

## BUT WHEN THE BOLSHOI TACKLES *Swan Lake* ...

Many months ago, when I found out the Bolshoi Ballet was coming to town with *Swan Lake*, I felt I absolutely had to go see it. But the closer the date came, the less interested I became - lack of money for super-expensive seats; my friend, backstage-doorman Alex's unwillingness to sneak me in; I couldn't see how it would impact my writing, I mean I wasn't now going to write another piece on *Swan Lake* or amend what I'd already written.

So I left things to chance - and in the end, Alex just went up to the house manager at Hummingbird and asked for a favour - and got us two comps. Excellent!

We went to the run's second performance on a Wednesday, which delighted me because I was sure there would be lots of empty seats - and I was right. Perfectly enough, I saw it from the fourth row aisle-seat in the front orchestra, so the exact same row as the Kirov, only from the opposite side - how ideal for a comparison!

Here's the verdict - but first, the orchestra. We all know about Hummingbird's acoustics, but they seem to have gotten worse. Even from the front the sound is muffled and at its most loud the music still feels bed-ridden, blanket-covered - and the excessively small orchestra compounded the inability of creating a full and lush sound.

**Act I** - Ugly costumes; terrible décor; the King looked like a thug; the same nonsense with cups and trumpets; you got sick of the identical over-repeated court gestures whenever anyone entered; everything was bloodless, without energy or expression or excitement. You're supposed to be celebrating the Prince's coming-of-age party, for fuck's sake! And what's with the gift of a sword? Isn't he supposed to get a crossbow and go swan-hunting? Granted, the court jester was a compact dazzling dancer, but any kind of juvenile forced humour merely irritates me so I tried to ignore him.

Yet one thing was absolutely thrilling - the Prince himself. He looked like a boy - a fresh-faced 16-year-old! Awesome! He graduated the Bolshoi Academy five years ago and joined the company right away so he had to be 22 or 23, but boy did he ever look young, ok, maybe 18 - but still shocking, way younger than anyone on stage the whole night.

Leaving aside the incongruity of the Prince not having any coeval companions, his exceptional youth was still marvellous. You *want* your Juliet to look as close to 14 as possible (think NBOC's Elena Lobanova), you *want* your Romeo as close to 17 as possible and when the Prince is coming of age then, depending on the country, he's going to be 18 or 19 or 21. So now that you have the perfect

boy, what are you going to do with him? I say you don't make him dance like a God - any talented male dancer is going to be better at 23 and 28 than at 18, so can we please see his tender age reflected in the quality of his dancing? And we actually did, somewhat. I wanted to see him dance not fully formed - and yes, he did *not* have great extensions, his jumps were *not* too high, so that was lovely to watch, but I would have made more of it. The point is that in Act III his extensions and jumps were a touch better. Was that because he was less nervous? Because falling in love had made him more confident? Was he wanting to be as perfect as possible for his new swan-girl love? Anyway, I would have made the contrast between first and third acts more evident, more sharply clear - but all in all it was wonderful to see, though I remain skeptical. Since this was the only hint of anything actually resembling intelligence in the whole show it makes me fear the partially-realized contrast was not necessarily intentional but instead somehow accidental.

**Act II** - If possible, the décor was even uglier than in Act I with, inconceivably, no sense of water or lake, zero. Planted towards the back is this cumbersome fat-U-shaped metal frame to which is attached a partially see-through scrim. Lying on its side this bizarre contraption can "contain" things and that's how we first see a little group of swans - through finely-strung "fish-net". While writing just now I'm actually starting to understand what might have been the designer's thought-process. Since it was not possible to show, in a literal way, the swans under Rothbart's spell, why not be a little more concrete and have the swans "caught" in something resembling the front of a lobster trap? No matter. These swans were hardly specimens ideal for unfiltered viewing. Neither attractive nor desirable they were all rather boring, bland, with totally blank unchanging facial expressions. It felt like they did not want to be performing and were just going through the motions. Now I know these swans are not happy campers but the facial neutrality was very off-putting. Technically assured, yes, but cold. Lines nicely formed, yes, but inert. The cygnets were over-sized, over-fed, and had no spark. Man, if I ever got my hands on *Swan Lake*, I would sit those birds down and discuss thoroughly with them what they are supposed to be thinking and feeling. Were the Bolshoi swans *told* to be flat and unaffecting? They weren't particularly graceful either - they aroused no interest in me whatsoever. How disappointing can that be?

One fascinating exception - the Swan Queen herself. She was a little old, but that's ok, no reason why the Prince can't fall for a woman who looks more than ten years older than him, particularly one so graceful and with such beautiful and touching expressions painting her face.

Normally what happens is a progression: she's scared of being killed; she gets wooed; she falls in love; Rothbart fucks the Prince off. While this succession of events actually *does* happen, you'd never know it by the Swan Queen's body language. To begin with, she never seemed scared of the Prince and no wonder: no bow, no arrow. But when she starts to be won over by the Prince and agrees to marry him, we never sense the impact of attraction or love. Even

during their *pas de deux* her face remains in this narrow range of pained, anguished looks. It's as though deep down she does not feel anything is ever going to change; she has no hope; she is so traumatized she cannot imagine the Prince might actually be her saviour. You get the sense she feels fated to unhappiness and misery and all this Prince stuff is never going to change her life as she cannot imagine him having the power to defeat Rothbart (which plays nicely into the super-youth of the Prince). In general, I thought it was an interesting and acceptable interpretation, though, again, I cannot be sure what was intentional and what not - maybe she's one of those dancers who cannot help but be particularly expressive facially (NBOC's Xiao Nan Yu comes to mind).

Incidentally, Rothbart leaves the impression that he is *also* in control of the Prince as sometimes he gets the Prince to mimic his movements or seems to force the Prince to dance in unison with him. Ok, I don't buy it. I mean it's worthy of sitting down and discussing the idea while you're making the piece, but in the end, it does not make sense that Rothbart has the power to influence every human being on earth. It's much more sensible for Rothbart to have command *only* over the swans - otherwise, why not just dispense with the white swans altogether? If Rothbart has total control over the Prince then there's no need for the Black Swan to try and seduce him. Rothbart could just say - *You're getting married to that black swan over there*. Well, there goes the whole ballet.

It was only during this act that I was suddenly jolted to a fabulous realization - for once, no follow-spot light! Eureka! And no follow-spot ever. Hallelujah!

**Act III** - Things get worse. You know the three national dances and how much I loved them with the Kirov, how each one is supposed to be in sharp contrast to the other? Forget it. They all looked like similar soup out of cans. Where were the brides-to-be? It took me a long time to figure out that one of them was a soloist in each of the national dances. So here you have three guys and three girls in their national costumes and another girl in a completely different outfit (even more confusingly those wedding-dreamers all had dresses very similar to the Queen's) who is showing off and dancing in ways that are just not in keeping with the style of the national dance. Pathetic. I won't even bother commenting on the "tambourines". The mini-duets with the bride-wannabes? This Prince was not exactly adoring, but we saw none of the stiff discomfort of the Kirov's Prince.

The Black Swan section hits a new low. Remember that scrim? Well, not only does the Black Swan appear at court with Rothbart but she's also accompanied by a retinue of six black "caged" devotees. Soon the lighting is such that the court becomes entirely invisible, or rather, you see only vague outlines. The Black Swan is supposed to be fiery, sexy, seductive, with sharper moves, more angular choreography, displaying technical wizardry. Well, you got none of it. There seemed to be no difference between the swans of contrasting colours. That's missing the entire point.

Remember how I loved the Kirov brides-to-be, their sudden bubbly curiosity when the Black Swan entered? Incomprehensibly, here they had vanished, so suddenly I didn't even see them vaporize. The six accompanying black swans were pointless, they contributed absolutely nothing. Rothbart sitting in the King's chair beside the Queen seemed very wrong - again this business of him having power over every human, even royalty. The court does pop back into our vision when the Prince declares his love and they do their little solos. Here the Black Swan had a lot of trouble with her *fouettée* turns - oh well, they are not easy, but still, a principal dancer from the Bolshoi should not have to travel a quarter of the stage-space during her turns.

To cap everything off, there is the one brief appearance, like a vision up high, of the forsaken Swan Queen - god, that can be so beautiful and touching but in the Bolshoi's hands? Yes, they fucked it up, what else? First, you're supposed to see the Swan Queen *before* the Prince decides; there's really no point in her appearance after he's publicly declared his betrothal to the Black Swan. Second, you've got about three seconds to grab the Prince's attention, you have to be frantic, your arms flying up and down as fast as possible, *bouffée*ing as rapidly as you can. Indeed, the Swan Queen moved with some speed but conveyed none of the urgency and desperation; she was *not* fighting for her life. You might say that is all in keeping with the swan's sense of resignation, her feeling fated that this marriage is never going to happen. In that case, why even bother putting in a half-hearted appearance? Oh, it was all so painful to watch.

**Act IV** - Six black swans and a bunch of whites - no tension, just confusion. By this point I'm just disgusted with the whole thing, irritated and wishing it would end soon. Yes, it was *that* awful. I have no sense if it was the happy or the sad ending. I was no longer "present".

**Curtain call** - From the audience you saw that all the *corps* dancers had formed a big  $\cap$  encompassing the stage's back and sides, leaving tons of room for the principals and soloists to take their bows. And, yet again, there was that evidently indispensable fucking scrim-cage. How would you, as a dancer, feel during a curtain call if you were positioned in a way that was not clearly visible to the audience? The entire *corps* just stood still, vapid expressions on their faces. I certainly can't fault them for their complete indifference. Nor would I have criticized even any thumb-twiddling, scratching or sighs of impatience. When dancers are not respectfully presented I do not expect them to present themselves professionally.

**Audience** - Not well attended, large sections of empty seats on both sides of the floor-level. Not well received, a bit of a standing ovation at the end, except for one woman, sitting directly behind me, indisputably associated with the Bolshoi, who, throughout the performance, kept shouting *bravo* at every opportunity - but in a totally mechanical way. And she had a particularly annoying grating voice to boot. She also blabbed incessantly with her Bolshoi companion and I did something, as a reflex, something so rude I've never done

before: I lifted a hand to right beside my head and snapped my fingers loudly! They *did* shut up after that.

**Conclusion** - Shockingly disappointing. The Kirov choreography stays very connected to their original 1895 version; the Bolshoi uses director Grigorovich's updated 2001 version. You know how I loved the Kirov and, naturally enough, I really doubted I'd prefer the Bolshoi. But I went with an open mind and was shocked how the gulf in quality was so wide. I thank the gods I saw the Kirov first and was inspired to write at such length and detail - while this version feels barely worth commenting on.

Simply put, the Bolshoi just does not know how to do *Swan Lake*. Over a century ago they had first crack at it and they fucked it up so badly it went out of the repertoire in about seven years. Kirov's Lev Ivanov resuscitated *Swan Lake*, made it glorious, with Petipa filling in the blanks. The Bolshoi is heavy-handed, ham-fisted and gaudy - they utterly lack the exquisite sensitivity of the Kirov. Botched *Swan Lake*, bloody Bolshoi bullshit!

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