

Matthew Bourne's, Swan Lake

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order to come to better terms with the classical masterpiece itself.

The ballet tells the story of a young prince caught in the midst of his own sexual self-discovery. (In a rather audacious gesture, the play opens with the prince masturbating in his oversized bed — itself a stage of sorts.) Subsequent scenes demonstrate the connection between power and sexuality and highlight society's insistence on the heterosexual norm. While those around the prince encourage and pressure him to take up traditional roles and rituals, he feels drawn to a wilder ideal, one represented by his encounter with the swans on a late night walk through the park.

Bare-chested and muscular, the swans seize the stage with both menace and grace. They frighten the prince, yet intrigue him with their beauty and physicality, their undeniable sensuality. In choreographing their dances, Bourne incorporated an awkward and potentially violent character to their movements, something in keeping with the actual nature of swans — and, in many ways, of men. Gone are the lithe, pretty ballerinas prancing across the set *en pointe*. In their place Bourne gives us crew cuts and war paint

— and a sexual force to be reckoned with.

One swan in particular catches the prince's eye and, subsequently, his heart as well. Obviously unsettled by this development, the other swans become aggressive and territorial, inflating their own sense of masculinity in response. Likewise, the prince's mother and the royal attendants step up their efforts to reinforce both gender roles and the heterosexual dynamic. The result is painfully tragic to watch, and yet leaves one with the uncanny sensation that this was and always has been the true meaning of the story.

Swan Lake is full of visual and musical spectacle. Bourne makes the most of each on the stage, juxtaposing scenes of wild frenzy and comedy with quiet moments of heartfelt tenderness. Its joyous depiction of a developing gay love affair between the prince and his swan likewise finds counterpoint in the overt homophobia of the other swans. Hate crime as a result of (mostly male) territorial behavior has rarely been so vividly examined on the stage. The result is an incredibly affecting work of art that offers indelible images to those who experience it. Both mind and heart continue to reel

long after the final curtain has dropped.

Many critics have hailed Bourne as a creative genius for unlocking aspects of *Swan Lake* which had previously puzzled and perplexed some scholars of the work. Tchaikovsky's own latent homosexuality provides both relevance and validity to Bourne's rather deconstructive line of reasoning. Perhaps, as Bourne himself has suggested, Tchaikovsky had intended all along for the swans to be men. In its own time, however, such a production would have been virtually impossible. Today, however, its time has come. ▼



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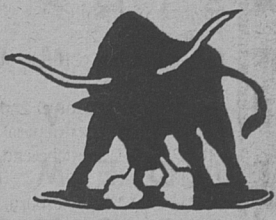
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