

## RARAE AVES

Every once in a rare while one has an experience so seismic as to cause a seeming internal convulsion. The axis of one's life seems to shift. This happened to me just recently when my entire nervous system was violently shaken upon seeing the Kirov Ballet's *Swan Lake* in Toronto.

I had looked forward to this event with real anticipation. Not only was I going to see the legendary company, its name reverted back to The Mariinsky Ballet – “Kirov” being excessively Stalin-tainted – but awaiting me was what must be called their signature piece. The convoluted history of *Swan Lake*'s creation does not begin, however, in St. Petersburg but rather at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre which commissioned Tchaikovsky to expand on what had already been composed for the children's “swan-ballet” performed at home by his extended family. The luscious music of this fleshed-out version was mostly praised, but its choreography was apparently so abysmal that no retooling and revising could salvage it. The original *Swan Lake* was dumped from Bolshoi's repertory less than a decade after its premiere.

Ironically enough, Tchaikovsky's death was needed to bring the ballet back to life. Kirov's incomparable Lev Ivanov created, for a memorial concert, completely different second-act choreography, and became creation-catalyst for a brand new work. The great Marius Petipa, Kirov's ballet-master, joined forces with Ivanov and a mere year later, in 1895, the second incarnation was complete. This, then, is the ballet, with minor changes, that has been handed down for our delectation.

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For me, a ballet-lover since childhood, the choreographer of two ballets myself, there was much at stake here. For the first time in my life I would be seeing “the real thing” – utterly pure Classical ballet, unadulterated and tradition-laden, danced by a company fiercely dedicated to preserving style's-authenticity, a company unmatched in Classical technique's excellence and in that era's artistry.

Don't we have here the feeling of a “museum piece”? A musty old thing dragged down from the attic with cobwebs, one hopes, all removed? Something irrelevant in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Age of Technology which should have been thrown into a dustbin decades ago instead of painstakingly preserved with the reverence accorded Lenin's corpse in its Mausoleum?

In thinking this way you would be wrong. This *Swan Lake* is as vital, vibrant and stunning as it must have been when created. And the analogy with Lenin is actually apposite. Were you to visit the Kremlin today and gaze at the glass-

encased marvel of Lenin's embalment, you would see he looks exactly like he had died ... well, yesterday.

Watching this ballet, I was transported into an otherworldly state: taken back in time by more than a century while in the presence of something mysterious, tragic, timeless, a magical realm having only the most tenuous connection with our own world. We all know many a girl, with the help of hot bath, hairdo, makeup and "fuck-me" dress, can transform her seemingly-dumpy self into a most desirable creature. But a girl-gaggle who live under a black-force compulsion which has transformed them into an oscillating dual existence between swan-by-day and a new species, a swan/girl hybrid, come nighttime? Not on this planet.

Wiping tears from my eyes, again and again, I was made to think about why I so treasure ballet. It was all directly in front of me. Yet I was also reminded of everything I loathe about this unique artform. So this is not a production-review (of which I saw two performances). Instead, I am taking this *Swan Lake* as a prototype, putting it under a magnifying glass – and then sharing with you my reflections on Classical ballet and its performance.

## **Perfection's Elusion**

So what is it about ballet I "so treasure"?

To start: the sheer aesthetic beauty of looking at dancers' bodies moving in space. They are every bit as much athletes as artists. Not only are these bodies in superb shape, but trained to execute each position and movement in a way that most heightens its visual impact, accentuating and communicating its maximum beauty, a physical ideal with roots in Greek and Roman sculpture. The awareness of where each body-part must ideally be and how it relates to physique's remainder produces a magnificent unity of composition.

When the steps, turns and jumps are joined together, in *enchaînements*, an enormous amount of care goes into the connective "tissue", the way one position "bleeds" into another with economy, clarity and precision. This fluidity, by a great dancer, creates a gracefulness seeming more feline than human.

Consider the relationship between dancer and music, how the dancer *embodies* the music, moves *inside* the music. Here all technique is subsumed to orchestral sounds. A particular thrill is to see a sensitive conductor, attuned to the soloist, who will make the tiniest adjustments – a hesitation here, a tempo speed-up there – in order to complement and be at one with the dancer during *this* particular performance. Here is artistry's evincement.

Every pose or motion in ballet is codified and has a name. Over centuries ballet's aesthetics have evolved; ideals have shifted along with a much deeper understanding of physiology resulting in more thorough and pinpoint training, which in turn has fostered greater strength and stamina allowing higher leaps, more multiple turns, etc. Different schools have different approaches, certain preferences – arms extended this way, feet placed that way – variants imperceptible to the general public. To the trained eye, though, it is possible to identify not only any given dancer's training-school, but also to confidently name the company the dancer performs with.

Curiously enough, despite the evolutions and stylistic adherences, the lexicon has remained essentially the same for over 100 years. This is one of ballet choreography's marvels – I may not speak any Japanese but I can go to the Orient and create new work because everyone will know exactly what a *sissonne*, an *échappé*, a *pas de chat* is. (Nevertheless I would need an assistant fluent in my language as well as Japanese. Other choreographers might very well manage without one.)

Beyond the fact one choreographer's ideal *arabesque* may look a trifle different from another's, it is important to understand a whole gamut of emotions may be expressed by any given step. A *sissonne*, for example, may appear halting, wistful, sad, just as easily as strong, courageous and angry. So the issue is not only about correct step-execution but also the emotional essence it wishes to express. The dancer must calibrate the precise feeling he wishes each step to be infused with.

One must remember dancers are also actors, portraying characters, playing roles. Here arises interpretation. How, exactly, does she convey the forsaken maiden's distress? In what manner does he best express the Prince's inner turmoil? Each moment demands clear choreographic expression. Personality and interpretation – this is how the stamp is put on a role, how it is made one's own.

However a great deal more lies below the surface. How did the dancer attain such high skill-level? Here my admiration is boundless because, never having been a dancer myself but having trained as a concert pianist and having spent considerable time with ballet dancers, I have a very clear idea of the enormous sacrifices made in order to reach their individual plateaux.

It is trite to say “they work really hard” or “they put in a lot of effort”. It is considerably more complicated and complex. In essence, all excellent dancers have devoted their lives to their art. Life becomes an incessant striving to achieve that excellence.

At an early age – boys begin usually later than girls – one starts learning the technique, a long, arduous process occurring in continual stages as the body

develops and grows stronger. It is unimaginable any girl under age nine would be allowed to begin wearing pointe shoes, yet most would have acquired the requisite strength by age eleven. Learning technique is a process of accretion. It begins, naturally enough, with the basics, the foundation upon which everything else is built.

This pursuit is so trying and frustrating as everything is interconnected. Each body-part must be in correct relation to every other part and it is maddeningly difficult to simultaneously remember – and execute – the dozen-or-so requisite muscular positionings to achieve the ideal effect. It is dizzying to contemplate. Of course the dancer is not constantly thinking about every aspect of his body. After time, technique-elements become ingrained. However, it is so easy to focus on one specific recently-pointed-out flaw only to accidentally disregard another essential necessity, resulting in a different kind of misalignment. And the dancer himself will not even be aware of it – hence the need for an “outside eye”, the fellow-dancer's reminder, the ballet mistress' nudge. Mirrors help only up to a certain point. Every physique is unique and not only must everything look like it should, but it must also *feel* right. The correct use of a certain muscle is not necessarily visible to the eye. Few people are as acutely aware of their bodies as dancers.

Once a certain level is attained, the passion sustained, and the commitment made to devote oneself to dance, then a rigid discipline sets in. One must go to class every morning, never mind the desire to sleep in. This leg is sore, that shoulder hurts. No matter. Work through it. The left knee refuses to bend properly, it will not obey mental commands. Figure it out. It is not uncommon for a dancer, male or female, to become so upset she will burst into tears, or he will go to a studio-corner and try not to cry.

In school, a teacher may rarely pay attention to a certain pupil. That girl knows she should be getting more “corrections”. Well, that's *really* unfortunate. A year later, a new teacher might have a somewhat different approach to technique. If he is moving in a direction that pleases, that can be refreshing, liberating, exhilarating. On the other hand, having to re-learn, re-think, can be bewildering and depressing.

Speaking of depressing, there will always be more students than jobs in a company. This is an inalienable fact of life: endless competition, whether one likes it or not. One will have helpful friends as well as spiteful enemies. Dancers will be just as loving – and cruel – as everyone else.

Earlier I mentioned how unfortunate it is when a student receives insufficient attention. But this is equally applicable to any professional dancer. Attention, even in the form of criticism, shows support. It means the ballet mistress or choreographer *cares*, wants to see a better dancer, wants to be proud. A chain reaction occurs, affecting the dancer psychologically – feedback is essential

and when dispersed, this concern engenders well-being. Confidence now grows and will absolutely show in performance. The converse also applies. One cannot escape the persistent gnawing feeling one's worth must constantly be proved to the Company. When no response is elicited, dancers will *not* assume all is well but rather the opposite. Once insecurity takes root, it eats away and corrodes. And what a struggle to regain confidence, to re-establish critical ground-level pride!

What I have just described is not unique to dance. I don't think for a moment life is one jot easier for Olympic gymnasts. The world's great chefs train mercilessly, continually learning new techniques as they attempt to bring out ingredient-essences and flavour-enhancements. Any serious creator must devote countless demanding hours to attain command of his art.

Ballet dancers, however, face an additional, particularly trying hurdle. No matter how difficult any movement is, it must appear effortless. All bodies weigh a certain number of pounds but they should appear as light as the proverbial feather. Gravity's pull is inexorable but dancers must often convey the sense they, like gossamer, are floating in air. The dancer's quest for perfection is quite daunting – it is, and will always remain, unattainable.

Naturally, good days *do* arrive: movement comes easily and the body feels joy when dancing seems second nature. There are even those magical performances, occurring perhaps only once or twice in a career, when the body seems to transcend reality and by some miracle everything happens effortlessly, everything actually *does* feel perfect.

But for the most part, the dedication is grueling, punishing. Daily life is usually a trial - dancers receive considerably more criticism than praise. It is an existence full of moments of grinding sadness as with maturity and experience artistry only deepens – just as corporeality becomes inescapably weaker, more worn out, more pain-ridden. And it is a fleeting life – few dancers perform after age forty. Ballet demands resilience, courage, relentless physical stamina and mental strength.

Amidst all this art's beauty, often overlooked is how dangerous it really is. Lurking behind all that seeming effortlessness is often a dire menace. A few drops of sweat on the dancefloor can make one slip: now an ankle is sprained. A moment's lack of concentration during a jump can result in a poorly placed landing: now some foot-bones are fractured. Any movement *en pointe* is inherently fraught with peril – barely twelve square inches bear the entire body's weight. And getting over an injury is such a painful process. The dancer so badly wants to recover quickly and get back to work. But patience, patience, patience. Returning too early, before the injury has fully healed, will only aggravate the problem, thus lengthening the healing process.

Every devotee has favourite steps and I love a great many of them. To watch a ballerina poised vertiginously, still, *en pointe*, is breathtaking. It is as though time has stopped. To see her *bouurrée* back and forth is nothing short of a marvel, like skimming on water. To watch a male, one arm stretched out, the other holding her seemingly-limp body in a deep back-bend encapsulates the surrender of love.

This knowledge of what each dancer has endured to bring me this magnificence fills me with deep appreciation, gratitude and respect. The ferocity of sustained concentration stuns me with awe. But most of all, while watching ballet at its greatest, my heart is cracked by beauty, my mind and spirit are exalted.

## **Belief Suspended**

So what is there to “loathe”?

Quite a bit, actually.

Now I must go into some length about “suspension of disbelief”, an expression coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge back in 1817, a concept I have always not only disliked but found very difficult to comprehend.

The struggle lies with the term having an array of meanings – working simultaneously on several levels – and its application is unique to various genres. In essence, though, “suspension of disbelief” means you are willing to believe or accept something to be “true”, to be “reality”, even when you know perfectly well this is not the case. You “suspend your disbelief” in order to accept certain crucial premises of the play, film or ballet you are presently watching.

For example, even though you know you are looking at a man on stage named Rudolf Nureyev, you are supposed to “suspend your disbelief” and believe that he is *not* Nureyev but rather a Prince. So where does “belief” enter the picture? Belief implies having faith (I believe in God) whereas fact is an expression of concrete reality (There are six glasses on this table). But since I actually *know* the dancer on stage is Nureyev, there is nothing to *believe*. And since there is nothing to *believe*, the whole notion of *disbelief* should not even enter the picture. When I take Nureyev to be a Prince, what I am actually “suspending” is – call it *truth*, call it *reality*. The whole term is a misconception, barking up the wrong tree, working on a false premise. This misnomer should never have gained currency. No wonder I have such a rough time with it.

Just to stir the waters more turbid, Coleridge actually wrote “*willing* suspension of disbelief”. As opposed to *unwilling*? Will has nothing to do with it. I don’t think the curtain goes up and you say to yourself – *I know this is Nureyev but I am now going to believe he is in fact a Prince*. I think that whole process is

involuntary and occurs split-second. Furthermore, I think most spectators' minds go back and forth during the performance. When Nureyev bows to Natalia Makarova, you very possibly will be immersed in the story and see the Prince greeting the Swan Queen. But two minutes later, when Nureyev makes a spectacular jump you may well think – *There is no dancer in the world like Rudi.*

One fact you do not have to “disbelieve” is my brain does not work like Coleridge’s. Mine is much simpler. And since I rather doubt that my antidotes, “suspension of truth” or “suppression of reality” will ever take hold among the general public, I will, alas, be obliged to continue using this unpalatable terminology.

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In *Swan Lake* then, how do we need to “suspend our disbelief”? During Acts I and III we are not in a theatre, not in Toronto, not living in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century capitalist democracy. Instead we are in a European kingdom’s ballroom, in feudal times, observing a Prince’s birthday party and then watching the presentation of half-a-dozen maidens from whom this Prince is to choose one to be his wife. During Acts II and IV we are transported to a lake-side in an entirely different sphere of existence where a malevolent sorcerer has transformed innocent young women into swans and half-swan/half-women, all helplessly submissive within his iron grip.

So far, so good. I have no difficulty accepting both these worlds, foreign as they may be to my experience on Earth. Problems arise when inconsistencies occur within the framework of these different worlds.

For example, if you want me to sustain my belief we are in, say, 18<sup>th</sup> Century France, you cannot have a character turn on the TV for the simple reason that televisions did not exist at that time. For the same reason you cannot have someone pick up the phone, never mind send a text-message. It shatters the illusion. Different centuries do not exist simultaneously unless it is a science-fiction novel's premise, certainly not the case with *Swan Lake*.

I am glad to say the Kirov did not offer anything remotely as egregious. In fact, what I am about to complain about might well strike you as being petty, inconsequential in the grand scheme. But for me these seemingly-small lapses are nothing less than destructive and ruinous. And, in every case, unnecessary, easily avoidable or effortless to remedy.

Before getting into specifics, I want to make clear I have no such complaints about either Acts II or IV. Why? Because both occurred in the same unearthly place, a “fairy-tale” existence where we are lured into a make-believe realm where the terms are fashioned exclusively by its creator. An *imaginary* world, not a real one. Under such conditions criticism might be directed only at lack of

coherence, some inconsistencies, contradictions and oversights disturbing the unity of this, as it happens, monstrous idyll. But there was nothing at all jarring – well, almost nothing – in the blue-and-white sensuous waters of this *Swan Lake*.

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Let us begin with Act I where we witness the Prince's birthday-celebration. Someone pretends to be strumming a lute. This was a common instrument during feudal times. But why not a *real* lute? Why was he pretending to play this obvious simulacrum from Kirov's prop-shop?

I have always had a problem – call it congenital – when easily obtainable objects are substituted with fakes. I take equal offense when people on stage mime activities that could easily be actually done. It only subverts the illusion that so much trouble has gone into fostering. I say: if you cannot have the real thing, then do not have it at all; if you cannot do the real thing, then do not do it at all.

My other "lute"-issue was the orchestral music accompanying "lute"-playing. There was nothing sounding remotely like a lute. Now if Tchaikovsky had written a simple melody that was performed by pizzicato strings then the "lute"-playing might have made some sense. In that case, why not have one of the males learn to play the tune on an actual lute? Surely that would take only a few dozen hours to master. Quite conceivably it might even give the dancer real pleasure. With appropriate music, a real lute, real string-plucking in time with the orchestra – that would have been charming, delightful.

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I will now move on to the "brass" goblets: I happily accept both the "alcohol" and cups. What is a coming-of-age party without a bounty of fine wine? But why push my "suspension of disbelief" to include imagining non-existent liquid?

Simply put, one does not dance with wineglass in hand, particularly when the movements are energetic and arms are flying about. It is foolish to do so – unless, of course, the intent is to "baptize" your partners with Chardonnay or "christen" the floor with Champagne.

Yet now I will tell you what I saw: maybe six young men dancing, cups in hands, arms sweeping from side to side. Any wine-dribbles on the floor? Of course not. Any wine stains on partners' costumes? None I could see. Then arms describing big curves. Was there a corresponding lovely red arc in air? I'm afraid not. Someone threw a cup across the stage to a friend. On opening night the friend dropped it. Did any wine spill out? Hardly. But that makes sense – the dancer was tossing away an empty cup. But if true, why did he choose to dance with an empty cup in the first place? And I swear: moments later the

catching-impaired reveler “drank” deeply and ostentatiously from that very same cup, one never refilled. This was followed by arms swinging up and down. Was the corresponding result an array of fascinating Rorschach blots momentarily suspended in mid-air? By now you must know my queries are purely rhetorical.

I’m curious: are all these complaints mere quibbles, do you find me picky and fussy? Has this dead-horse flogging become tedious, point made, time to move on? Well, for me it was not only tedious but really irritating to continue watching, minutes on end, this ridiculous series of incongruities.

An alternative, erasing my caveats, requires little imagination. By all means have dozens of goblets. Yes, let's make an exception and fill them with water, not wine – dancers perform best while sober and ballet is dangerous enough without inebriation. Let’s have multiple toasts to the birthday boy’s health and prosperity. But why dance with cups in hand? A wet floor could, without exaggeration, cause a career-ending injury. There is no reason why dancing cannot be *interspersed* with drinking. It is simply a more sensible, more practical alternative and I have no doubt the performers would happily abide. Ballet dancers exert an enormous amount of energy, they sweat a great deal. Backstage is littered with water bottles. Clinking goblets and drinking fresh cool water between dances would be a pleasure.

Another critical issue, though, is the hands themselves. So much care is given to arm positions, how hands look. The hand holding a cup – and these cups are ugly – verges on disfiguration, an excrescence. The purity of “line” – so essential to ballet's beauty – is broken. Arms now end in stumps.

Nice.

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Now we move on to the lanterns. Since we have “suspended our disbelief” we know we are in a time pre-dating electricity thus candles would be the light-providers. Lanterns provide illumination and are particularly useful because easily portable, possibly charmingly bunched together and amenable to being raised and lowered. They can be pretty, decorative and their soft light can even cast a romantic haze, certainly having their place at a birthday bash. But ... is it necessary to dance with them? Can they not just be put in place and perhaps occasionally repositioned?

You are by now aware I strongly prefer “the real thing” if at all attainable. Being aware, however, of strict laws concerning “open flame” on stage, I would not have been disturbed by battery-operated devices, nor even by the more recent inventions imitating candle-flickerings.

But no, the powers-that-be insisted these lanterns, attached moreover to long poles, must be danced with. And that just bewilders my mind. Rudimentary, cheap-metal lanterns were hung from a chain, the glass-pane rectangle protecting the “belief-suspended” candle from wind. However, any back and forth lantern-swinging will cause molten wax to fly about, thus impeding illumination. Besides, despite glass-cage protection, the candle will not withstand rapid to-and-fro movements and will soon be extinguished. Even worse, horsing around with lanterns is an invitation to disaster. But wait – shards of broken glass? Why not? Let’s raise the danger level another notch. A hot-wax streak landing on a pretty dancer’s face? Absolutely. It would be interesting to see if she could “stay in character” and, you never know, maybe a fine line of off-white beeswax might actually heighten her beauty.

But seriously – what were they thinking? Am I supposed to understand gods decreeing, in great festivities' honour, these candles to be unquenchable eternal flames? That the lantern casings are impervious to collision, un-smashable, made of heavenly alloys? This transcends “suspension of disbelief” into pure mysticism.

Beyond these rather obvious concerns I find something considerably more disturbing here. Classical ballet is an art of heightened grace. It is all about seamless fluidity, crystalline elegance. Lanterns in motion are ungainly and clunky. This clash between beautifully controlled bodies and wildly jiggery, juddery lanterns was dissonant, discordant. It was dismaying, almost painful to watch. I sat in my seat, shaking my head. Yes, in disbelief.

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In Act III we see two musicians on opposing balconies wielding incredibly long fake trumpets. Throughout the act they stiffly stand at attention but whenever the orchestra’s brass section sounds a fanfare announcing an important personage's entrance, the two “trumpeters” slowly outline a big arc, from left to right, as they pretend to blow their instruments. I suppose you could argue this arc is essential to leaving the impression everyone on stage is alerted to the momentous arrivals.

But consider the following: if both horns and blowing were actually real, the fanfare-sound would travel, from one audience-area to another – whereas the actual orchestral sound is continually and exclusively aimed directly at everyone's ears. What is portrayed on stage is in direct conflict with what we hear.

Again, it is not as though we are facing an intractable problem. Simply direct the trumpet “players” to aim their instruments upwards on a 45-degree angle and stay there for fanfare’s duration. Everyone on stage would undoubtedly be alerted, and the audience would see what it actually hears – a consistency of sound.

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The spectacular Spanish-dance performance, still Act III, full of crisp and flamboyant *élan* was, alas, marred by the “tambourine”-waving young ladies. By now you must be able to divine what you’re about to read. The tambourines were, of course, not real, lacking an essential component, the crescent-shaped band of double-paired mini-cymbals that create the unique percussive sparkle. It is not as if true tambourines are difficult to find. Nor are they expensive. Moreover, the Spanish flavour is distinctly heightened. So why are the dancers – and we – obliged to tolerate shoddily-made artifacts? You have one of the greatest ballet companies in the world and you impose pathetic imitations on them? It beggars my mind.

What exactly might compel this ersatz-percussion's usage? The dancers certainly employed the instrument's drum nature with energy. So might it be the jangly “noise”, does it interfere with Tchaikovsky’s music? No better explanation comes to mind. But it is still a sham. We hear such undeniable authenticity in real tambourines' sound and I really don’t think Tchaikovsky would have objected – though we will never know as he died two years before that 1895 premiere. I can’t help feel, however, that spirited tambourine-slaps in concert with those shimmering metallic cascades vigorously punctuating his Spanish interlude could only have deeply pleased him.

If indeed concern lies with cymbals' sound, then, for heaven’s sake, acquire *actual* tambourines and remove the offending metal discs. That way you will have something at least in the *ballpark* of a tambourine as opposed to a cheap-looking, dull-sounding stand-in. If we were supposed to imagine these “tambourines” to be real, then this goes beyond any reasonable demand on our “suspension of disbelief”. Instead we are aggrieved by a *miscarriage* of belief.

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These affronts to our intelligence and credulity occur throughout ballet's history on a consistent basis. The “make-*believe*” worlds to which we are summoned seem to enforce a hard-and-fast rule: any prop that could be the real object must be eschewed in replica's favour.

The rare occasions *actual* objects are used as props often produce beautiful results. The scarf in *La Sylphide* floats gracefully in the air and is light enough to never disturb the “line”. The raised hands supporting each ribbon in *La Fille Mal Gardée* always appear elegant while forming the maypole.

Yet ballet seems oblivious to the effects it creates when persisting to tread on ever-trickier territory. In *Romeo and Juliet* I have seen rapiers held aloft, one hand on the hilt, the other clasping near the point. A rapier’s blade is frightfully sharp. Grasping one with a naked hand is simply not feasible. Fingers would not

be lost, just one's use of them, as ligaments and tendons would be severed. And *real* parrots perched on the *La Bayadere* ladies' hands would not tolerate being flailed around. Those temple maidens would scream and bleed when outraged parrots would dig in their claws.

Even more egregious instances occur: *Diana and Acteon* reduces one to abject perplexity. As goddess of the hunt, it makes sense for her to be in constant bow-possession. That no arrows are visible is peculiar but forgivable – perhaps they are hidden but readily at hand. But why does she lift that bow above her head with both hands at its ends? Well, this allows Acteon, a mortal hunter, to grasp the middle of the bow with one hand and walk around her in a circle. Diana is *en pointe* and the bow assists her maintaining balance. The prop is not used for its natural purpose but exclusively as an *aide choréographique*.

Once that 360-degree *promenade* is finished, Diana opens her hands and Acteon not only relieves her of the bow but runs to toss it in the wings. How a goddess would allow her symbol, her power-source, her essence-expression, to be touched by any mortal is beyond me. Allowing Acteon its actual possession and the removal from her sight defies all comprehension. One might think Diana's releasing her bow's grip might signal a surrender, a willingness to be taken. However nothing could be further from the truth. Diana is, in fact, enraged. Come to think of it, why do we, at this point, even see Acteon as a *man*? He has just unwittingly stumbled upon the naked goddess bathing and Diana, unmerciful, has by now changed the hapless hunter into a stag, soon to be devoured by his own hounds.

Disconcerting, although in a totally different way, are the lyre, mask and tablet (representing the Greek dance/music, mime and poetry muses) in Balanchine's daringly innovative *Apollo*. He so successfully managed to create tableaux – angular, spiky, complex images – making us see ballet with new eyes. Yet his magnificent vision is marred by using a mini-non-lyre, etc. I understand the desire to align each muse with her discipline but that can be achieved in ways other than token faux-miniatures. There could be, for example, three sculptural “stations” from which the muses appear, thus marking them for ballet's duration. And treating symbol as real object, in this case “strumming” the lyre, “writing” on the tablet, unnecessarily conflates a signifier with the thing itself.

Curious: *Apollo's* inspirational force was to celebrate the arts yet certain aspects end up leaning more towards a debasement. Irrespective of Balanchine's attitude towards creating great work – *Just keep making ballets and every once in a while one will be a masterpiece* – it is particularly dismaying to see him come so close but fall short for reasons hardly demanding genius.

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The next hobby-horse I will rock on concerns two inextricably entwined performance-aspects: bows and applause. I will not argue against the existence of either element but do have serious concerns with procedures involving them both.

Generally speaking, I would prefer applause to be restricted to any Act's end, in other words when the dancing is finished – though I am receptive to spontaneous cries of *Bravo*. Such a compliment to the dancers! The audience member is saying, in effect – *This was so wonderful, brilliant, amazing, I can't possibly contain myself. I need to express my appreciation right now.* A perfect example is any ballet containing the technical feat of 32 *fouettée* turns. Midway through this showy virtuosity the ballerina begins – always, inevitably – to be showered with cheers.

For me, the problem starts when bowing and applause become reflexive, when spaces are created within the piece in order to allow for audience applause. Even worse: if the curtain call is over and the audience has more-or-less finished applauding, it is beyond me why the curtain needs to be raised again. Yes, I realize the company has prepared another, possibly slightly different, curtain call. Yes, it might be disappointing the show was not received as well as one would have preferred. But when applause is distinctly fading out or has even ended, is it not time to simply accept this fact? On numerous occasions I have seen large audience-chunks, coats on, ready to leave, but no – another curtain call is thrust upon them. Pathetic, these continual invitations to heap praise. I will never understand how one can derive pleasure from applause configured into a duty. It makes me think of the five-year-old's mother who instructs – *Now go and say thank you to Uncle Jim for that lovely beachball I know you are going to have so much fun playing with.*

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Here now is the routine we see over and over again: we watch a *pas de deux*, say, the Prince is wooing the Princess. They are apart, they come together, etc., he lifts her up, he places her down, etc. Towards the end they arrive at an almost-final position followed by several dramatic, usually rapid, orchestral chords allowing the dancers to make small, swift adjustments to create the truly final pose, perhaps tossing the head up, perhaps extending an arm wide, perhaps he is on bent knee and she hops onto his thigh and forms an *arabesque*. All movement abruptly stops with the music and the dancers remain motionless for a couple of seconds. The audience applauds.

Unless the performance was truly spectacular, the applause will stop and in silence the Prince leads the Princess to the stage-front. Now she bows, applause, she bows again, applause, he bows, applause, they both bow, applause. Finally they retreat (whether off-stage or back into position), applause stops, music begins, ballet resumes.

What was just described I find very upsetting and will try to explain why.

All Classical ballets tell stories; they ebb and flow from beginning to end. The breaking of continuity is irritating – just think the last time someone repeatedly interrupted while you were explaining the latest girlfriend-break-up.

Compounding this annoyance is my view – am I the only one? – that this chopping up into bite-sized pieces occurs for no reason whatsoever. Unless, of course, you consider praise-seeking, vanity, preening, to all be good reasons to slice up a narrative.

The whole point, until now, has been that we in the audience are by some wonderful circumstances privy to observing something through the invisible “fourth wall”. The premise is the audience is not really there.

At the end of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy the actor does not freeze in applause-anticipation. Nor does he amble to the front and take a bow to accept more plaudits. It would be ludicrous. Why, then, does this occur in ballet? What we are seeing on stage is supposed to represent exactly what happens in the story. Audience acknowledgment immediately breaks that illusion.

In *Swan Lake*'s second Act, the Prince courts and falls in love with Odette. You could say the other swans form the audience to this budding romance but it would be more accurate to say they are participants, co-conspirators. So, actually, there is an audience of only one – Rothbart, the loathsome sorcerer.

In the event, the Prince’s courtship becomes only more intense, Odette succumbs to his passion, the Prince swears eternal love. At no point does he consult with his Court (*Am I making the right choice?*) nor does he boast (*I’ll bet she’s never seen a guy jump so high!*). He has eyes only for the stunning Odette, he is in love’s throes, no one else in the world exists at this moment. Why, then, step outside the story and show something that never happened?

I do not understand why so much effort is put into creating a scene so “real” as to truly dispel any doubt, to allow for total “suspension of disbelief” – only to repeatedly undermine it. It is ridiculous for the audience to be yanked back and forth – now I am looking at lakeside swans, now I’m in Toronto massaging two dancers’ egos; now I am following a story, now I am complimenting the story-tellers. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century royal Prince has suddenly become today’s not-exactly-mundane Rudolf Nureyev.

When those aforementioned *pas de deux* dancers are frozen in that final position, let them stay in it a tiny bit longer. It may be difficult, but if they can hold it for two seconds, they probably should be able to hold it for another two. Then proceed directly with the story; no need for dancers to trek to the front and bow. The audience’s desire to applaud at these junctures is understandable but the effect is regrettably deleterious: the story is interrupted, the flow is broken, the

bow is not part of the narrative and results in encroachment upon characters' credibility.

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To talk about applause is to wade into muddy waters: it seems unclear to most people it is an option, a gift. You attend a show and, at its end, decide if you wish to applaud or not. If you loved the performance you may even cheer; conversely you might not clap but curse yourself for wasting an evening. But in all cases your response should be the expression of your will.

Accent on *should*. Perhaps I am conveying a specifically Anglo-Saxon sensibility, but most people feel they *must* applaud, whether in a manner sustained and spirited, or milder and perfunctory, depending on appreciation's degree. As long as one produces a *semblance* of applause. This "obligation" has several roots – feeling that dancers have worked hard, have done their best: they deserve it. Besides, it is "custom", it is "courtesy", whereas booing is unquestionably boorish. This attitude – in contrast to the prolonged insulting jeers one may encounter in Italian opera houses – is a manifestation of upbringing stating if you have nothing nice to say then say nothing at all.

But wait a minute. You paid for your ticket – you have every right to walk out, to withhold applause. The dancers "worked hard"? If you did not enjoy their work why should you applaud? Because otherwise you will hurt their feelings? They did "their best"? Well, that's their job, that's their *obligation*, that's what they get paid for. You came in hopes of a wonderful ballet, not strenuous exertions. As for the fraternally two-sided coin, "custom" and "courtesy"? It reminds me of tipping the restaurant waitress. Many feel, logically enough, if the service was excellent, it should be reflected in the tip. But if it was so-so or weak, then a tip at the "going rate" should still be left. Again, it is not a matter of choice, it is an obligation.

My feelings on this matter must, by now, be clear to you and explain why I am so disturbed when ballet directors take accolades for granted. Instead of being pleased by a positive reception, they operate on the presumption that applause is a "given".

By all means, do be *prepared* for the possibility of applause. When you feel that your ballet – or your dancers – are particularly wonderful, then, yes, imagine the *likelihood* of bravos. And when they do come cascading down, be grateful for them.

I want to interject here a couple of instances from my own experience as Artistic Director. We have produced several pieces ending in unanimous lack of applause – to my great satisfaction. Why? Because there are times when applause is inappropriate. For example, *The Last Supper*, a performance of

euthanasia, climaxed with a doctor administering life-ending injections. It was moving and tragic. No doubt there were some who were reminded of a friend's or parent's passing, of their own inevitable demise. It was most respectful to quietly leave the death-bed scene. With *She Alone* the audience was witness to a girl's progress from uncertainty to bewilderment to despair. Never did we feel audience-silence expressed an absence of being touched or indicated any weakness on the performer's part. In fact, the hushed departures *were* the audience's rather telling response.

A completely different scenario unfolded at our first ballet, *I Know and Feel that Fate is Harsh but I am so Loath to Accept This*. I was sitting in my customary place, level with the performance area, chair-back against a six-foot wall separating myself (and other audience members) from those in the seat-rows above and behind us. On Opening Night, when the ballet was perceived to have ended, I heard this strange, mildly annoying, rumbling noise that was certainly not part of the sound design. After a bit I looked back and – oh my god! – it was the sound of a standing ovation, people clapping and stomping on the rafters.

I bring up these personal examples to illustrate my stance. I have never craved approval and I suppose this explains my aversion to ballet's addiction to applause, audience-milking, this disinclination to pass up any opportunity that might induce more adulation.

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I wonder why this endless cycle of bowing and applause so stubbornly remains a ballet-performance ritual. Does the answer lie in "tradition"?

I suppose there is really only one reasoning: people will clap anyway so let them. If allowances are not made for this public outpouring, it's going to screw up the rest of the piece as dancers will not hear the orchestra, particularly if the music is pianissimo; they will miss cues; it will result in confusion and muddle; best to let the audience have its fill and then proceed in an orderly manner.

All that might make sense, but the logic is specious. Dancers do not necessarily have to *hear* the music because they are in eye-contact with the conductor. Looking at conductor's arms will tell one precisely when to proceed. Even if the music is very quiet or critical dancers are not facing orchestra's direction - very rare - someone backstage could easily give the command – Go – though this would have to be agreed upon and rehearsed. On repeated occasions I have seen the conductor, at the National Ballet of Canada (NBOC), decide the applause has gone on long enough and just continue with the music, making the sound travel through the haze of subsiding audience clamour. The dancers pick up from where they left off. You could call it "seamless" were it not for the gap in the first place.

“Tradition” is cast in stone only when people insist on its continuity, its immutability – or when sustained by law, perpetuated by great powers. It can be laden with deep beauty and respect; it can equally be a perpetuation of horrors.

Times change, people rethink, attitudes reshape, language evolves, morality shifts, science illuminates, anarchy disrupts, revolutions transform, wars annihilate.

Off the top of my head: first-degree murder does not result in a death penalty; genocide is finally defined and declared illegal; slavery is outlawed; homosexuality is no longer considered a disease; “witches” stop being burned at the stake, “coloured” people cease to be inferior races – the list goes on and on though it applies to only *certain* parts of the world, to only *certain* people’s thinking.

Traditions may seem to take forever to alter, to wipe out – yet one Pope’s encyclical overturned centuries of the Mass being performed exclusively in Latin.

Tradition must not be an excuse to perpetuate barbarism. Just *because* it is a long-standing custom, is it acceptable to submit teenage girls to clitoridectomies? Alas, this is not a rhetorical question.

I bring all these things up to emphasize that traditions can not only be modified, crumbled, but actually obviated. The above examples are colossal in scope. Throwing out certain outdated, outmoded, unhelpful practices in ballet pale in comparison.

Perhaps it bears repeating: I am *not* against bows or applause – far from it. What is so disagreeable is ballet’s insistence on currying praise throughout the evening. A full curtain call at performance’s end is salutary. But in light of the multiple interruptions in most Acts, do we need a curtain call at the end of each one? It was dismaying, after Act I, to see the Kirov’s Principal Dancers slip through the part in the curtain and take more bows. Yes, I realize the scenery needs to be changed. But do we really need diversion? Can our minds not be allowed to reflect on what we just saw? I, for one, would so have preferred those few minutes to pass in silence, the better to prepare myself for Act II, one of the greatest glories of all ballet.

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Another unyielding tradition driving me to distraction is the use of follow-spots. This circle of bright white light following a Principal Dancer wherever she goes resembles, more than anything else, a puppy following his master. Its use is *de rigeur*, no matter its appropriateness. In fact, I would go so far as to say follow-

spots are almost never apposite – “almost” only because surely there must be an exception, somewhere, if one were to really apply one’s mind.

At first Act’s end, the Prince is alone, meandering towards the lake. No one else is on stage. All his movements are “highlighted” by this floating disc. It is nothing short of ludicrous. Absent this shining “shadowing” what else will we be looking at if not the lone soloist? Did we come to the ballet to stare exclusively at the scenery, the dancers themselves being a kind of regrettable minor irritation to be patiently endured?

At one point in the second Act there are 32 swans on stage. Motionless. The only people moving about are the Prince and Odette. But we still need a follow-spot to trace their dance. Sorry, *two* follow-spots, one for each. And then Rothbart appears. Of course he also needs one.

So why am I in such a lather, why all this vexation?

A special kind of tyranny many directors impose on their audience embodies the channeling and controlling of audiences’ attention. It is about the director saying – *I want you to look here at this point and then look there a moment later*. Well, I really want to decide for myself what I prefer to look at. It is my right as a human being, never mind an audience member, and I insist on exercising that prerogative.

What makes this “puppy-light” so insidious is our eyes are naturally drawn to light both bright and moving. In order for me to look at something other than what I’m “supposed to” forces me to exert energy defying my genetic instincts. And I resent that. Just to be clear, I can definitely imagine situations demanding assistance to audience’s struggle to perceive a character’s outline – a scene, say, in a dank underground prison cell. I embrace such a necessity and admire the director insisting on the scene lit by a single dim lightbulb, so in keeping with prisoner’s anguish. But ballet’s coercive follow-spot is akin to someone relentlessly whispering in my ear, commanding me to look at *this* dancer, now *that* dancer.

The follow-spot also offends a critical *corps de ballet* principle – the uniformity, the sense of unity. Dancers are harshly rebuked for doing anything – *anything* – making them stand out from the group. For no matter how carefully the lights-operator guides her follow-spot it will inevitably illuminate, for a moment if not longer, a *corps*-member’s arm, some other’s back. The desired likeness is now shattered. What irony! Follow-spots commit the precise cardinal sin dancers are upbraided for: sticking out, shining alone and apart from everyone else.

Leaving aside the crudity, the inelegance of the follow-spot, I will conclude by pointing out its most egregious flaw. Highlighting the Principals during their solos by directing my gaze at the “stars”, in effect implies nothing else on stage is worth looking at during these minutes. These now-demotic swans are just

“standing” there, not moving; if they will change position it will be swift and simultaneous; really a waste of time observing them; pity to miss the “real” action, the Prince and Odette expressing their growing attraction towards each other.

If only you knew how much concentration it takes to smoothly get into those difficult positions, what coordination is needed to make your body appear like everyone else’s, what strain it is to remain in that pose, motionless. And after a minute of immobility to have the immense relief of pose-change, two seconds of intricate precision to assume your new position, equally challenging, only to again remain statue-still.

If you truly knew how demanding all this was, you might well agree it is such disrespect towards the *corps* to even hint your time might be better spent looking at the Prince and Swan Queen. It is more than disrespect. It is a deep insult. And these are fighting words. In front of me you cannot malign those magnificent selfless artists, that glorious Kirov *corps*, my beloved girls for whom I have only the highest praise which I will now continue to lavish.

### **Behold the Corps**

*Swan Lake*'s greatest pleasure lies, for me, in the *corps de ballet*, that cornucopia of ethereal enchantments.

Right from Act II's beginning we sense the oppression's weight when the swans emerge *en file* with articulate corner-turns to form the next line and the next one, each swan dancing identical steps. Do we see these half-swans frolicking about, relieved evening's arrival allowing them to regain at least part of their humanity? Not in the least. No sense of liberation whatsoever as each swan is in lockstep with the other, more like automatons presenting polished colours in a military parade.

The air is thick with controlled despair as they proceed with an exactitude, a severity, each producing heavy-hearted “photocopies” of the other. Though the movements seem leisurely their somber faces betray leaden spirits' resignation .

As Act II unfolded, I was so struck by how the dancers resembled *actual* swans. It is common to feel these birds convey a sense of noble dignity as they float downstream, their periscope necks commanding obeisance. But those very same necks, as gaze is lowered and turned sharply to one side, distort the overall appearance. Solemn regal demeanour becomes angular, aslant, ungainly. More than once I thought of gawky young teenagers' squawkiness , hormones charging, their bodies spurting growth difficult to coordinate.

The simultaneity of wonky bird and lithe female brought to mind the clones of human beings, central characters in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let me Go*. The outward impression is of observing ordinary people, yet upon closer reading one becomes aware of something ineffably different about them. And so the Kirov swans. Their bodies' smooth flow is interrupted by mildly quirky poses; slightly off-kilter arms heighten otherwise ballet-natural postures. Part of this *corps'* triumph is to so perfectly convey a continual pervading sense we are looking at creatures distinctly familiar yet so unique as to be not quite real.

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But are they, in fact, producing precise “photocopies” of each other?

Not quite.

What is happening here is something more subtle, more interesting – until it becomes absolutely compelling.

Every dancer always stays within each strict specific framework. But within that rigidity there are tiniest variations until it becomes quite apparent – if one is watching from a position close enough – each dancer is also expressing her own individuality. And this applies to both choreography as well as acting.

At one point the swans are standing in two lines, a pose with left arm raised and still at an awkward 190-degree angle. Yes, from a distance it looks like everyone is in an identical freeze. In reality, however, that is not the case: one girl's arm is a tiny bit higher, another's just a fraction lower. And this is *not* because they are unable to assume perfectly identical poses. This variance of a degree or two still confines each dancer to a very narrow stricture. Those arms, however, are precisely where they are because each dancer is best conveying her expression of that moment.

Two more pose examples from the catalogue of these minor differences: hands are all held in place *roughly* six inches off the ground, legs are extended *more-or-less* 20-degrees forward. Do not think for a moment this is because one swan is born with shorter arms, the other blessed with longer legs. Dancers learn to compensate for varying aspects of their physicality in the struggle to present the uniformity demanded from them. Yet the Kirov – wisely – allows for these small manifestations of uniqueness.

When the *corps'* arms move from any point A to point B they all begin on the same note and stop simultaneously on another note. The fascination lies in the nature of that small movement: one dancer's arm may begin with reluctance and gain speed whereas another's arm may do the precise opposite, all depending on her personal manner of expressing the given emotion.

I profoundly celebrate all these differences: tedious conformity is superseded by rich complexity.

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Earlier I mentioned the only way one may observe these minute details is by seeing the ballet from a vantage point close to the stage. There are those who prefer to be further back for a complete overview. Yet my most profound experiences watching ballet – or any dance for that manner – is when I am able to see the dancers' facial expressions. In fact, I have reached the point where I would rather forego the performance if I am unable to see the shifting shades and nuances of emotion on their faces.

Six identically-dressed maidens are presented to the Prince in Act III so he may choose one for his bride. But we have seen the circumstances – unbeknownst to everyone he has already declared his love for Odette, the Swan Queen. Nonetheless he is obliged to take each one in his arms and do a brief dance. Even from a distance it is possible to see his movements' stilted, wooden nature, holding each maiden in turn without affection, taking no pleasure in their lissome figures. This is dancing by rote – *intentionally*. What is most rewarding, however, is the look on his face – not exactly cold and stony but one of pure disinterest. Clearly this duty is disagreeable, but one patiently endured without showing overt disdain unbecoming of a Prince.

This pointless, perfunctory exercise is followed by the statement of decision. Which lucky gal will become the Princess? Each lovely's face is bright and adoring as she makes a little curtsy and waves her fan – and yes, each fan is not only held differently but fluttered in its own fashion. To his mother's horror and Court's shock, the Prince walks down the line and rejects each candidate.

Naturally enough, girls' faces fall, brim with disappointment. Each one, in painful turn, becomes crestfallen. It is one thing to suffer dejection in the privacy of one's home where one can shed tears, smash plates, claw at one's hair. But it is quite different to endure a very public humiliation and be obliged to conceal one's dashed hopes.

All six, though rejected, are not denied swift dignified exit's momentary relief – but proceeding with the ritual, take their seats, again in a prominent row of chairs, to observe successive entertainments of Polish, Spanish and Hungarian folk dances. Hardly “entertainments” amidst their sadness and disillusionment: mesmerizing to watch as each sweet, despite all efforts, failed in feigning fortitude. One could not help looking around, distracted and unfocused; another abjectly hung her head; the third, eyes glazed, was able to only glumly stare ahead; the fourth helplessly worried her fan; the fifth sunk into desultory boredom; the last could sit neither quite straight nor quite still.

In sorrow's midst a remarkable jolt: the entry of Rothbart, presenting swan Odile, sparkling and seductive, Odette's black doppelganger. It was a mesmerizing arrival - who *is* this creature? As she began to captivate – haughty bewitchment, cool virtuosity, charismatic aura – the saddened maidens were stirred, their attentions aroused. However their reactions showed differing electricity-spasms.

Demeanours changed, piecemeal, as the significance of Odile's presence began to have a rippling effect. A modicum of interest displaced boredom; the glum stare became a blank look; the hung head was lifted; the fan stopped moving; focus replaced distraction; the shifting body leaned forward betraying curiosity.

Yet most extraordinary of all: in every case the underlying gloom was reduced but everpresent, never dispelled. That modicum of interest was never rapt, the glumness did not extend to fascination. Underneath this exotic apparition's observation remained sharp vestiges of dejection, the ineffacable foundation of dismay. So gripped by the precision and subtlety of these signs of life I barely paid any attention to Odile – though by now you know I have never been a devotee of pyrotechnical displays.

What I have just described was so moving, so touching that I, yet again, teared up. And swelled with pride. I sometimes wonder why I am prone to react that way. After all, this was not *my* choreography, not *my* company, these were not *my* ex-students. Upon reflection, though, I think emotions' roots lie in pure joy. And yes, it is uplifting to have actually experienced work of such depth and intelligence. However I think what is really at work here is something more ... shall we call it “existential”? I mean for me it was a revelation something so rich and complex can actually *exist*, particularly concerning a work's aspect that on surface seems hardly significant to the piece as a whole. So my delight at the assiduity of these artists left me floored, stabbed by wonder.

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In the days following *Swan Lake*, it seemed a spell had been cast on myself as well – the Kirov corps' versatility, the directors' commitment to individual expression were emblazoned on my mind.

Here was common approach's negation: seeking the highest degree of uniformity was discarded. My thoughts ranged towards George Balanchine, famous for having a clear vision of the perfect female ballet body. What would his ideal *corps* look like? Would the dancers be as identical as possible?

And then I had a new thought – what if we were to live in a time when human cloning was legal? Would Balanchine, if still alive, want to design literally identical bodies for his *corps*? And if so, what would be template's dimensions?

After some consideration I wrote down the prescription – long legs, long neck, 5' 10" tall, weighing 110 lbs, chest 32B, waist 20", hips 32". When I called Vanessa, she absorbed my list and said - *Hillar, you forgot about the long arms and you realize you've just described Suzanne Farrell* (Balanchine's most powerful, because unbeddable?, muse), *except Suzanne at five foot ten would probably have weighed closer to 115 pounds.*

Here I must take a moment to explain the Vanessa in question is none other than Vanessa Harwood, former Principal Ballerina with the National Ballet of Canada. Vanessa did me the supreme honour, in 2004, of coming out of retirement to perform in my first ballet and since then has been a strong supporter of DNA as well as a friend. She is often happy to reminisce and give lengthy detailed answers to my questions, no matter their abstraction or precision. Vanessa is also one of the most ideal persons to discuss *Swan Lake* with. Not only has she danced Odette/Odile well over 50 times, all over the world, with the most distinguished partners (including Nureyev), but also with such consummate distinction as to be dubbed "SuperSwan" by the Canadian press. And yes, she did see the Kirov perform in Toronto, although with a different cast than myself. Over the course of several stimulating conversations in the past weeks I gained a great deal of background and understanding while bouncing ideas off her insightful mind, so rich with that vast experience.

Balanchine, considered by many to have been last century's greatest choreographer, was a driven workaholic, a great innovator who heightened aspects of Classical ballet while creating his Neo-Classical style. Of course, we will never know if he would have taken the clone route, but I can't help but feel he would have been sorely tempted.

What would have been the effect of this identical-twins stable, all produced by the same cookie-cutter, all trained by the relentlessly demanding Balanchine, showing off their higher-raised legs, forward hips, all that speed? Again, we will never know but I imagine the effect would have been, inescapably, quite novel. And also quite chilling. I think the novelty would have worn off before long, only to be replaced with *ennui*. Broiled scallops with melted dulse-butter might be delicious but once this luxurious dish becomes dinner, night after consecutive night, its allure will quickly evaporate.

Chilling also because totalitarian idealism does not create great art – think Soviet Socialist Realism – and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* was not called *Happy New World* for a reason. The manufacturing of custom-designed bodies may be feasible – but minds thinking utterly alike, feelings so totally in synch as to invite comparison with the accuracy of famed Swiss chronometers? Not bloody likely.

Homogeneity may be comfortable, comforting – but also bland and boring. I will never deny the laudable simplicity and purity of two dozen fresh ten-inch-

stemmed white roses, perfectly arranged in a vase. But to replace half of them with reds and yellows, to shorten some stems, to have a few in full flower amongst others yet in the bud, to bump a couple of them askew – now we are looking at a composition of visual complexity. The white roses hold temporary interest whereas the multi-colour display continues to stimulate and engage the mind.

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As promised, I have continued to lavish praise upon Kirov's *corps* – but now wish to dilate on the quality making it truly matchless: one is left with the impression these young women were born to be swans. This impression is engendered by the utter naturalness of their dancing; it emits a second nature. This “naturalness” is so pervasive it transmits an air of *supernaturalness*.

I have already spoken of the ballet tenet requiring all effort-traces' banishment. Yet the seeming ease of their dancing is on a completely different plane – the unearthly calm, simplicity and elegance becomes transcendent.

The dancers ooze musicality. Such seeping sensitivity makes the dancers so at one with the music they seem no longer dancing the choreography – it feels the music (and not the choreographer) is in command, shaping their movements.

When one is so transfixed, the mind begins to play tricks – is it possible the tables are turned and the dancers' movements, in fact, are creating the music? Privy to such perfection one senses the presence of supernatural forces. Is it conceivable the dancers are not really in control, that their movements are being moulded and sparked by some ineffable power?

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During the intermission after Act II, I spoke with Ernie Abugov, the superb genial senior stage manager at NBOC, a man who arguably sees more ballet in a year than I might in my entire lifetime. After short pleasantries the always-rushed Ernie made to leave but I begged him to answer just one question – *Don't you get the feeling that this dancing is in their blood?* He replied instantly - *Yes, absolutely. They are dancing their DNA.* (That would have been a pun were it not so apposite.)

In their blood, in their DNA, an integral, seamless part of their lives. “Seamless” is, of course, an exaggeration – they live at home, not the theatre, and they certainly do not parade on the street in full swan regalia. But for well over 200 years the Kirov Ballet, just like the Hermitage Museum, has been St. Petersburg's cultural fulcrum. It defines Russia's former capital. To say every Canadian boy dreams of being on a Stanley Cup-winning team is only as

inaccurate as believing that every Russian girl dreams of dancing principal roles in the Kirov. It is a position of great security and prestige.

I have no doubt the present *corps* saw their first performances at the same age they began to read, entered the school at age six, graduated at seventeen and were then accepted into the *corps*. By the time they first performed in *Swan Lake*, a year or two later, they had seen it at least several dozen times and rehearsed it for hundreds of hours.

The depth of intimate familiarity with the choreography is astounding. Every dancer knows every position in the *corps*, meaning they know exactly what to do if they are 3<sup>rd</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> in line. This was proven right at the beginning of Act II on Opening Night, when one of the swans slipped, fell, and, with difficulty, moved herself into the wings. In most companies she would be considered a particularly strong dancer, otherwise she would not have been at the head of one of the six lines of four swans (where now there was an empty space). In the Kirov's case, though, I am not sure one can make that assumption: another remarkable aspect of this *corps* is they are all equally skilled; no hint of weakness is apparent.

Soon after the accident, at an appropriately busy moment, the injured swan was almost imperceptibly replaced and the performance continued as though nothing had happened. This is actually more remarkable than it may sound. Even though the swans perform identical choreography, whether as a group or in small clusters, it is a significant difference if you are swan #6 or #18. You need to know your precise position in every formation as well as when to go there and how many steps of what size are needed to arrive correctly.

In fact, I would go so far as to say every dancer in the *corps* is perfectly familiar with the Swan Queen's role, has danced it in her mind countless times, has occasionally asked one of the males to partner her in the studio and would be able to replace the injured lead, mid-performance, at moment's notice. Despite years of fantasizing, the reality of suddenly being thrust into Odette/Odile in front of an audience would be an absolutely terrifying experience. The only blessing would be the time-lack to think and get even more nervous. But something tells me that every single *corps* member would acquit herself at least decently in that technically demanding, emotionally exhausting role.

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*Swan Lake* has two alternate endings – one happy, the other tragic. In the first instance the Prince mutilates Rothbart by tearing off one of his wings; he collapses, writhes, is rendered impotent and dies. The spell is thus cast off, the swans are all liberated and able to resume their “normal” lives. The Prince and Odette are reunited and live “happily ever after”.

The tragic ending is much more messy and complex. Throughout Act IV the swans have been aflutter, suffering great anxiety as their fate hangs in the balance. If the Prince will indeed live up to his commitment and marry the Swan Queen then all swans will be set free. However it now turns out the Prince is a blackguard, a perfidious scoundrel. Word has gotten around and Odette herself relates how Odile, the despicable Black Swan, has turned the Prince's head, and now, bedazzled, the double-dealer has once again sworn eternal love.

The swans, who have been so supportive of their Queen, so empathetic, so lovingly standing guard, so unobtrusive as to not disturb the courtship, so tactfully averting their eyes during her wooing – these very same swans are now distraught and suspicious. Odette is not infallible: the Prince was obviously a poor choice. Their hopes, elevated to such heights, are now smashed. Imperious Rothbart is furiously charging about, far from vanquished, lording it over them as always. Disappointment festers into anger, into hatred. The Prince arrives to explain Odette *is* the one he truly loves. Too late. The swans attack and exact their revenge – murder and regicide.

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The Kirov chose to present the “happy” ending – but then followed with a most curious, fascinating, curtain call.

I should explain I am not a fan of curtain calls – they strike me as artificial appendages to the production. This audience approbation-acceptance is obligatory, predictable in its order, its execution mechanical. It is beyond me why this stale convention should not be infused with the same intelligence and artistry as the evening's choreography we have just watched. If curtain calls' formality and blandness would be dispensed with, if instead they would be charged with creativity and each one made appropriate to the ballet at hand, I would possibly change my view.

I say “possibly” because another element bothers me: the performers are no longer in character. I realize I have likely left you with the impression of a cranky, curmudgeonly nature, but it is not quite as harsh as might seem. I *do* understand dancers' relief at performance's end, their desire to discard their character, to smile, to glow in the well-deserved rapture of an enthusiastic audience.

In fact, it is not as easy as it might seem to make the transition from your *persona* back to your real self. When so much mental and physical energy is exerted – particularly in the case of a role as wrenching as Odette/Odile – one cannot resume one's true self like flicking an electric switch. One needs to be eased back. Vanessa told me it was difficult to do the first curtain calls because she was still partially in character. When I asked her – *So who exactly are we seeing during the curtain call?* – she took *Romeo and Juliet* as an example –

*When I'm dancing I'm 100% Juliet and during the curtain call I am Vanessa Harwood as Juliet.* A precise distinction, elegantly stated.

I prefer, however, to see Vanessa as 100% Juliet on stage and as 100% Vanessa over dinner. I want to leave the theatre with images of the performance floating in my mind. Seeing the dancers out of character is a distraction, it somehow sullies the experience. Just like the most taxed performers I need to ease myself out the performance at my own tempo. So most often, when the final curtain falls, I stand up and scurry out. Not only do I then continue to live inside the world of that ballet but I avoid the irritation of making my way to the exit through a thronging crowd.

When the curtain fell on *Swan Lake* I proceeded with my regular practice of bolting towards the exit and then – I do not know why – I was compelled, drawn to the dancers, and went to the very front, needing to be as close as possible. Thank God – otherwise I would have missed the crowning glory of the evening.

The Prince and Swan Queen, along with the orchestra's conductor, were all broad smiles, making deep bows, accepting flower-bouquets. I simply ignored them. Then the swans took a few steps forward, bowed and stepped back into position, down on one knee, hands to the side folded on top of each other, heads submissively down, a classic swan pose. Their faces were somber – no smiles, no relief, no levity. When they raised heads to meet the audience there was no recognition, no acknowledgment, as they remained absolutely in character, still performing.

Later I pondered over the swans' demeanour. This had been the "happy" ending; why were they all so downcast? Were they not aware of their liberation? Their sorrowful looks were in utter contradiction to their fate. I could not imagine they felt any regret at being released from Rothbart's repression.

Then it occurred to me – perhaps they had been too scarred by their ordeal, brutalized beyond repair. Perhaps it was not yet possible for them to believe their good fortune. Perhaps it was wiser not to rejoice. Who knows? Rothbart might be waiting for them at the gate, ready to snap them back into line. This notion of liberation might be pure illusion.

At second performance's end I went again to the extreme front to look at the swans. I soon became riveted by a black-haired member of the species: every time she retreated to her original position, her body now still, she would move her arms to one side, and then full seconds would pass, as with infinite care, delicacy, deliberation she would place right hand on top of left with resigned placidity. Absolutely mesmerizing. Those forlorn traumatized swans. Edmund Burke's words once again penetrated: *Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty.*

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The seven performances were well attended and if the acoustically-challenged cavernous Hummingbird – now Sony – Centre was not quite sold out there were relatively few empty seats. This was not surprising. Toronto audiences are notoriously unsupportive of the local arts scene but seem to go gaga once any show has proven a hit in New York, London or Paris – ideally all three. Only when a spectacle receives its sweet-scented international imprimatur of success does it become worthy of Torontonians, is deemed a “must-see”, and people are willing to flock to the theatre and shell out big bucks for their obligatory self-imposed bi-annual culture-dose.

So how was *Swan Lake* received? Not all that well – polite applause, a few scattered cheers and some people managed to rise from their seats.

I have always felt standing ovations to be a touch dubious, even spurious – unless the audience spontaneously rises *en masse* amidst a pandemonium of whoops and cries. The simple fact is when people directly in front of you stand up you cannot see the stage and are exposed only to the dark contours of their backsides. You had no intention of standing but if you wish to see the curtain call you have no choice but to get on your feet.

In order to leave the theatre one must, sooner or later, cease sitting and stand in order to walk to an exit. People end up caught in row's middle; they would like to leave but find themselves trapped. (Exiting from mid-row is much more difficult when people are standing as opposed to sitting.) If you look closely at any standing ovation you will most often see people merely standing, impatient, wishing the applause would end so they can get on with their lives.

Yet others are troubled by their insecurities. When they see groups of people standing they feel like they are missing the boat. They are not art-experts, unable to properly judge neither merits nor flaws and they were not particularly taken by the performance. However they do see others standing so it must mean the performance was excellent. If they remain seated they betray their “lack of culture” and that’s, well, embarrassing. As a result of not wishing to appear ignoramuses, after a minute or two many more people have pried themselves from their seats and – *voilà* – a standing ovation.

In any case, on Opening Night, as you know, I was barely aware of my surroundings, in thrall to the swans. But I do know when the curtain call was over the applause immediately completely stopped. What remained was only the sound of people chatting, putting on coats, leaving for the exit. And then the curtain rose for another curtain call. Why? The audience had finished expressing its appreciation. Whenever this blatant applause-mongering occurs I feel such pity for the dancers. How humiliating it must be to present another

series of bows when the audience has unmistakably signaled its willingness to depart!

It must be clear I do not hold Toronto audiences in high regard but I was still a little stunned. I had just experienced one of the greatest ballet performances of my entire life - and this audience was unable to sustain its clapping for longer than a minute.

Swans before swine?

## **Death by Beauty**

Now to conclude with my death-fantasy, my suicide-choreography .

When it becomes clear that life has almost drained out of me then lift my decrepit body onto a gurney and ambulance me to the theatre. Wheel it down to the front, in the middle, where friends will be waiting. Chilled bowls of caviar, both sparkling black sturgeon and glistening orange salmon will be in place. Someone will deliver platters of freshly-warmed baguette-slices before we begin and during breaks. And ice-filled coolers with bottles of the finest vintage Champagne will be at hand.

Command the Kirov to perform *Swan Lake* for me. Not the ordinary version, dear Director, but the one I outlined weeks ago to you.

Do not begin with the Overture or the first Act. Eliminate them entirely. But let me see Act II not just once. Twice in a row will be immensely more satisfying. I realize this is demanding a great deal but let the *corps* rest in between for as long as they need. Even though I am ready to die, there is no particular hurry.

Give your Principals the night off. Since I have such faith in all your dancers, I would be thrilled were you to choose four, two for each Act II, who you consider to be most desirous or deserving to play the Prince and Swan Queen. I would be honoured to witness their debut public performances, albeit for a miniscule – but immensely appreciative – audience. And, oh, the follow-spot operators? You must insist they stay home.

Present only a small portion of Act III. The Court, for the most part, need not be present. All I desire is the Prince “dancing” with the six brides-to-be, the painful rejections, followed by their misery during the almost-unbearable perfection of the Hungarian dance. As for Odile, I have an interesting proposition. Since we now have two Odettes, why not two simultaneous Odiles? With most of the Court's absence, there will certainly be enough room on stage for both of them. It will be fascinating to observe the bewilderment, the stupefaction of both non-brides and Prince. He is not obliged to choose between them, nor should he

swear eternal love to either one. Simply drop the curtain in the midst of all this delirium.

Just like Act II, I really must see Act IV twice, first the happy ending, then the tragic. Again, let the break in between be as long as need be. Life is precious. I do not wish to die but since I must, let there be no excessive haste.

I would like only one curtain call series, the final one, and let the lights remain as they were at Act's end. The Hungarian dancers need not re-appear and the Prince, as well as Rothbart, must also remain absent. No disrespect here. It is simply my dying wish to look exclusively upon the wondrous girl-swans. And they must be told *not* to expect applause. The dancers will find expressions of my gratitude when they retreat into their dressing rooms. They will not be disappointed because you will have told me how to most please them.

And so it will all unfold. During the final Act IV, when it becomes clear the swans are in mutiny, I will slip into my mouth the fast-acting life-ending pill and wash it down with Charles Heidsieck. It will be perfectly timed and the final curtain of my life will fall during the second or third repetition of the original curtain call. I will die in silence, in awe, bathed in beauty, tears and bliss.

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