographed many times. One of the significant differences between the many versions of the productions performed today is the variable endings. These range from romantic and positive endings where Odette and Prince Siegfried happily unite after Von Rothbart is killed, through to tragic endings where Prince Siegfried is killed and Odette remains in swan form to mourn her loss.

Productions which have diverged more significantly from the 1877 production include Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* which replaces the female corps de ballet with male dancers and Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake* which combines the roles of Von Rothbart and Odile into that of a Baroness, shifting the focus of the narrative to a love triangle.



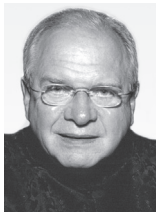
Ben Stevenson's production

BEN STEVENSON

After studying at the Arts Educational School in London, Ben Stevenson danced with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and English National Ballet where as a Principal Dancer he performed leading roles in all the classics.

In 1967 English National Ballet asked Stevenson to choreograph his first production, *The Sleeping Beauty*, which starred Margot Fonteyn. Between 1976 and 2003 Stevenson was the Artistic Director of the Houston Ballet, raising the company to international acclaim. Stevenson is currently Artistic Director of Texas Ballet Theatre.

Throughout his career Stevenson has choreographed and staged ballets for companies all around the world including Queensland Ballet, (*Cinderella* and *The Nutcracker*), English National Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Paris Opera Ballet and many more.



THE PRODUCTION

Based on Petipa and Ivanov's production, Stevenson's *Swan Lake* was first performed by Houston Ballet at the Hall for the Performing Arts, Houston in 1977. This production combines acts one and two together, and acts three and four together, to create a shorter, more condensed ballet. Originally, the production used the set and costume designs of independent designer William Pitkin, however the Queensland Ballet production will combine Stevenson's original choreography with Kristian Fredrikson's sets and costumes. Kristian Fredrikson's designs were originally commissioned for Russel Kerr's *Swan Lake* which was first performed by the Royal New Zealand Ballet at the St James Theatre, Wellington in 1996.

SYNOPSIS

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE — THE LAKESIDE

One day, Princess Odette is gathering flowers by the lake when the sorcerer Von Rothbart appears and transforms her into a swan.

SCENE ONE — THE COURTYARD AND CASTLE

Festivities are underway to celebrate Prince Siegfried's coming of age. The Prince is dismayed when reminded that he will soon be King. The Queen then presents him with the gift of a crossbow which excites him greatly. As he is left alone to contemplate his future, he suddenly observes white swans soaring overhead. Taking his crossbow, the prince follows them into the night.

SCENE TWO — THE LAKESIDE BY MOONLIGHT

While by the lakeside, one swan approaches the prince and transforms into Princess Odette. She explains that Von Rothbart cast a spell on her which can only be broken by someone who swears his love for her. Von Rothbart suddenly appears, and Prince Siegfried attempts to shoot the sorcerer. Odette explains that if he succeeds, the sorcerer's spell can never be broken. Soon after, Siegfried swears his vow of eternal love to Odette though she warns him that if he breaks his vow, she is doomed to remain a swan forever. At dawn, Odette returns to the lake and becomes a swan again.

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE — THE BALLROOM OF THE CASTLE

As the Prince dances with princesses from countries around the world, his mind is filled with thoughts of Odette. Von Rothbart and his daughter Odile, disguised as Odette, arrive. Siegfried believes Odile to be his swan princess, and Von Rothbart forces him to swear his love to Odile. As Von Rothbart and Odile return to their true forms, the prince realises he has been deceived. As Von Rothbart destroys the castle, Odette and her maidens appear.

SCENE TWO — THE LAKESIDE

Odette forgives Siegfried for his unwitting betrayal, and they agree to remain together until death. In his rage, Von Rothbart raises a storm, but the love of Odette and Prince Siegfried proves stronger than his magic. As the couple throw themselves into the lake, Von Rothbart too is destroyed.

Ben Stevenson's production

MOVEMENTS

Movements in Stevenson's *Swan Lake* are consistent with those of classical ballet including the emphasis on order, control, balance and harmony. Stevenson's choreography incorporates ballet movement vocabulary which, during corps de ballet sections, are danced in various symmetrical group formations and often travel through the space, creating kaleidoscopic floor pathways. The virtuosic movements require the dancers to possess a strong classical ballet technique, stamina and grace to execute.

Some movements are adapted to communicate various characters. For example, Odette and the other swans tilt their heads with a delicate swan-like grace while their arms undulate like flowing silk as if they are daintily fluttering through the space.

MUSIC

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was a Russian composer of the late-Romantic period who is well known for composing the ballets *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) and *The Nutcracker* (1892).

In 1875 Tchaikovsky was commissioned to compose the music for *Swan Lake*. The critics of this performance thought Tchaikovsky's score to be far too complicated for a ballet production.

After Tchaikovsky's death, and with permission from Tchaikovsky's brother, the score was revised by Riccardo Drigo for Petipa and Ivanov's 1895 production. This music is also used in Stevenson's version.

One of the key musical features of *Swan Lake* is the central theme played on the oboe. The haunting and sorrowful power of this enchanting tune, and the tone similarity between the oboe and a swan's call, have led this theme to be one of the most famous for this instrument.



Ben Stevenson's production

SET AND LIGHTING

Designed by Kristian Fredrikson, the set reflects a Renaissance period and Pre-Raphaelite style. Each scene consists of a series of painted portals, cut-drops and backdrops which set the narrative in each environment and sometimes act as a metaphor for different characters.

One example includes the relationship between the dilapidated section of the palace painted on the backdrop in Act One, Scene Two and Prince Siegfried's own brooding personality. In contrast, the royal gala set (Act Two, Scene One) depicts a rich and opulent royal ballroom painted with gold and red hues, complete with a throne.

Lighting in *Swan Lake* enhances the environmental setting. For example in Act One, Scene Two light shines down between the leaves, highlighting some of the architecture and creating a forest canopy effect. In contrast, during the lake scenes, blue side lighting and back lighting is used to create a moon-lit atmosphere.

COSTUMES

Designed by Fredrikson for Russel Kerr's *Swan Lake*, the costumes are Renaissance inspired. The wealthy characters wear lavish, heavy and layered outfits which boast their affluence. Made from rich reds, and metallic gold and silver fabrics, featuring puffy sleeves which accentuate shoulders and embellishments such as trims, ribbons and braids, the costumes are a definite reflection of the aristocrats' high socio-political status. Similarly reflecting the Renaissance style, the peasants' costumes are less lavish than their aristocratic counterparts.

In contrast to the nobility costumes, the swans' costumes are white and blue classical (pancake) tutus complete with feathered head pieces and pink tights. These tutus are made from light and transparent fabric which have been cut into jagged shapes to create a feathered effect.



Q & A with Mary Li

BALLET MISTRESS AND PRINCIPAL RÉPÉTITEUR

Many would say ballet requires a balance between artistry and physical technique. Can you describe this balance?

Ballet absolutely requires a balance between artistry and physical technique. Fundamentally, a dancer has to be able to convey a story, theme or concept to audiences. The more that a dancer is able to relate to the other dancers on stage and communicate the story or theme, the more audiences will be able to understand or enjoy the production.

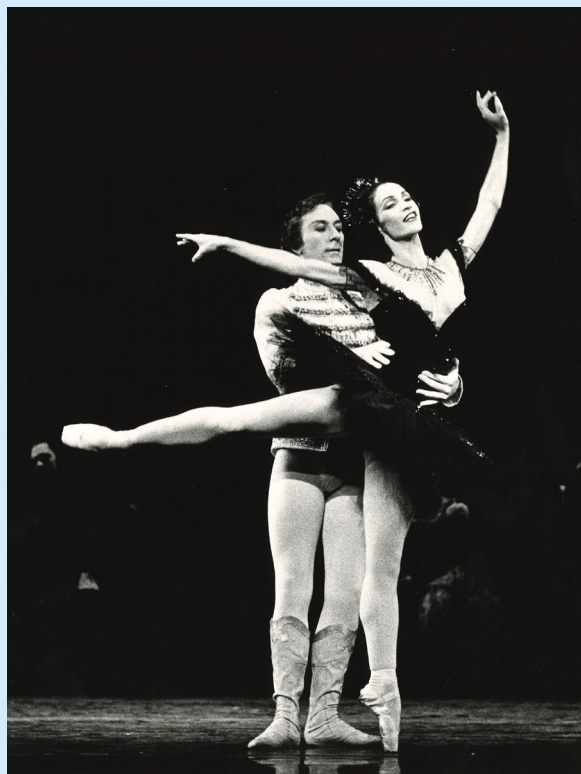
Ballet also requires a strong physical technique which continues to improve from training through to a professional career. It's a never-ending quest for technical excellence which dancers have to consistently work at to improve every day.

The balance between the two aspects evolves throughout a dancer's journey — as dancers progress past their technical peak, their artistry may develop further.

How did you balance this dual requirement when dancing?

For me, I would first work on learning the steps and achieving the technique required. The artistry would then naturally follow.

This may change depending on the dancer, the work they're learning and rehearsing, the choreographer working with them and how the choreographer perceives them. Sometimes a choreographer can help a dancer achieve something they didn't even know was possible. However, younger dancers definitely have to push their technique so that they are able to reach the physical standard required to perform significant ballets such as *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*.



Q & A with Mary Li

BALLET MISTRESS AND PRINCIPAL RÉPÉTITEUR

Swan Lake is a beautiful, challenging and historic ballet. Tell us about your performances of this iconic ballet and the roles you danced.

I was privileged to be able to perform a few versions of the production at several points in my career. This allowed me to work on a ballet I had previously conquered physically and to develop each time I was able to repeat a role.

I first performed the dual role of Odette and Odile in John Field's *Swan Lake* (1982) with the London Festival Ballet (now known as English National Ballet) at the London Coliseum. I was quite nervous before my debut in this dual role. I also performed other roles in this production including a swan, the pas de trois, czardas and a technically difficult role that was created for me named the Russian Girl.

In 1987 I performed Ben Stevenson's version of *Swan Lake* at New York City Centre. At the time I was 27 and Ben assisted me in developing the artistic and musical aspects of the dual role of Odette and Odile.

I was later coached by Margot Fonteyn when we restaged Ben Stevenson's *Swan Lake*. Margot came from the English tradition, so she told the story through the music and wasn't extreme in her physical technique. Margot understood the relationships the story and movements have with the music and was able to articulate this in a clear and gentle manner. She humanised the narrative and role for me in a way that changed my interpretation. She taught me to tell the story, my story, through my own way instead of trying to be someone else.

How would you describe the difference between the white swan, Odette, and black swan, Odile, and what were some of the challenges of performing this dual role?

Odette is a very vulnerable character which requires the performer to be soft and gentle. In contrast, Odile is confident, wanting to deceive and seduce Prince Siegfried. They're both equally challenging in their own way.

A challenging moment for Odette is her Act One, Scene Two entrance where she is required to run on stage, perform a grand jeté and posé immediately into an arabesque en pointe. Technically challenging in itself, this choreography also requires the dancer to tilt her chin and maintain graceful and soft arms reminiscent of feathered wings.

In contrast, Odile requires the performer to possess a high level of stamina. You are exhausted by the time you perform the famous 32 fouetté sequence in Act Two, Scene One. If you don't possess a natural strength, this role is particularly challenging.

Personally, I think I was probably more suited to Odile but I worked very hard at the soft movement qualities required for Odette. So in the end, I think I had more success performing the white swan, Odette.

What makes Ben Stevenson's Swan Lake different to any other versions of this ballet you have performed?

Ben Stevenson's storytelling is particularly brilliant. Throughout the rehearsal period he would consistently communicate the story, helping us relate to each other and the characters we were performing. He was very encouraging, sometimes providing some backstory to the characters but also allowing room for us to explore our own interpretations.

Also, the pas de deux that he choreographed for Act Two, Scene Two is one of the most beautiful pas de deux I have ever performed. The lyrical movement quality and relationship with the music is breathtaking and makes you want to weep.

How have you used your knowledge and experience of technique and artistry to prepare/coach the Queensland Ballet dancers?

All dancers are different, each with their own strengths and challenges they need to work on. I therefore tailor my approach differently for each dancer so they feel confident executing the movements. I share everything I have learned that will help them achieve the physical technique required for different roles and enable them to be confident to perform at the best of their ability.

In your eyes, what does it mean to coach a dancer to be ready for the stage, and when do you know they are ready?

It is truly a fine process as I have to assist the dancers to be at their peak when they enter the theatre, and not over-prepared where they become bored, or under-prepared where they are not confident. It is like building blocks where the artistic staff have to help the dancers be ready both physically and mentally.

When the dancers are performing the movements consistently well, we know they're ready for the stage.



Queensland Ballet

For more information about how Queensland Ballet supports students and teachers, or to discuss ways to get involved with us, please contact:

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