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Every once in a rare while one has an experience so seismic as to cause a semblance of 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 version of *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 had 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 the choreography was apparently so abysmal that no amount of retooling and revising could salvage it. The original *Swan Lake* was dumped from the Bolshoi's repertory less than a decade after first seeing light of day.

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

For me, a lover of ballet since childhood, the co-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 the authenticity of style, a company unmatched in the excellence of Classical technique and in the artistry of that era.

Don't we have here the feeling of a "museum piece"? A musty old thing dragged down from the attic with the cobwebs, one hopes, all removed? Something irrelevant in our 21st Century Age of Technology that should have been thrown into the dustbin decades ago instead of being 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. If you were to go visit the Kremlin today and gaze down at the glass-encased marvel of Lenin's embalment, you would see that he looks exactly like he had died ... well, yesterday.

Watching this ballet, I was transported into an otherworldly state: the sense of being taken back in time by more than a century while being in the presence of something mysterious, tragic, timeless, a magical realm that had only the most tenuous connection with our own world. We all know that many a girl, with the help of a hot bath, hairdo, makeup and “fuck-me” dress, can transform her seemingly-dumpy self into a most desirable creature. But a flutter of girls who live under a black-force compulsion that 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 all the things I loathe about this unique artform. So this is not a review of a production (of which I saw two performances). Instead, I am taking this *Swan Lake* as a prototype, putting it under a magnifying glass the better to study it - and then sharing with you my reflections on Classical ballet and its performance.

Perfection's Elusion

So what is it about ballet that I “so treasure”?

First of all, there is the sheer aesthetic beauty of looking at the dancers' bodies moving in space. They are every bit as much athletes as they are artists. Not only are these bodies in superb shape, but they are trained to execute each position and movement in a way that most heightens its visual impact, that accentuates and communicates its maximum beauty, a physical ideal that has its roots in Greek and Roman sculpture. The awareness of where each part of the body must ideally be and how it relates to the rest of the body 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 that seems more feline than human.

Then there is the relationship between the dancer and the music, how the dancer moves with the music, moves inside the music. Here all the technique is subsumed to the orchestral sounds. A particular thrill is to see a sensitive conductor who is attuned to the soloist and 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. This is the evincement of artistry.

Every pose or motion in ballet is codified and has a name. Over centuries, the aesthetics of ballet have evolved and 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 as well as 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 the school of training of any given dancer, but also to confidently state the name of the company the dancer performs with.

Interestingly enough, despite the evolutions and stylistic adherences, the lexicon has remained essentially the same for over 100 years. This is one of the marvels of ballet choreography - I may not speak a word of Japanese but I can go to the Orient and create a 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 that one choreographer's ideal *arabesque* may look a trifle different from another's, the important thing to understand is that a whole gamut of emotions can 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.

For one must remember that dancers are also actors, portraying characters, playing roles. Here the question of interpretation arises. How, exactly, does she convey the distress of the forsaken maiden? In what manner does he best express the inner turmoil of the Prince? 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 a high level of skill? 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 they make in order to reach their individual plateaus.

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 and arduous process that occurs in continual stages as the

body develops and grows stronger. It is unimaginable that any girl under the age of 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.

What makes this process so trying and frustrating is that everything is interconnected. Each part of the body 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 part of his body. After time, elements of technique become ingrained. However, it is so easy to focus on one specific aspect only to forget another basic, essential element that will throw everything off. And the dancer himself will not even be aware of it - hence the necessity for the "outside eye", the reminder from a fellow dancer, the nudge from the ballet mistress. 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 are.

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. My left knee refuses to bend properly, it will not obey my mental commands. Figure it out. It is not uncommon for a dancer, male or female, to become so upset that she will burst into tears, that he will go to a corner of the studio and try not to cry.

In school, this teacher rarely pays any attention to me, I know I 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 going in a direction that pleases you, that can be refreshing, liberating, exhilarating. On the other hand, the effect of having to re-learn, re-think, can be bewildering and depressing.

Speaking of depressing, there are always going to be more students than jobs in a company. This is an inalienable fact of life. Endless competition, whether you like it or not. You will have helpful friends as well as spiteful enemies. Dancers can be just as loving - and as 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, is a show of support. It means that the balletmistress or choreographer *cares*, wants you to be a better dancer, wants to be proud of you. A chain reaction occurs, affecting the dancer psychologically -

feedback is essential and you are getting it, you are feeling the joy of positive reinforcement. This will only build your confidence and will absolutely show in your dancing. The converse also applies. You cannot escape the persistent gnawing feeling you must constantly be proving yourself to the Company. When you elicit no response you will *not* feel that all is well but rather the opposite. Once insecurity takes root, it eats away at you. And it is so difficult to regain confidence, to re-establish your critical ground-level pride.

What I have just described is not unique to dance. I don't think for a moment that life is one jot easier for an Olympic gymnast. The great chefs of the world train mercilessly and are continually learning new techniques as they attempt to bring out the essence of ingredients and enhance flavours. Any serious creator must go through a long evolution in order to attain command of his art.

However there is something particularly trying for the ballet dancer. 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. The pull of gravity is inexorable but dancers must often convey the sense they, like gossamer, are floating in air. The ballet dancer's quest for perfection is quite daunting - it is, and will always remain, unattainable.

Naturally there are good days when things come easily, when there is great joy in feeling your body dance as though it were second nature. There are even those few extraordinary moments, that might occur only a couple of times 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 this is a grueling, punishing dedication. 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 your artistry only deepens - just as your body becomes inescapably weaker, more worn out, more pain-ridden. And it is a fleeting life - few dancers perform after the age of forty. It is a dedication that demands resilience, courage, relentless physical stamina and mental strength.

Amidst all the beauty of this art, what is 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 you slip and sprain your ankle. 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 weight of your entire body. 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 *bouffée* 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.

Part of the struggle lies in the fact that the term can mean a wide array of things - and that it works simultaneously on several levels - and is applied in ways unique to various genres. In essence, though, “suspension of disbelief” means that you are willing to believe or accept something to be “true”, to be “reality”, even when you know perfectly well that 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 muddy the waters even further, 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 that this is*

Nureyev but I am now going to believe he is in fact a Prince. I think that whole process is involuntarily 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 that 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.

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 21st 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 the side of a lake that exists 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 partaking of both these worlds, foreign as they may be to my experience on Earth. The problems arise when there are inconsistencies within the framework of these different worlds.

For example, if you want me to sustain my belief that we are in, say, 18th 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 that is the premise of a work of science fiction, certainly not the case with *Swan Lake*.

I am glad to say that the Kirov was not guilty of anything remotely as egregious. In fact, the things I am about to complain about might well strike you as being petty, inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. But for me these seemingly-small lapses are nothing less than destructive and ruinous. And, in every case, unnecessary, easily avoidable and 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 a 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 sensual waters of this *Swan Lake*.

Let us begin with Act I where we witness the celebration of the Prince's birthday. 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 the 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 issue with the "lute" was the orchestral music accompanying the "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 couple of 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.

Enough about the lute, I will move on to the "brass" drinking goblets. I happily accept both the "alcohol" and the cups. What is a coming-of-age party without a bounty of fine wine? But why push my "suspension of disbelief" to include the imagining of 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 dribbles of wine 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 the air? I'm afraid not. Someone throws 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 in that case, why did he choose to dance with an empty cup in the first place? 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 know my queries are purely rhetorical. But I swear that moments later one of those partiers “drank” deeply and ostentatiously from that very same cup.

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

The alternative requires little imagination. By all means have dozens of goblets. Yes, 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. It would be a pleasure to clink goblets and drink fresh cool water between dances.

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

Nice.

Now we move on to the lanterns. Since we have “suspended our disbelief” we know we are in a time that pre-dates electricity. Lanterns provide illumination and are particularly useful because they are easily portable, can be bunched together and are amenable to being raised and lowered. They can be pretty, decorative and their soft light can even cast a romantic haze. They certainly have 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 that I strongly prefer “the real thing” if at all attainable. But being aware of the strict laws concerning “open flame” on stage, I would not have been disturbed by battery-operated devices, nor even by the more recent invention where lightbulbs imitate candle-flickerings.

But no, the powers-that-be insisted that these lanterns, attached moreover to long poles, must be danced with. And that just boggles my mind. Rudimentary lanterns were made of cheap metal and, hung from a chain, the rectangle of four panes of glass protected the candle from wind. However, any back and forth swinging of a lantern will cause molten wax to fly about, thus impeding illumination. Besides, despite the glass-cage protection, the candle itself will not withstand the to-and-fro movement 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 streak of hot wax 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 the addition of a fine line of off-white beeswax might actually heighten her beauty.

But seriously - what were they thinking? Am I supposed to understand that the gods have decreed, in honour of the great festivities, 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.

I have only a couple more points and will try to be brief because they are essentially along the same lines.

In Act III we see two musicians on opposing balconies wielding incredibly long fake trumpets. Throughout the act they do nothing but stand at attention. But whenever the orchestra's brass section sounds a fanfare to announce the entrance of an important personage, the two "trumpeters" slowly outline a big arc, from left to right, as they pretend to blow their instruments. I suppose you could argue that this arc is essential to leaving the impression that 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, beginning in our direction and then fading away from us - whereas the actual orchestral sound is continually and exclusively aimed directly at our 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 the fanfare’s duration. That way everyone on stage would undoubtedly be alerted, and the audience would see what it actually hears - a consistency of sound.

The spectacular performance of the Spanish dance, 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. They were lacking an essential component, the crescent-shaped band of double-paired mini-cymbals that create the unique percussive sparkle. It is not as if tambourines are difficult to find. Nor are they expensive. They distinctly heighten the Spanish flavour. So why do the dancers - and we - have to put up with 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 the use of this ersatz percussion? The dancers certainly took advantage of the drum aspect of the instrument. So might it be the jangly “noise”, does it interfere with Tchaikovsky’s music? I can’t think of a better explanation. But it is still a sham. There is such undeniable authenticity to this sound and I really don’t think Tchaikovsky would have objected - we will never know as he died two years before that 1895 premiere. However I can’t help feel that spirited high-pitched tambourine-slaps in concert with those shimmering metallic cascades vigorously punctuating his Spanish interlude could only have deeply pleased him.

If indeed the concern is with the sound of those cymbals, 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.

These affronts to our intelligence and credulity occur throughout the history of ballet 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 favour of a replica.

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

be held in a way that never disturbs 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 the outraged parrots were to dig in their claws.

Even more egregious instances occur: *Diana and Acteon* reduces one to abject perplexity. Being the goddess of the hunt, it makes sense for her to be in constant possession of a bow. 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 in 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, the source of her power, the expression of her essence, to be touched by any mortal is beyond me. That she would allow 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 of love, 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 in the form of 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 muses of dance/music, mime and poetry) in Balanchine’s daringly innovative *Apollo*. He so successfully managed to create tableaux - angular, spiky, complex images - that made us see ballet with new eyes. Yet his magnificent vision is marred by the use of 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 the ballet’s duration. And treating a symbol as a real object, in this case “strumming” the lyre, “writing” on the tablet, unnecessarily conflates a signifier with the thing itself.

Curious - the inspirational force of *Apollo* was a celebration of 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 that hardly demand genius.

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

Generally speaking, I would prefer applause to be restricted to the end of an Act or the piece itself, in other words the dancing has ended, the piece is over - though I am receptive to spontaneous cries of *Bravo*. That really is 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 the audience to applaud. Even worse: if the final curtain call is over and the audience has 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 that the show was not received as well as you would have preferred. But when the applause has ended is it not time to simply accept this fact? On numerous occasions I have seen the audience ready to leave, but no - another curtain call is thrust upon us. 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 whose mother says - *Now go and say thank you to Uncle Jim for that lovely beachball that I know you are going to have so much fun playing with.*

Here now is the routine we see over and over again: there is 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 that allow the dancers to make small, swift adjustments to create the true final pose, perhaps tossing the head up, perhaps extending the arm wide, perhaps he is on one knee and she hops onto his upper leg 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, there will be silence as 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, the ballet resumes.

What was just described I find very upsetting and I 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 of 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, up 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 that 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 wait of applause. 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 the second Act of *Swan Lake*, 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 the throes of love, 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 that will be 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 19th Century royal Prince has become today's not-exactly-mundane Rudolf Nureyev.

When those aforementioned *pas de deux* dancers are frozen in that final position then let them stay a tiny bit longer in it. It may be difficult, but if they can hold it for two seconds, they should be able to hold it for another two. Then proceed directly with the story. Quite simply, there is no need for dancers to make the 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 the encroachment upon characters' credibility.

To talk about applause is to wade in turbid waters. It seems unclear to most people that it is an option, a gift. You attend a show and, at the end, you decide if you wish to applaud or not. If you loved the performance you may even cheer; conversely you might boo. But in all cases your reaction 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 sustained and spirited, or softer and perfunctory, depending on the degree of their (un)appreciation. As long as they produce a *semblance* of applause. This sense of obligation has several roots - the feeling that dancers have worked hard, they 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 an Italian opera house - is a manifestation of the upbringing stating that if you have nothing nice to say then say nothing at all.

But wait a minute. You have 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 waitress at a restaurant. Many feel, logically enough, that 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. In other words, 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 of DNA Theatre. We have produced several pieces that have ended in a 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 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 the lack of audience response expressed an absence of being touched or indicated any weakness on the performer’s part. In fact, the hushed departures *were* the audience’s telling response.

A completely different instance occurred 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, directly in front of a six-foot wall that separated myself (and other audience members) from those in the rows of seats above and behind us. On Opening Night, when the ballet was perceived to have ended, I heard his 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, the audience-milking, this disinclination to pass up any opportunity that might induce more adulation.

I wonder why this endless cycle of bowing and applause so stubbornly remains part of the ballet performance ritual? Does the answer lie in “tradition”?

I suppose there is really only one reasoning: people are going to clap anyway, so let them. If we don’t make allowances for this public outpouring, it’s going to screw up the rest of the piece as dancers are not going to hear the orchestra continue the music (particularly if the music is soft), 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. Look at her arms and you will know precisely when to proceed. Even if the music is very soft or the critical dancers are not facing in the 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, decide the applause has gone on long enough and just continue with the music, making the sound travel through the mist 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 it is 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 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 teenaged girls to clitoridectomies? Alas, this is not a rhetorical question.

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

Perhaps it bears repeating: I am *not* against neither bows nor applause - far from it. What is so disagreeable is ballet's insistence on currying praise throughout the evening. A thorough curtain call at the end of the performance 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 that 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 empty my mind in preparation for Act II, one of the greatest glories of all ballet.

Another unyielding tradition that drives 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 around. Its use is *de rigueur*, no matter the appropriateness of it. In fact, I would go so far as to say that follow-spots are almost never appropriate - "almost" only because surely there must be an exception, somewhere, if one were to really apply one's mind.

When the first Act ends, the Prince is alone, meandering towards the lake. That means no one else is on stage. All his movements are "highlighted" by this floating disc. It is nothing short of ludicrous. Absent this "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 about this, why all this vexation?

A special kind of tyranny many directors impose on their audience embodies the channeling and controlling of the audience's attention. It is about the director, in effect, 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 that our eyes are naturally drawn to light that is bright as well as light that moves. In order for me to look at something other than what I'm "supposed to" forces me to exert energy to defy my inbred instincts. And I resent that. Just to be clear, I can definitely imagine situations that demand the 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 for insisting on the scene being lit by a single dim lightbulb. 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 one of the critical principles of the *corps de ballet* - the uniformity, the sense of unity. Dancers are harshly rebuked for doing anything - *anything* - that makes 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 alikeness 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. By highlighting the Principals during their solos you are not only directing my gaze at the "stars" but you are, in effect, implying that nothing else on stage is really worth looking at during these minutes. The rest of the swans are just standing there, they aren't moving, if they are going to 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 changing that pose, two seconds' worth 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 that it is such disrespect towards the *corps* to even hint that 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

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

Right from the beginning of Act II we sense the weight of oppression 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 that evening's arrival has allowed 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 of severity, each producing heavy-hearted “photocopies” of the other. Though the movements seem leisurely their somber faces betray the resignation of leaden spirits.

As the second Act unfolded I was so struck by the way 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 the gaze is lowered and turned sharply to one side, distort the overall appearance. Solemn regal demeanour becomes angular, ungainly. More than once I thought of the squawkiness of gawky young teenagers, 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 who are central characters in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let me Go*. The outward impression is of them being ordinary people, yet upon closer examination one becomes aware of something ineffably different about them. And so the Kirov swans. The smooth flow of their bodies is interrupted by mildly quirky poses; slightly off-kilter arms heighten otherwise ballet-natural postures. Part of the triumph of this *corps* is to so perfectly convey a continual pervading sense that we are looking at creatures distinctly familiar yet so unique as to be not quite real.

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 the tiniest variations until it becomes quite apparent - if one is watching from a position close enough - that 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 in a pose with the left arm raised and still at an awkward 190-degree angle. Yes, from a distance it looks like everyone is in an identical freeze. But in reality 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 the feeling 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 that is 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 it is clear they all begin on the same note in the music and stop simultaneously on another note. But the interest 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 supplanted by rich complexity.

Earlier I mentioned that 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 believe the ideal is to be further back in order to have 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 are aware of what just happened - 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 the stilted, wooden nature of his movements, holding each maiden in turn without affection, taking no pleasure in their lissome figures. This is dancing by rote. But what is most rewarding is the look on his face - not exactly cold and stony but one of pure disinterest. Clearly this duty is disagreeable, but one to be 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 curtsey and waves her fan - and yes, each fan is not only held differently but fluttered in its own fashion. To the horror of his mother, the shock of the Court, the Prince goes 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 are denied, alas, the relief of a swift dignified exit and, proceeding with the ritual, take their seats, yet again in a prominent row of chairs, to observe the successive entertainments of Polish, Spanish and Hungarian folk dances. Hardly "entertainments" amidst the sadness and disillusionment. It was mesmerizing to watch as each sweet, despite all efforts, failed in feigning fortitude. One could not help looking around, distracted and unfocussed; another abjectly hung her head; the third, eyes glazed, was able only to 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.

But then something remarkable happened - the entry of Rothbart, presenting the black swan Odile, sparkling and seductive, Odette's doppelganger. It was a jolting arrival - who *is* this creature? And as she began to captivate - haughty bewitchment, cool virtuosity, charismatic aura - the saddened maidens were stirred, their attentions aroused. However theirs was not a simultaneous jolt of electricity.

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, and so on. Underneath the observation of this exotic apparition remained the sharp vestiges of dejection, the ineffaceable foundation of dismay. I was so gripped by the precision and subtlety of these signs of life that I barely paid any attention to Odile - though I must admit 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 just 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 the roots of this feeling 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 that something so rich and complex can actually *exist*, particularly concerning an aspect of a work that on surface seems hardly significant to the piece as a whole. So my pride at the assiduity of these artists left me floored, stabbed by wonder.

In the days following the *Swan Lake* performances it seemed like a spell had been cast on myself as well - I could not stop thinking of the Kirov *corps*, their versatility, the directors' commitment to individual expression.

Here was the opposite of the common approach that seeks the highest degree of uniformity possible. My thoughts ranged towards George Balanchine, famous for having a clear vision of the ideal 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 were legal? Would Balanchine, if still alive, want to take advantage of that and design literally identical bodies for his *corps*? And if so, what would be the dimensions of the template?

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 that 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 Theatre as well as a friend. She is often happy to reminisce and give lengthy detailed answers to all kinds of questions from me. 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 the greatest choreographer of the last century, 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-twin gaggle, 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 lobster with melted 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 that think utterly alike, feelings that are so totally in synch as to invite comparison with the accuracy of the famed Swiss chronometers? Not bloody likely.

Homogeneity may be comfortable, comforting - but it is 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 of the stems, to have a few in full flower amongst others that are 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.

As promised, I have continued to lavish praise upon the Kirov *corps* - but now I wish to dilate on the quality that makes 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 is as though it were second nature to them. This "naturalness" is so pervasive it transmits an air of *supematuralness*.

I have already spoken of the ballet tenet that requires the banishment of all traces of effort. Yet the seeming ease of their dancing is on a completely different plane - the unearthly calm of the 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 as though 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 it is the dancers' movements, in fact, that 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?

During the intermission after Act II, I spoke with Ernie Abugov, the genial senior stage manager of the NBOC, a man who arguably sees more ballet in a year than I might in my entire lifetime. After a minute of 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 a fulcrum of the cultural foundation of St. Petersburg. It defines the former capital of Russia. To say that 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 a number of 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 then were 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 the 3rd, 14th or 22nd 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 case of the Kirov, though, I am not sure one can make that assumption: another remarkable aspect of this *corps* is they are all equally skilled; there is not even a hint of weakness.

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 that 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 a moment's notice. Despite the 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 lack of time 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.

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 in a tizzy, 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 the 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 that Odette *is* the one he truly loves. Too late. The swans attack and exact their revenge - murder and regicide.

The Kirov chose to present us with the "happy" ending - but then followed with a most curious, fascinating, curtain call.

Right from the start I should explain I am not a fan of curtain calls - they strike me as artificial appendages to the production. This acceptance of audience approbation 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 worth of choreography we have just

watched. If the formality and blandness of curtain calls 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 there is another element that 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 the 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 - you cannot resume your true self at the turn of a dime. You need to ease yourself 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.

However I prefer 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 bouquets of flowers. I simply ignored them. Then the swans took a couple of 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 their heads to meet the audience there was no recognition, no acknowledgement, 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 the end of the second performance 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 her right hand on top of her left one 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.*

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 to me. 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 the big bucks for their obligatory self-imposed bi-annual dose of culture.

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 the middle of a row; 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 experts in the field of art, unable to properly judge neither merits nor flaws and they were not particularly taken by the performance. However they do see others standing so that 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, the choreography of my suicide.

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 a handful of friends will be waiting for me. Chilled bowls of caviar, both sparkling black sturgeon and glistening orange salmon will be in place. Someone will deliver platters of freshly-warmed bread before we begin and during the 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 if you were to choose four, two for each Act II, who you consider to be most desirous or deserving of the leading roles of 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 at 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 the absence of most of the Court, there will certainly be enough room on the stage for both of them. It will be fascinating to observe the bewilderment, the stupefaction of both the non-brides as well as the 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 the end of the Act. 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 the 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.