The classics and her cygnets: Classic choreographies and their contemporary (counter) parts

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The Classics and her Cygnets
Classic Choreographies and Their Contemporary (Counter) Parts

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
ABSTRACT

The proliferation of contemporary interpretations of classic works throughout the history of dance is substantial, yet there is little scholarly acknowledgement of contemporary interpretations as a genre unto themselves. Unlike other art forms, there is a lack of academic research into contemporary interpretations within dance and their place in dance history.

This thesis delves into the genre of contemporary interpretations of classic choreographies, uncovering their popular appeal, the various approaches, their role and contribution to dance history. The second part is a comparative Swan Lake case study, examining the works of Mats Ek, Matthew Bourne and Garry Stewart in reference to the Petipa/Ivanov version of Swan Lake (1895).

The Swan Lake canon, perhaps the epitome of classical ballet, seems irresistible to choreographers. This classic ballet becomes the metaphoric mother Swan, while the myriad of contemporary interpretations are her gaggle of cygnets. Each cygnet is distinctively unique yet shaped by the same source. One work may reverently celebrate the Swan while another chooses to question their upbringing, preferring that a pastiche or a cheeky parody of the Swan suits them best. However regardless of the contemporary interpretation it is ultimately the voice of the classic work that will always prevail as the central figure of discourse and debate. Consequently the classics and their reinterpretations constructs a substantial and palpable history which confirms that dance can no longer be seen as the immutable transient art form with which it is often labelled.
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Thank you to Dr Maggi Phillips
CONTENTS

Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 1

Defining a contemporary interpretation ................................................................................. 3
  Problematic Definitions
    -The history of reinterpretations in theatre, opera and literature .................................. 5
    -The original, is there such thing? .................................................................................... 7
    -The appeal of a contemporary interpretation .................................................................. 9
  -Reasons for a contemporary interpretation .................................................................... 12
    Identity
      Familiarity and marketability vs. value judgement and criticism
    Choreographer's history ................................................................................................. 14
    Musical accompaniment
      Accumulation of knowledge ....................................................................................... 15

-What gets reconstructed? ..................................................................................................... 17
  Subjective/Objective Selectivity...................................................................................... 18

-Importance of contemporary interpretations within dance heritage, history and culture.... 20

Swan Lake: A CASE STUDY .............................................................................................. 21
  -The standard Swan Lake .......................................................................................... 22
  -Ordering Tchaikovsky ............................................................................................... 23
  -Stewart’s Birdbrain ..................................................................................................... 25
  -Bourne’s Swan Lake .................................................................................................... 28
  -Ek’s Swan Lake ............................................................................................................ 29
  -Gender Bending .......................................................................................................... 30
  -Cygnets ....................................................................................................................... 34

-Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 36
  Furthering the Canon ....................................................................................................... 37

References and Bibliography .............................................................................................. 38

vi
**Question:**

What is the role of contemporary interpretations of classic choreographies within the context of the history of dance and the development of dance works? How might contemporary interpretation shift the traditional, conventional ideologies entrenched in the canon of classic works and may initiate changing perspectives on the features and stylised conditions typically surrounding these works?

**INTRODUCTION:**

A contemporary interpretation is an acknowledgement and referencing of the past through a continuation and development of ways in which the original work may be approached, presented and received. A revisioning of classic works allows for consideration of the past, the present and the future. The contemporary interpretation preserves the past while allowing for an inventive response to the present context which looks toward changing the views and ideas of the future. Thus contemporary interpretations stand in the present but, by utilising classic works as their basis, choreographers have committed to looking back into the history of dance. In essence they assess values based on the current day context and present a re-evaluation of the work. Contemporary interpretations illustrate the notion that although dance has no permanent material that lives as a stationary object, its history is present within current dance works. With this in mind, can dance really be seen as a fleeting and transient art form if works continue throughout centuries? Historians need not concern themselves in searching for scraps of information from critics about the original premiere of a dance work; instead the ephemeral and often thought ‘lost’ history of the dance lives on in an unstable and flexible format within any reinstatement. The choreographers become the historians and present their own reading and insight of the work.

The proliferation of contemporary interpretations throughout the history of dance is substantial, yet there is little scholarly acknowledgement of contemporary interpretations as a genre unto themselves. Unlike other art forms, there is a lack of academic research into contemporary interpretations and their place in dance history.

Initially, interest in this topic was due to an inquiry into the genre of contemporary interpretations and a questioning of why certain choreographers find choreographic interest in putting their own stamp on classic works. My questioning did not arise out of any particular adoration of the classics or a want for a traditional and untouched preservation of them. To be truthful, before this research I had seen the classics on video but I had seen very few of the traditional ballets live and therefore did not have a particular affinity for them. I must admit to
enjoying the reinterpretations more than the classical works and to having seen many more
contemporary interpretations than traditional works. This also may have something to do with
my preference for a contemporary sensibility and aesthetic and thus, the reinterpretations appeal
to me. The question is why do choreographers chose to express their views through someone
else's vehicle when they could use their own personal medium to present their work.

As the research process of this thesis continues, understanding the choreographer's choice to
reinterpret a past work becomes clearer. The choreographer looks to the canonical dance work
for many reasons. Through a significant source in dance history (the classic work) the
choreographer draws on their own history of the work in presenting a parody, a celebration, a
pastiche, a distortion, a reverence, a ridicule, all of the above or many more variations. The
contemporary interpretation becomes part of the classical canon in a thoroughly revisioned,
alternative version.

The 

Swan Lake

canon, perhaps the epitome of classical ballet, seems irresistible to
choreographers. This classic ballet becomes the metaphoric mother Swan, while the myriad of
contemporary interpretations are her gaggle of cygnets. Each cygnet is distinctively unique yet
shaped by the same source. One work may reverently celebrate the Swan while another chooses
to question their upbringing, preferring that a pastiche or a cheeky parody of the Swan suits
them best.
DEFINING A CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

For the purpose of this research and thesis, the term 'contemporary interpretation' needs definition. To reduce the multiplicity of meanings that this word could signify, when used in the context of this study the term here refers to the following:

A 'contemporary interpretation' is a new work presented which is deliberately founded, inspired or based on a prior work. In most cases the prior work is considered canonical in the discipline of dance. The presentation of the work is seen as a new or an alternative version as opposed to reworkings/reconstructions which aim for authenticity and replication of the original. However repertoire works exert an important influence on contemporary interpretations. Without any repertoire of classical works a choreographer cannot draw from a previous work to interpret its substance (or notion of its substance) in another way. But it is the works that have been transformed into a contemporary format that incites the interest in this study. A contemporary interpretation is an utilisation of previous work as the source of a new work. The choreographer's aim is to depart from the original work/works (through various and unspecified approaches) and yet maintain an intentional and visible intertextual relationship with that original work.

The research method is qualitative interpretative research. The opinions offered are informed yet subjective.

Problematic definitions

Dance as an ephemeral art form makes it particularly difficult (impossible?) to preserve a dance work in its exactness. Even with an original work there is no single form of the piece that can be said to be the completed art product.

"A work in repertory balances between forces that attempt to stabilise it and forces that, by their very nature, inevitably keep it in dynamic flux" (Preston-Dunlop, 2002, p. 198). Dance as a performative art form should be seen as a work in flux. It is performed multiple times (room for human error or variety of interpretations), with differing casts, in different contexts (venues and locations) interacting each time with a new audience. Therefore the myriad of variables present at each performance of the piece destroys any notion of the work as a final finished form.

A useful and important concept raised in the area of replicating original dance works is that, until recent times (with the popularity and accessibility of video and DV cameras) dance repertory was passed on through kinaesthetic memory from dancer to dancer. When available dance notation can be used but it is often thought to be an inadequate approach. For example, Dunlop (2002, pp. 198-199) believes that dance notation maintains the 'surface form' (steps,
spaces and qualities) of the work, but the dramatic and kinaesthetic motivations of the work are left undocumented. Changes also occur out of necessity, because some companies have different numbers in the ensemble and thus spacing, formations and group numbers are changed. For example, the 1957 version of *Swan Lake* (Tulubyeva, 2003) presented six cygnets, as opposed to the more recognised four cygnets, a version which may or may not be closer to the original. The dancers may have differing skills and qualities thus the director could adapt the movement to suit and enhance the dancer’s skill and preferences.

Therefore works could possibly stray far from the original work but the intention for their creations was in fact to reproduce/replicate the known work. In light of this constant variation, it is sometimes quite impossible to recognise the aim and purpose of the choreographer. In conclusion, the only way to judge a work as a contemporary interpretation is to look at the product of the work and determine qualitatively if the work communicates something new and/or utilises a different medium than the old work.
THE HISTORY OF REINTERPRETATIONS IN THEATRE, OPERA AND LITERATURE

The notion of a reinterpretation of any text is hardly a recent occurrence. There has been keen academic interest on reinterpretations in theatre and other art forms. In dance however, the same cannot be said. The research into reinterpretations in other art forms, for the most part, is useful and comparable to the field of dance.

A cross-arts panel conference in 1997 (Bannerman, 2000) consisting of theatre and art directors, brought to light many interesting ideas on the topic of interpreting or remaking the text over a range of different art forms. In consensus, the entire panel saw value within the creation of a contemporary work based on the canonical text (alternate or otherwise). Phyllida Lloyd's statements sum up the overall sentiments of the group when; she deems the "canon of dramatic literature in English is substantial and our freedom to play within and explore its philosophy is gladdening" (cited in Bannerman, 2000, p. 113). Although dramatic literature is the focus and not dance, switching between the performing arts forms is reasonable, considering the similarities between them.

Ann Thompson, discussing Shakespearian adaptations, appreciates that every instantiation of the text (in any form) works to strengthen the historical tradition through a simultaneous rewriting of history and storing, preserving it:

We still (in total absence of manuscripts) pursue the chimera of 'what Shakespeare really wrote', while on the other hand, we treat his plays as endlessly adaptable, available for reproducing, rewriting, rereading, and reinterpreting by each generation. Thus 'preservation' has always been going on simultaneously with reinvention. (Thompson, 2000, p. 121)

There are various approaches to reinterpreting a work; authenticity and accuracy can be sought with the aim to find a replica of the original version or conversely, the work can present an alternate and counter version, challenging the original context, conventions and ideologies of the classic. Thompson's quotation reveals that regardless of the aim, it is the voice of the classic work that will always prevail as the central figure of discourse and debate. Consequently the classics and their reinterpretations constructs a substantial and palpable history which confirms that dance can no longer be seen as the immutable transient art form with which it is often labelled.

Of notable interest are the discussions of Tim Albery (cited in Bannerman, 2000, p. 115) addressing the idea that even in a classic work a multitude of 'texts' exist. Opera is his chosen art form of discussion but this paragraph could easily read dance, in particular classical ballet
and its contemporary interpretations. Albery analyses an opera canon and breaks down the separate 'texts' apparent in each opera:

An opera ... is based on an original text which is adapted by someone, usually other than the composer [READ CHOREOGRAPHER] becomes a libretto. If an opera is sung in English, there is a version of the libretto in translation to contend with and of course there is the music. (cited in Bannerman, 2000, p. 115)

By its nature there are three separate texts or scores in an opera, whereas within a traditional ballet work there are already two texts; the musical score and the choreography. Albery goes further to state that the costumes, design and set all constitute different texts. The idea that each element of the work constitutes a text within a greater text is also true of a dance work. For example, Tchaikovsky's musical scores are of artistic merit and great celebration without the ballets attached. They themselves have their own canon and history. Therefore the musical score can be looked at as an independent element of an entity. Albery's (cited in Bannerman, 2000, p. 115) conclusion is that "in Opera [read dance] there is a multitude of texts of ever changing importance".

The choreographer has a choice to utilise any or all of these texts as a source for the new version. For example, is the musical accompaniment to be kept and/or the costumes and/or the set? It is the choreographer's choice to draw on what is needed and let slide/disregard other elements of the text.
THE ORIGINAL, IS THERE SUCH THING?

In the context of this research, an original work is identified as the version of the work which is generally accepted and recognised by the current public and dance domain. Although this classification is essential for this study, it may seem at first glance to disregard the notion that the accepted ‘classical’ dance piece could and often is a direct appropriation from another prior text or artwork. The need for some categorisation, however challenging or arbitrary it is, allows for a greater depth of study and analysis by consenting to filter out areas that confuse the specific aim of the research. A closer look at the complicated origins of Swan Lake will reveal the reasons for this somewhat arbitrary but completely necessary classification of an original work pertaining to the version that is defined and recognised as the ‘classic’ dance piece.

The exact origins of Swan Lake are uncertain, the work premiered in 1877 at the Bolshoi theatre in Moscow (Cohen, 1982, p. 3). The Austrian choreographer Julius Wenzel Reisinger is credited with the choreography, (p. 3) and the libretto was created by Geltser and Begichev (Charles, 1998). But the Swan Lake story is arguably derived from many sources. Tales of women/swans appear in many folklore stories from many different cultures and thus the credited authors of the libretto seem to have merely adapted the story based on a variety of cultural folk sources (Charles, 1998). For example; the libretto could have been taken from the German folktale Der Geraubte Schleier (The Stolen Veil) by Johann Karl August Musaus. The Russian folktale The White Duck also has some similarities to the Swan Lake plotline and thus could in addition be a possible source of origin for the libretto (Charles, 1998). The dispute over the libretto is just one of many quandaries about Swan Lake’s origins.

Today it is the Marius Petipa/Lev Ivanov version of Swan Lake that is considered the revered and classic version. This version was created in 1895, almost twenty years after the premiere of the original concept. Many of the well known features of Swan Lake such as the White Swan pas de deux were created by Petipa and Ivanov (Charles, 1998). Therefore, even in the first twenty years of existence, Swan Lake was reworked to make a newer more contemporary version. Today, this choreography is no longer regarded as a contemporary version, but has become the standard original classic replacing the premiere work of 1877.

Therefore, this research acknowledges the complexity of categorising any work as a complete original and does not suggest that the versions seen as the classics are any way complete originals, especially in light of the previously discussed views of dance as a work in ‘flux’ (Preston-Dunlop, 2002, p. 198). Or similarly, the point is reinforced by looking to post structuralist/modernist theories of Roland Barthes and the like, who believe, “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture ...” (Barthes, 1988, p. 146). Every
text can be derived from multiple sources so that even the 1877 Swan Lake is a reinterpretation of something which had been manifested previously.

The focus of this research is on the romantic and classical ballets and contemporary interpretations that have arisen from this canon. This selectivity does not imply that there have not been a number of twentieth century modern works that have become popular in repertoire and also have been utilised as the origins of a contemporary interpretation. An interesting and renowned example of this is Nijinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps (1913). This modern ballet caused outrage and controversy at its premiere and since has been reinterpreted numerous times by a number of choreographers. Some want to bring the work into a contemporary context, while others want to utilise the highly acclaimed musical accompaniment to find their own alternate narrative with the same musical score. Contemporary choreographers who have made their own interpretations of the work include; Martha Graham, Pina Bausch and Stephen Page.
THE APPEAL OF A CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

According to various sources (Thomas, 2003, p. 123; Midgelow, 2007, p. 1) there has been a rise in contemporary interpretations of past dance works since the nineteen eighties. Could this interest in the dances of the past be due to the current political, social and cultural context of the time? In the western world, the eighties and nineties were a period of economic rationalism influenced by the beginnings of the mass development of modern and impersonal communications through the internet, email and mobile phones. Politically, there was an increase in conservatism promoting privatisation and individualism at the expense of public services and collectivism. Do these factors contribute to producing nostalgia for the past periods? Do the choreographers oppose the socio-economic climate of today and thus look at pre-existing works to comment on the issues effecting today’s world, either by presenting the work as a nostalgic look into the past or by actively creating the work to juxtapose the past and present, revealing society as it is today?

The increase in contemporary interpretations may also stem from the huge consumer driven culture which began to thrive in the eighties and has increased thereafter. Consumerism (Healey, 2007) is driven by society’s never-ending drive for consumption that demands the constant outlay of capital for excess material goods and services. To ensure a thriving economy, waste and overindulgence are imperative aspects to a consumerist society. New and improved products constantly replace the old, maintaining a stimulation of the financial market. Is a dance work a consumer commodity? Dance, as a form of entertainment has always been a product for the public to purchase. However, within a consumerist culture there is a strong push for society to be presented with work that is fresh, novel and up-to-the-minute. With the constant interpretations of a classic ballet piece, the choreographer becomes a smart supplier of products. They use a well known brand (i.e., the successful classic) and with a little bit of modernisation, clever marketing and packaging, the traditional work becomes ‘new’ and the latest model of Swan Lake relevant to the present context.

Thomas (2003, p. 140) however, believes that dance has always had a history of remodelling old styles to present new work and thus it is to be expected the classic choreographies operate in contemporary forms. She uses the fashion industry to help illustrate her point:

Fashion is one of those cultural systems that continually reappropriates dress codes and aspects of style from the past and reformulates them into the new mode ... nothing is simply recycled or reproduced as it once was, rather it is transformed into something new which might contain reference to the old. (p. 140)

Thomas illustrates fashions’ ever changing aesthetic and the acceptability for contemporary artists (in this case fashion designers) to find inspiration in the old as a means of generating
something new and purchasable. Contemporary dance, like fashion is constantly shifting aesthetics. Perhaps it can also be accepted that classic choreographies are indeed an appealing material for contemporary artists to use.

The success or effectiveness of contemporary dance is highly dependent on the current popular fashion, or trend of the day. As socio-economic, political, cultural and aesthetic changes occur, so does contemporary dance. The entire premise of the art form depends on what is seen as to be entertaining and artistic at a particular point in time, as opposed to the more traditional styles of cultural dance where the aesthetical product is a culmination of thousands of years of technique and style built up slowly. Within contemporary dance is the notion of taking something conventional, traditional and expected and converting it into a trendy and fashionable work.

The contemporary interpretation is fundamentally a postmodern pastiche of a previous work. With the example of the *Swan Lake* canon, all the interpretations throughout history, since the original 1877 ballet premiere, are in fact all postmodern interpretations of the original, whether the aim was to replicate or to reinvent the work. The postmodern ideal is that the work draws on, refers to and represents ideas that have previously been utilised. As earlier stated, it is also argued that even the ‘original’ work of *Swan Lake* in 1877 is purely an interpretation based on a myriad of already established differing sources that come together in the work. Once the parallel between postmodernism and contemporary interpretation is assumed, various postmodern arguments correspond adequately to the previous conclusions made about the link between consumerism and contemporary interpretations. Frederic Jameson (Midgelow, 2000, p. 220) observes that postmodernist art is in fact consumer driven: “‘Postmodernism is a cynical embrace with commodity capitalism’. Aesthetic production has become, argues Jameson, ‘integrated into commodity production generally’” (cited in Midgelow, 2000, p. 220).

Jameson points out that the postmodern pastiche, often claiming to challenge the sources and provoke a criticism of convention, in the very notion of utilising the classic source as a base remains “conservatively repetitive and thereby operating as a homogenising and hierarchising force and that which is denormatising” (cited in Midgelow, 2000, p. 220). This opinion, rejecting the validity of the creator’s fixation to look to the past for a source, differs from critics who dislike the contemporary interpretation’s irreverence toward the original creator, therefore tainting and contaminating the classic work. Poesio (Lansdale, 2008, p. 73) states that reviewers in history generally thought “‘revisionist’ dance works were creations that lacked inventiveness and originality, were parasitic on pre-existing artistic materials and thus came across as gratuitously outrageous takes on allegedly untouchable landmarks in our culture.”

These two views representing differing attitudes within society are both fundamentally against contemporary interpretations. One view is directly conservative advocating the preservation of
the brilliance of an untouched masterpiece. Diametrically opposed to this belief, Jameson is not concerned with the past, but he states “that postmodern quotation keeps us imprisoned in the past and that pastiche prevents us from confronting our present” (cited in Midgelow, 2000, p. 220).

Regardless of these academic opinions criticising contemporary interpretations, the popularity to revisit the past, existed long before postmodernism, “Aeschylus and Racine and Goethe and da Ponte also retold familiar stories in new forms” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 2). If the reasons for creating contemporary interpretations are uncovered then maybe their popularity and appeal can be celebrated rather than “scorned as secondary and inferior to the adapted text or to the audience’s own imagined versions” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. xv).
Identity

A classic work has a distinct and important identity. Already, there exist standards, values, stylistic characteristics, and social, cultural and political contexts. It is this powerful, comprehensive and successful work that choreographers agree to delve into when utilising a classic work as a source. The assorted aims of a choreographer, when tackling a classic produces various outcomes, it is often these outcomes that attract a choreographer into dealing with a classical work. For instance, through a re-contextualisation of the piece, the choreographer endeavours to show the past in a different light. There is a desirable pull to examine the conventional generally unquestioned traditions (due to the classic work’s status as a ‘masterpiece’). Probing into the identity of the work destabilises the trappings that automatically surround the work helping to discover new meaning and significance, challenging the audiences’ perceptions or the past perceptions of the work. In the process, there is a departure from the previously established mode of the work.

Familiarity and Marketability versus Value Judgement and Criticism

Security and familiarity are appealing aspects of a classic work. The choreographer is not embarking on an open-ended investigation. No matter how great the risk is in changing the version and presenting a new and individual voice and perspective, there is always that underlying framework on which the work is based which exerts its influence, favourable or otherwise. Although this does not guarantee automatic success, the history, the name and the fame of the original draws an audience in to witness the performance. Regardless of undesirable reviews, the use of a classic work as the source is in fact a marketing strategy, with the assurance that audiences’ interest will be provoked. Cohen believes that the adaption of a familiar tradition is attractive for the majority of audience members: “The contemporary audience recognises the work as an entity, it accepts revised versions and often even considers their freshness as a major attraction” (1982, p. 6).

However, complications can arise from this approach as well, because by using a known, pre-existing work, the choreographer agrees to every pre-existing version of the work to become part of the process. This is due to the fact that a pre-existing work is heavily loaded with traces of a whole host of judgements, opinions, values and attitudes. Even if the choreographer has no intention to refer to all of these factors, audiences bring their own pre-existing knowledge when they watch the work. Audiences, when watching a reinterpreted work are going to judge their experience of the new in reference to knowledge already accumulated. This conjunction of the old (often unquestioned assumptions) and the new is often what the choreographer is expecting and it is through the past knowledge of the work that new meanings come to the forefront.
Consider, Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake*. Without previous knowledge that the swan characters are female; the audience cannot appreciate the full impact of the decision to change the gender of the swans. Without any idea of the *Swan Lake* story, Bourne’s production becomes a narrative which is much less radical and controversial because in its presentation of the ballet in 1995, there was a reasonable level of social acceptability of gay culture. However to transpose a gay perspective on a traditional and conventional work which was presented in a time period where gayness was not an acceptable topic for display, strengthens the impact of the comment on sexuality through exposing the audience to unexpected and surprising reversals.

Can a choreographer actually foresee what pre-existing baggage of values and opinions of the work that the audience will bring? By reinterpreting a work, the audience can compare directly with something they may know. Often the choreographer may attempt to present the work in an effort to change the judgement about it. Linda Hutcheon says “You cannot step outside that which you contest, you are always implicated in the value, you choose the challenge” (cited in Midgelow, 2000, p. 220).

In many cases a contemporary interpretation is compared directly with the original. Subjective voices will critique the work in comparison to their perspective of the original. Questions arise about whether the contemporary interpretation did the original justice; did it surpass expectations or spoil the viewers’ reception of the work? A contemporary interpretation, more often than not, relies on the audience having an opinion about the original work in order to enrich the meaning and significance of the newer work. It is the audience’s opinions and judgements about the prior work that place full value and implication of meaning on the references and allusions that appear in the contemporary interpretation.

A question to consider is, as time goes on- do the expectations of a classic piece increase? Will the audience anticipate a bettered version, expecting more and more each time the classic material is approached by a new choreographer?
Choreographer's History

The trend for reinterpreting classic works could also stem from the absorbed dancing history of the choreographer that has preceded the creation of the new work. For many choreographers, who have experienced the classical tradition in training and performance, the classics are a large part of their personal history as dancers and thus it is little wonder that these classics permeate their way into these choreographic voices. The experiential knowledge and years of performing the works (standing in the corps or otherwise) gives the choreographer insight/opinions to express in regards to the work.

Subjectivity, contextual upbringing and experience come into play and contribute to a choreographer forming a reading or interpretation of a work. With this in mind, experiences vary greatly and thus the contemporary interpretation is not limited in any way. It is not restricted to being a retaliation of that classic work together with all the conventions and traditions of classical ballet. The interpretation (as previously mentioned) could be a reverence to, or celebration of the original work or it could be a parody, ridiculing the classical system and its projected ideal. Alternatively could a reinterpretation simply be a tailoring of the work into a contemporary context? It seems that there is an endless supply of reasons for reinterpreting classic works. Due to the multiplicity of motivations, the works created are in fact a collection of ideas about the classical work fused with contemporary perspectives, subjective perspectives and the long lineage of previous stagings of a work as an ‘original’ and also as a reinterpretation.

Musical Accompaniment

The musical scores that accompany the classic works are an integral and unforgettable aspect of the performance. The scores are also extremely important in their own right. Music legends such as Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Adolph Adam, and Igor Stravinsky composed for some of the most famous and long lasting canonical works (Swan Lake, Giselle and The Rite of Spring). These pieces of music are well known and generally thought of as classic pieces, in the sense that they have stood the test of time rather than belonging solely to their respective classical music periods.

Given that these three pieces were commissioned for dance on a concert stage, it is little wonder that these scores have become desirable for present choreographic works. The powerful and familiar scores of the classics draw choreographers to using them. However along with the score comes the irrevocable link to the original work (the choreography, set, costumes etc). There is an attraction for the choreographer to make reference to the work that has gone before. To use these musical pieces for mere aesthetic or subjective reasons is undeniably naive. If a
choreographer chooses to ignore allusions to the original work when creating a piece using music from a very well known work, their dramatic intentions and meaning will be invariably distorted. The reason being is that, as stated previously, the audience will already have established a relationship between the musical score and the classic work, thus the link already exists and no matter what is presented on stage the audience will draw comparisons between the new and what has already existed.

Thus with many choreographers, who utilise some or all of the original music there is the obvious and intelligent decision to make reference to the work that has gone before, for example; Mats Ek’s contemporary interpretations of *Giselle* (1982), *Swan Lake* (1987) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1996) establish a very close relationship between the musical narrative and the dramatic/choreographic narrative, even though the narrative context and content emphasis differs to that of the original work. With this intimate unity between the musical score and the action on stage, an impression is given of Ek as a musically driven creator. However, looking at the narrative and context of the work, it also reveals that Ek is very much insistent on displacing and/or challenging the cultural, artistic and social traditions contained within the original narrative by his striving to create an alternate work. The choreographer creates something new because the music is an alluring driving force.

**Accumulation of Knowledge**

Each contemporary interpretation is merely a single reading of a long lineage of readings of a particular work. The single reading contributes to the sedimentation of knowledge and tradition of the classic work. It is these readings that help to construct the canon of the classic. The canon sustains not necessarily the voice of what one choreographer can say in one lifetime but is it the accumulation of voices throughout history creating differing works which speaks each time a classic work is reinterpreted.

At first it may seem that a choreographer is dealing with an easy commodity. And yes in some ways, because the work is known and familiar, the process is defined and limited by the original in some aspects. However there are also a myriad of elements that make taking on a classic work comparable to tackling a giant. The elements include previous critiques and analyses of the work (to, once again, prevent a naivety of judgement), a sound knowledge of the choreographic style and form as well as an in-depth understanding of what is communicated socially, culturally and historically. In the case of creating a satirical spoof of the classic original it is even more valuable to embrace the extensive background of the work. Regardless of the reason, a new reading will further the development of the work as an entity in itself, “however radical or subversive a particular reworking may be, the tenacious web of canonicity always attempts to reassert itself” (Midgelow, 2007, p. 37).
WHAT GETS RECONSTRUCTED?

The ballet classics have a long and impressive history. The works are looked upon as masterpieces. The performance of a classic carries weight and credence to the company, dancers and the audience. The classics are now seen as the epitome of classical ballet. But how was the tradition of the work set up? What creates the canon? Helen Thomas (2004) discusses the highly selective nature of reconstruction, a sure sign that the work has canonical potentiality. She maintains the idea that a work is only maintained as a tradition if it is deemed to be the best:

It is overwhelmingly theatrical ‘high art’ past dances that are deemed suitable, worthy candidates for reconstruction. This selective preservation is underpinned by a vertical (hierarchical) concept of culture, which stems from the ‘culture and civilisation tradition’ in which culture is defined as; the best that has been thought and said’. In this case high art per se is the yardstick by which all other forms and practices are measured. (p. 34)

The work must be viewed as worthwhile for it to be considered as a classic and, therefore, to have a continued status in repertory. Revivals, repertoire and reconstructions show obvious signs of exclusivity and hierarchy. Thomas’ ideas denote that preserved works are selectively chosen by institutionalised holders of power in a particular art form.

This selectivity could however also be quite important in undoing some of the prejudices against minority groups who have been completely left out of the history of dance until recent times. One example is Bourne’s swapping of the swan gender in his Swan Lake (1995) with the outcome that through his reading the gay minority group, largely unrepresented in traditional dance and ballet works and still subject to both social and political discrimination has appeared on the concert dance stage. Representing the gay perspective through an appropriation of a traditional idiom also acts as a positive discrimination, for the gay culture and thus highlights the notion that the inevitable selectivity embedded within a contemporary interpretation can in fact contribute both negatively and positively to the progression and development of dance history.

Although Thomas raises logical and likely reasons for why a work becomes a classic, there are definite exceptions to her generalisations. It is of interest to look at how Swan Lake became a traditional masterpiece and, arguably, the epitome of classical ballet. Various sources state that from Swan Lake’s beginnings the work was not terribly successful and thus the reasons for the canonisation of the work are a little more complex. Proof of Swan Lake’s ineffective beginnings are recorded in a number of sources; according to Cohen (1982, p. 3) Swan Lake after its premiere in 1877, had five years of “mediocre productions” before being “dropped from the repertory of the Bolshoi Theatre ... A variety of attempts had been made to rescue it from impending oblivion”.

16
This quotation highlights Thomas's suggestion that only the 'best' works will be kept. It shows that without success, a work will be dropped from existence and swallowed into the lost history of dance. It was the Petipa/Ivanov version of the work that was to prevent the Swan Lake production from falling by the wayside. The 1895 version in St Petersburg according to collected various positive press responses by Wiley (1997, pp. 175-177) was well received. Wiley states that, the press response was an indication of success, and the collaboration between Ivanov and Petipa worked (p. 175). How did Petipa and Ivanov transform the unsuccessful 1877 Swan Lake version into a suitable repertoire work, retrospectively helping this adaptation become one of the most famous ballets of today?

Subjective/Objective Selectivity

Many critics have very specific ideas about which works can be transformed into contemporary interpretations. For example, Lesley Main, quoted by Helen Thomas believes that;

Some dances are 'of their time' while others can 'transcend their time of origin'. In other words some work should not be tampered with because it has what is locally situated historical significance, while other work has a greater universal time reach in that it can have relevance for a contemporary audience. (cited in Thomas, 2003, p. 122)

Main's notion brings up another problematic concept in regards to what becomes a contemporary interpretation. It is deduced from the quotation that Main suggests not all works should be able to be represented in any context. This is a slightly difficult notion to comprehend as there seems to be no simple way of uniformly deciding which works are allowed to be 'tampered with'. To begin with, dance is essentially a subjective art form. Individual interpretations of dances are diverse and changeable. The reception is dependent on a number of immeasurable variables in regards to culture, time period and society. There is no way in which one could determine objectively on behalf of society of the present and future societies that a work would be unsuitable/or suitable for contemporary interpretation. Furthermore, with postmodernism at the forefront of the art of dance, 'policing' or restricting choreographers to drawing on only a select history of works is in fact just another method for teaching a biased and inaccurate history.

Main's view of selectivity and classification of work appears to illustrate that the choreographer has a moral and ethical obligation to the original creator and thus there must be a respect for these works. Opposing this idea is that of Richard Taruskin (cited in Jordan, 1997, p. vii) arguing that there is no obligation of respect for a present day maker to a creator of the pre-existed work:

A performer cannot please or move the ancient dead and owes them no such effort. There is no way that we can harm Bach or Mozart any more (read
Balanchine, Graham, Petipa) nor any way that we can earn their gratitude, our obligations are to the living ... turning ideas into objects, and putting objects in place of people is the essential modernist fallacy...it fosters the further fallacy of forgetting that performances are not things but acts". (cited in Jordan, 1997, p. vii)
IMPORTANCE OF RECONSTRUCTION WITHIN DANCE HERITAGE, HISTORY AND CULTURE

Roger Copeland declares that the "ME generation of the 1960's has given way to the RE generation of the 1980's" (cited in Thomas, 2003, p. 123), highlighting that the trend since the nineteen eighties is to re-interpret classic works in radical ways giving new readings and impressions of the typical canon. However to set up the traditional canon, the work cannot survive without the interpretation of successive choreographers through the ages. For example, the Petipa/Ivanov version of Swan Lake (1895) is looked upon today as 'the' traditional production, however, this was already a deviation from the original production of the 1877 Swan Lake. Following this thought, theoretically it is quite possible that in another hundred years time 'the' traditional version will in fact resemble a production of Swan Lake that audiences see today as a radical contemporary interpretation of the classic?

Matthew Bourne admits that while growing up he "thought that this [Peter Darrell’s psychological drug drama of Swan Lake, 1979] was Swan Lake; that all Swan Lakes would be along these lines. I didn't know then that Darrell’s treatment of the story was something new" (cited in Macaulay, 1999, p. 201). Macaulay (1999, p. 202) goes on to suggest that in the late nineties audiences may think that Bourne’s Swan Lake is the ‘one and only Swan Lake’. These comments bring to the forefront the question regarding the length of an accurate historical memory of a transient art form. Selma Cohen agrees with the impossibility of preserving original work yet finds more interest and significance in the fact that there still exists a living, breathing version of Swan Lake. Cohen reveals that the “ballet has not survived in a pristine state, but it has survived; some continuing strain of recognisable identity has been preserved” (1982, p. 10). The fact that the work has survived in some form allows a revisitation into the history of dance. Vida Midgelow illustrates the importance of the survival of works through reinterpretations:

Reworkings revisit our dancing heritage. Through this revisiting, the choreographers of such works adopt, embrace and question this heritage. Ballet has been the prime focus for such reworkings, the genre sometimes being revisited to represent the form as despised, sometimes to celebrate it as magical, sometimes to frame ballet as socio-politically laden. Whatever the mode of reworking, these works draw attention to history as an issue. Historical contexts are reinstalled as significant, whilst also problematising the entire notion of historical knowledge, making the viewer aware of the nature of the historical referent. (Midgelow, 2000, pp. 217-218)

Once again this brings to light the notion that through the popularity for contemporary interpretations, an embrace of the canon and the support for presenting historic work in current performance, the existence of dance works succeed the creator, and thus the human being becomes more temporary and fleeting than the dance work he or she can create. The
contemporary interpretation or any type of instantiation of a previous work contributes to the making of dance history.
SWAN LAKE: A CASE STUDY

It is impossible to maintain an exact replica of the ‘original’ form of Swan Lake (1895) today. Even if this ballet could somehow be preserved in time, the changes that have naturally occurred within the one hundred years since opening night infers that the viewpoint of how an audience might see this production has also changed and, thus the description of this classic today is formed from a completely different perspective, namely that of a society of 2009. The values, knowledge and experiences of today prevent a truly objective interpretation of the piece. It is of the greatest importance to acknowledge this shift in time, and how this affects the reading and interpretation of the work.

An audience member from today’s society may perceive Swan Lake to have long mime scenes. For example, in the second act, Odette explains to Prince Siegfried that she is the queen of the swans, who has been turned into a swan on a lake made from her mother’s tears. This spell, she continues, will last until someone pledges his love for her and sets her free. In the eighteen hundreds, mime was an integral part of theatrical ballets, thus long mime sequences, such as the one described were probably not seen as excessive or long. Cohen says that the mime scenes are “superfluous” as today’s audiences are “accustomed to a faster pace and more non dramatic dancing” (1982, p. 7). Thus although the length of the mime scenes are unchanged the perception of the audience has changed thus affecting the reception of the piece.

Examining three contemporary interpretations of Swan Lake created within the last three decades will hopefully give more insight into the subject of contemporary interpretations. Of main interest is how the new creation refers to the original Swan Lake canon, what this work may communicate to today’s audience and how the use of the classic necessitates or enhances the meaning explored by the new choreographer. In accordance with Cohen (Cohen, 1982, p. 3) the Petipa/Ivanov version is seen as the classic version and will be juxtaposed and compared with Mats Ek’s Swan Lake (1987), originally performed by the dancers from the Cullberg Ballet, Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake (1995) performed by Adventures in Motion Pictures and Garry Stewart’s Birdbrain (2000) performed by Australian Dance Theatre.

1 Based on the VHS version of Mats Ek’s Swan Lake (n.d) by the Cullberg Ballet, posted on youtube.com, Retrieved 12 May, 2009, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cs_FatGNie0
3 Based on experiential knowledge as a dancer performing segments of Garry Stewart’s Birdbrain, May 2008 remounted by Anton. As well as the Birdbrain DVD recording of Australian Dance Theatre’s performance of the work (ADT’s own copy).
The 'standard' *Swan Lake*

The original story of *Swan Lake* is essentially a love story. The story explores the age old tale of a protagonist searching for a true love to marry. Due to the dark external forces of deception, the protagonist betrays his true love and loses her. The specifics of the story are as follows: the protagonist, Prince Siegfried, is advised by his mother, the queen, that he has come of age and has responsibilities to find a suitable wife. At a court scene, the prince is set up with a girl and unhappy that he cannot choose his own partner, he takes off to the woods to hunt. It is here that he meets the very beautiful swans. Siegfried dances and falls in love with Odette, the Queen Swan. Siegfried also discovers she is a human under a spell from the evil Baron von Rothbart that only utter fidelity to love can break.

At the Prince’s birthday he is expected to find his prospective princess and although he is in love with Odette, the (White) Swan, he is obliged to dance with a variety of ladies, all competing for his attention. Rothbart brings his daughter, Odile (the Black Swan) disguised as Odette to seduce the prince. The prince confesses his love for her as he believes her to be Odette. Odette, watching from outside flees. Odette is followed by the prince.

There are many variations to the ending, but essentially the Prince and Odette end up back at the lake aware that, as he has pledged his love to Odile, Odette cannot be freed. Thus to escape a life without love, the lovers throw themselves in the lake which breaks the spell and kills the evil Rothbart. Often this ending is replaced for a happier ending where Siegfried defeats Rothbart and thus Odette and Siegfried can be together forever (Tulubyeva, 2003).

The original piece is set in the royal court for the first and third acts and by a moonlit lake in the second and fourth acts. Often, however, choreographers have chosen to merge together the third and fourth acts as they are shorter in length. The scenes and action taking place by the lake with the swan/women dancing are known as the ‘white acts’. They are named white due to the well-known white costumes that the female ballerinas wear to represent the swans’ physical appearance and the women’s innocence and purity. In all three of the chosen interpretations the *Swan Lake* narrative becomes the base to build a contemporary interpretation, and is essentially adhered to.
Mats Ek and Matthew Bourne retain Tchaikovsky’s original musical score. Both have arranged the music differently to help assist their work. Both choreographers alter or leave out sections, yet on the whole the original musical score is maintained. Ek and Bourne are often classified as choreographers who are greatly inspired by the musical accompaniment. Poesio (Lansdale, 2008, p. 78) says “in Ek’s hands music ... becomes a vital component of every dance work”. In an interview, Bourne reveals why he is drawn to using Tchaikovsky’s music in his version of Swan Lake, “to see contemporary movements to that traditional music ... suddenly makes you see familiar, or great music in an entirely new light ... too many of traditional ballets ... don’t feel like living choreography anymore” (Macaulay, 1999, p. 206).

The music is an integral aspect of both their Swan Lakes. There is a synergy in both works between the two elements of choreography and music. The emotional/dramatic suggestions within Tchaikovsky’s music meet the emotional/dramatic action of the performers on stage.

Bourne divulges his opinions on particular choreographers using the original music: “there are ways of doing it well and messing it up. 1964 Nureyev production plays around with the music in a dreadful way, to me that is unacceptable” (cited in Macaulay, 1999, p. 204). These comments reveal Bourne’s reverence towards the classic ballet Swan Lake and also his feelings towards the issue of contemporary interpretations. We discover that he is similar in thoughts to critics, such as Main (Thomas, 2003, p. 122) who believes that some works are not to be tampered with, and moreover is severely against an interpretation of the classics that is not, in his eyes, successful. This is a curious notion as dance is such a subjective subject. Is there any way that one can delineate who is worthy of making a contemporary interpretation of Swan Lake? Bourne also voices his dissatisfaction of Ek’s use of the music: “...his (Ek’s) is a little too radical for me in some ways; the music is terribly cut and edited; and there are sounds within it, vocalisations, that I didn’t like” (cited Macaulay, 1999, p. 206). It is extremely interesting that Bourne, who has created one of the most controversial contemporary interpretations in the last twenty years, can be in favour of the opinion that aspects of the Swan Lake canon are sacred. Bourne’s complaint with these productions stems from choices of music. It is just as easily argued that Bourne’s treatment of the original narrative and choreography could be just as unacceptable to others, as Nureyev’s/Ek’s music choices were to Bourne.
It also must be noted that the original arrangement of Tchaikovsky’s score has not been a uniform constant throughout the *Swan Lake* canon. According to Poesio (Lansdale, 2008, p. 79) the Act Three ‘Black Swan pas de deux’, which traditionally ends with the ballerina executing 32 *fouettes en tournant*, was intended by Tchaikovsky to be used in the first act as a duet for the Prince and a female guest. Ek chose to place the Act Three ‘Black Swan pas de deux’ back in Act One and use the music Tchaikovsky originally intended for the Black Swan and Prince encounter. Thus Ek’s choice to switch around the musical arrangement may in fact be closer to Tchaikovsky’s original intentions. However this debate is tenuous as the Matthew Bourne’s program states that his production “retains ... Tchaikovsky’s wonderful score ... in its entirety and as intended by the composer” (McQuinn, 2008, p. 2). The conflicting ideas about Tchaikovsky’s intentions are only of relevance to highlight the fact that the origins *Swan Lake*, in this case Tchaikovsky’s score, are unstable.

In total contrast to Ek’s and Bourne’s traditional music choice, Garry Stewart chooses to contemporise the music using a techno-inspired accompaniment with a two additional inserts from the original Tchaikovsky music score. These inserts are played initially in the opening scene in fast forward and later in the second half of the piece, while the dancers execute various permutations of the ballet leg and arm positions in a sharp and correct manner. The music for Stewart’s work is attributed to Jad McAdam and Luke Smiles (Stewart, 2009). The sound is relentless, the composition uses a fast tempo with a heavy beat and bass and no recognisable lyricism. Within this soundscape there is little reference to the original Tchaikovsky composition, yet this piece uses an undercurrent of muttering and screeching of synthesised noise and voices, which although not definitive in their meaning seem to speak of the murky depths of under the water, alluding to the torture experienced by the once human swans now living on the lake created by the malevolent Rothbart.
**Stewart’s *Birdbrain***

In both the Ek and Bourne works, the narrative follows the general *Swan Lake* formula. Stewart’s interaction with the original *Swan Lake* is entirely different to those of both Bourne and Ek. He seeks not to change the narrative: unlike Bourne, he does not turn the Prince and his family into a stereotype that “bore a satirically strong resemblance to the present royal family” (Mackrell, 2001, para 11). Nor does Stewart interpret, as Ek does, the relationship between the son and mother as extremely tense and oedipal (Midgelow, 2007, p. 44).

Stewart does not rewrite or alter any of the original narrative, yet his version is probably the least recognisable in relation to the original. Stewart analyses the original piece and presents it in an extremely different format. *Birdbrain* becomes a non-linear affair of deconstructed elements stretched and expanded. *Birdbrain* utilises not only the original *Swan Lake* but draws on the trappings and conventions that are tied to the work and belong to the classical ballet idiom in general.

The work is a slick synthesis of the essentials. The symbols and renowned characteristics visibly emerge in a treatment which is both reverential and parodic. Through a contextualisation of the original work into a present day period, there is simultaneously a celebration of *Swan Lake* and the classical ballet canon, the ridiculing of some ‘outdated aspects’ and a cynical presentation of the fashions and trends of today. For example, Stewart both mocks and thereby eliminates the hierarchical system of corps and soloists. Arbitrary labelling of ‘corps’ and ‘soloist’ parts through costume design (white fitted t-shirts with labels across the chest) demonstrates the meaninglessness of a balletic pecking order in a contemporary dance company context. All the dancers at one point or another have a ‘corps’ label on their chest, yet throughout the piece they also have ‘soloist’, ‘Odette’, ‘Odile’ or ‘Siegfried’. Thus the audience begins to see the interchangeable nature of these labels and therefore their irrelevance, especially given that the costumes apart from the order of black letters across the chest are identical. Furthermore, this labelling does not seem to determine the amount of physical exertion or weight of role for each dancer. The labels on the costume also comment on society’s consumerist culture. The fashion of the nineties to wear the brand across the chest, like a name badge, alludes to the consumer preference to let go of their individuality in exchange of the brand speaking for their personality thereby allowing themselves to become a living advertisement for a multinational clothing company.
The labelling on the T-shirts becomes more and more entertaining as the piece develops. In the classical standard of Swan Lake, the duality of the Odette and Odile character is made obvious with the same ballerina playing both parts. In Birdbrain the dancers begin to wear 'Odette' on their front and 'Odile' on their back. The sex of this character is not exclusively female as males become this character as well. Dancers enter with labels such as 'peasant joy' and 'more pointless revelry' which is a flippant dig at Swan Lake in its traditional form where folk or national dances are inserted into the narrative as divertissements, simply to add colour or show off the soloists and, moreover, criticises the formulaic structures of ballet classics in general.

Birdbrain's dramaturge David Bonney simply states “Birdbrain takes one of the world's favourite ballets, Swan Lake, pulls it into tiny pieces and labels each of them with a big black marker” (n.d, p. 2). Like the labels worn across the chests of the dancers, the well known elements of the standard Swan Lake are branded throughout the entire work. The first character label is Rothbart, the only performer wearing clothes that resemble the original setting and era of Swan Lake. He is long haired and dressed in a green fibred waist coat, trousers and shirt. Instead of symbolising the ballet idiom his movements are that of a contortionist. The performer bends and moulds himself into twisted and miniature shapes and acro-balances. This movement vocabulary for Rothbart is a physical representation of the evil manipulations that Rothbart carries out in the story, such as changing the women into swans and disguising his daughter to take the physical form of Odette. The choice of keeping Rothbart upstage and behind a Scrim symbolises his pervasive presence wherein his watchful eye is constantly present yet imperceptible to the characters.

Stewart also references the celebrated thirty two fouettes en tournant. Instead of the prima ballerina executing this technical feat alone, a team of eight dancers, male and female, each contribute four fouettes en tournant to make a total of thirty two, which is tallied by numbers projected onto the back wall. This mimicry of the original mocks the ballet aficionados who eagerly anticipate counting the 32 turns to see if all are executed as well as simultaneously replacing the hierarchical exclusivity of the soloist with the team work of a company as well. Stewart presents the classical canon from a contemporary dance perspective.
Hardwick cited in Midgelow (2007, p.67) says that “Stewart’s approach to Swan lake in Birdbrain is ‘not a contemporary interpretation of the narrative’,” rather Stewart looks at the importance of the Swan Lake in the past, present and future. Birdbrain reveals the impact that the Swan Lake canon has had on the training and schooling of aspiring dancers. For example, through Birdbrain’s ‘schoolgirls’ section, the dancers, dressed in pinafore uniforms, practice ballet steps. While this occurs, the projection screen lists famous ballerinas throughout history who have danced the character of Odette/Odile. This scene presents the notion that the repertoire of Swan Lake survives today as an encouraging ideal for younger dancers. The repertoire serves to educate and inspire emerging generations of dancers.
Bourne’s *Swan Lake*

Bourne transfers the fairytale into a setting of royalty in today’s society. The usage of royalty particularly reflects that of the English monarchy. The Royal Family are the subject of constant paparazzi attention, which is especially accentuated in Bourne’s work when the press surround Prince Siegfried, drunk and disorderly and kicked out the Swank Bar. Bourne thus chooses to maintain the hierarchy of ballet, with the royal family at the centre of events, yet it is a monarchy of the modern age.

The structure and design of the piece also abides by the classical production conventions. Bourne’s structure of the movement and dancers in space centres on the use of the soloist(s) and the surrounding *corps de ballet*. The emphasis of lines, diagonals and semicircles dominate the court scenes. For example, at the Prince’s birthday party the *pas de deux* takes place in the cleared centre space while to the side in a large semi circle the guests appreciate the performance. These scenes are full of pomp and circumstance, with mime scenes and court dancing harking back to the classic canon as well as taking on a certain ‘over the top’ quality reminiscent of English pantomime.

The pantomime style is apparent throughout the entire piece but most prominent in Act One with the ballet within the ballet. This mini choreographic parody of the classical/romantic ballet idiom in particular *Swan Lake*, involves similar themes of love, death and good versus evil. The dancing is intentionally bad and the characters are fairy moths and tree trolls with costumes that are gaudy and kitsch. Bourne (cited in Macaulay, 1999, p. 234) says he wanted to make something that parallels to “some dreadful version” of the many restaged productions of *Swan Lake*, “It’s one of those awful, tacky ballets that probably played in the London music halls”. This is an interesting notion because from a contemporary dance perspective it seems that Bourne’s production style is flashy and showy displaying a heightened and exaggerated reality.

It is the popular culture references and the melodrama that makes Bourne’s work such a great success. Without the traditional elitism of the ballet, Bourne’s *Swan Lake* appeals to the general public and the everyday layman. Bourne embraces the style of the dance halls and the pantomime. For example, the scene at the Swank Bar portrays a variety of pop culture figures from the past: Elvis, the Blues Brothers, Cliff Richards and the British stripper Phyllis Dixie. The costumes are shiny with bright colours, feathers, rhinestones and wigs. The movement is influenced by jazz and show dance. His dual fondness/mockery of popular culture brings *Swan Lake* to a much larger viewership than usual making Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake* “the world’s longest running production” (McQuinn, 2008, p. 2).
EK's Swan Lake

Mats Ek reveals that one of the main reasons for being drawn to interpreting classic ballets such as Swan Lake is the strength of the story: “it struck me, good story, many things asleep. Good material, many things unused ... see how it was built, I wanted to explore it my way, try to find my entry to the story” (Heidecke, 2002). The character of the Prince was Ek’s entry into the story, on first impression taking in the costume of the prince against the set his character seems incompatible and out of place in a surreal art deco setting. The Prince has a full head of dark floppy male ballet hair while the rest of the cast wear bald head caps with the occasional additional sprouting hair tuft. The Prince’s costume is the only one aligned to the classical ballet ideal; ballet shoes, tights and a tunic.

According to many critics, Midgelow (2007) and Poesio (1999), Ek reads the relationship through a Freudian perspective. He imbues the Mother/Son relationship with sexual tension, shown through the initial duet between the two characters, expressively through the mother sensually running her hand over the son’s shoulder and onto his chest. The mother attempts to alleviate his desires for her with the presentation of a female companion for her son. The Prince, after momentarily dancing with the girl physically shoves her out his arms and follows his mother. Midgelow (2007, p. 45) says “Siegfried’s relationship with his mother emasculates him ... Following Freud, his relationship with his mother, combined with the absence of the father figure, deems it impossible for Siegfried to become fully masculine and establish successful relationships with other women” It is apparent that the male character of the Prince portrayed against confident and assertive characters such as his mother, the Swans and Rothbart is seen as ineffectual and weak. This portrayal is quite similar to Bourne’s version. Bourne and Ek both create a Prince who pleads for his mother’s attentions, he is timid and overwhelmed when first meeting the swans yet clearly desires, envies and is amazed by Odette. The Odette character, although played by different genders are both the antithesis of the Prince’s character. They are sexy, strong and self assured.

In the end, the marriage of Odette and the Prince shows a misleading resolution as Rothbart maintains control by holding on to the bride’s veil. The Prince has certainly not grown in strength or confidence, because in the final scene, he returns to the stage, shuffling backwards in a foetal position expressively frightened and still troubled. Odile still lurks in the shadows, executing the same movement motif as Odette. She teases the Prince with a glance over her shoulder and a circling of her hips. The male, like in the beginning, is seen as weak and confused in a world where he does not belong, full of characters that allure and taunt him.
Gender bending

All three works, unsurprisingly, have opened up female and male archetypes found in the standard Swan Lake story. Presenting less stereotyped ideas of gender on stage, the choreographers criticise the redundant views of the mythicised Swan Lake canon, bringing to the stage views aligned with the social and political climate at the time of the creation. Bourne’s version is perhaps the most overtly radical, because of the gender recasting of the entire swan cast. The story becomes a gay love story, with the repressed Prince at its centre. Homosexuality replaces the heterosexual ‘normality’ of this story and confronts the issue of the lack of homosexual relationships present in mainstream entertainment. The Prince is portrayed as a troubled, unconfident character. His officious mother and bubbly but uncouth girlfriend dominate his presence on stage. His movement style and body language is inward and hesitant. The Prince seeks affection and love from his mother, yet “her action is clearly resonant of the phrases ‘pull yourself together’, ‘be a man’... These admonitions directed at the young man seek to deny emotional display, reinforcing expectations of hegemonic masculine behaviour” (Midgelow, 2007, p. 55).

Susan Foster believes “the casual relationship between homosexuality and inadequate mothering that the dance depicts and the attack on the Swan by his fellow swans issue from a framework of heteronormative assumptions about gay life” (Midgelow, 2007, p. 57). It can be argued that Bourne attempts to present the violence and discrimination facing homosexuals in today’s society through inclusion of the bashing scene by the male swans. However Martin Hargreaves (Midgelow, 2007, p. 57) reads the death of the Prince and Swan as problematic in terms of challenging entertainments homophobic tendencies. The death scene “shows not only punishment brought on by any attempt to love, but also the degree to which this prohibition is internalised within any cultural context that deals with male homosexuality” (Midgelow, 2007, p. 57).

With the exception of the Prince, Bourne sticks to a ‘Masculine’ and ‘Feminine’ stereotype of the characters. The corps of male swans does not reflect the demure, shy and elegant female swans choreographed by Ivanov and Petipa. The swans are quintessentially male, they are strong, muscular, bare chested and untamed. Similarly the Odile character, the Stranger, is also an epitome of masculinity. He walks along a one metre high fence standing centre stage above the royal court waiting for the guests to notice him. His movement consisting of jumps, lunges and turns, emphasises his physical strength. He uses a large amount of stage space as he dances seductively with the many different partners, “emphasising his sexual performance, thrusting his penis at all comers, the stranger perpetuates dominant male sexual behaviour.” (Midgelow, 2007, p. 56) He also carries a horse’s whip, symbolic of his dominance of the partners that he takes. Juxtaposing the Prince (who is given little movement) against this male archetype serves
to emasculate the Prince further. Bourne also emphasises the mother’s sexual attraction and affection for the stranger, highlighting the Prince’s unfulfilled longing for love and attention both from the mother and the stranger, who he believes to be the Swan.

In the dancing the female/male partnerships show males in a strong, supporting and ‘masculine’ role while the females are lifted executing turns and long extended lines. This is especially highlighted in the Stranger and Queen duet. The male/male choreographic partnership between the Swan and the Prince shows greater unison and equality than the female/male partnerships. Thus while Bourne shows more equality between the Swan and the Prince, the female dancer falls into the conventional classical ballet role, for example, the Queen dancing with the Stranger in Act Three supported in a ballroom hold by the male as the male lifts the female with her legs extended. The Queen is seen throughout the piece as a dominating and forceful character, yet this duet shows male dominance of the submissive female, once again reinforcing the romantic gender stereotype present in the original narrative. Thus while Bourne’s male recasting challenges the hetero stereotype, he also reinforces many typical beliefs about gender/sexuality stereotypes, such as his emasculation of the homosexual male and the choreographic choice to keep the male dominant over the female in partnerships.

Ek and Stewart both illustrate androgynous characters through costume and choreographic choices. Both have mixed up the sexes so that the swans consist of both male and female dancers executing the same group movement independent of the sex. Stewart’s costumes, as earlier discussed, are unisex slim fitting T-shirts and tailored grey slacks. These costumes represent the fashion of the 1990’s and moreover symbolises the larger equity between the sexes in society.
Ek also uses unisex costumes yet he chooses to keep the traditional feminine white tutus. To confuse the gender stereotypes further, all the swans, both male and female, have bald heads, referencing the male typecast. Breaking down the division between male/female catapults the *Swan Lake* classic into a time period post the waves of feminism. Ek’s swans unlike in the original are bold and curious as they approach the Prince. The single motif movement of Odette is a bent and flexed cocked leg exposing the underneath of the white tutu and the stockingless legs of the dancer. The image is perhaps symbolic of a ducking swan on a lake or a preening swan on land. It is a strong, angular gesture far from the typified swan elegance of extended linear lines and undulating arms. Gone is the romanticism and exaltation of the female figure as is so often portrayed in the original. It is not to say that the female character is disregarded in anyway, it is just that the female character of Ek’s society no longer fits the stereotype of a beautiful, helpless and innocence creature. Ek believes that the classical tradition diminishes female characteristic possibilities (Heidecke, 2002), thus he opens up the swan personality to encompass much more than ethereal and fragile females. Odette and her swans are strong, a mixture of races/sexes, determined, bald headed, grounded, bare footed and sexy. Their movement is vulgar, beautiful and confident with open bold arm movements. The swans lunge into huge second positions, they take the space then contract their torsos and twitch and shake.
Ek also references the long arabesques lines, the spatial formations and musical patterning and phrasing belonging to the classical canon. Midgelow states that Ek’s physicality and movement vocabulary, could be seen “in another dance” as characteristically Ek yet as this is a contemporary interpretation the choreography is perceived to specifically allude to the traditional Swan Lake rather than Ek’s style. Midgelow goes on to say that through Ek’s movement language, the viewer, understands the movement, which stems from the ballet tradition, as “reflecting the codes of ballet and at times specifically to reference Swan Lak.” (Midgelow, 2007, p. 40). In opposition to the references to the ballet tradition Ek’s movement also displays direct departures from the balletic style. These differences teamed with the modernisation of the narrative ensure that the audience sees a counter Swan Lake which opposes yet directly emanates from the source, the Petipa/Ivanov work.
Cygnets

All three choreographers could not resist in leaving out the most famous variation of the white acts, ‘the dance of the cygnets’.

In Bourne’s *Swan Lake*, the white acts are the most interesting in terms of their departure from the original interpretation. Bourne’s court scenes seem arbitrary in furthering the plot, and establishing characters. On the whole these court scenes show that “Bourne is not interested in abstract compositions or experimenting with new means of expression. His principal aim is to create dances in which the theatrical element is particularly evident” (Bremser, 1999, p. 34).

Bourne’s court choreography is less innovative and consists mostly of combining styles of ballroom, ballet and popular social dance overlayed with a strong theatrical and dramatic aspect. In juxtaposition to the less unique scenes, the white acts are choreographically interesting with an individual and distinctive movement style and quality.

Bourne’s famous dance of the cygnets still utilises four dancers, and were it not for the identical Tchaikovsky score to help mark the cygnet entrance, it may be hard to recognise. The cygnets are four male dancers of a variety of heights and builds. This contrasts greatly with the original female *pas de quatre* consisting of four slim built ballerinas of identical height. The male dancers use head jutting movements, (referencing the quick, sharp head changes in the traditional ‘dance of the cygnets’) yet the dancers also flap, strut, waddle and splash. The usual exactness of the unison and polished petit allegro that is associated with the baby swans in the original version in gone. The effect is a little camp and amusing and the men seem at ease executing sharp masculine movement still synchronised yet with permission to relax the muscles in the flappy birdlike movements. The men accurately personify real little swan birds extremely differently than the idolised version of cygnets in the classic work.

Image 3. Four Cygnets (*Swan Lake* by the Royal Ballet)
Photography: John Ross
Retrieved 12 September, 2009
www.ballet.co.uk/gallery/jr_rb_swlanlake_1204

Image 4. Bourne’s Four Cygnets in *Swan Lake*
Photography: Getty Images
Yet ten years prior to Bourne’s premiere, Ek had already choreographed his version of the cygnets. Ek also utilises the original music with three dancers portraying ungainly baby swans. His cygnets are very similar to Bourne’s, although he is ambiguous in what the trio of female dancers symbolise. These dancers are not specifically swans. Instead, they are the court jesters, friends and attendants of the Prince, yet they definitely take on swanlike characteristics for this particular dance. These jesters could possibly be impersonating the real swans that have just exited the stage. These dancers start with the same motif as Bourne which represents a swan’s run/walk waddle. Their movements then develop into bigger ballet styled allegro, still slightly awkward. The three dancers dressed in white wear large round fingered gloves symbolic of a swan’s webbed feet. Similar to Bourne’s Cygnet dance, the choreography tends to be humorous with the dancers comically flapping from their elbows and shoulders, creating contorted shapes and distorted movement against the largely ballet inspired movement. This style of moving is characteristically Ekian. His choreography is developed from the classical training tradition. However Ek has also infused this balletic aesthetic with a contemporary style of representational gesture, including the ugliness of real emotion, quirky humour and human inelegance. Was Bourne inspired by Ek’s cygnets or have they merely interpreted the section so similarly because they utilised the same derivative? The similarities between these two versions highlights that a contemporary interpretation is free to look for inspiration from other past interpretations of the traditional source.

Stewart’s cygnets are distinctively different from both Ek and Bourne’s. He represents the four little swans without the aid of the same famous music, as Ek and Bourne do. Stewart’s version is signified by four dancers beginning the section crossing and holding each other’s hands like the original classic pas de quarte. In the original dance of the cygnets, the dancers do not let go of each other’s hands right up until the completion of the movement. Stewart’s four dancers also keep holding hands throughout their dance even though they are performing an intricate and complex quartet twisting, lifting, spinning and thrashing the bodies over and under each other. The movement is worlds apart from the original yet the choice of symbolic allusion to the original representation is so specific and cygnet variation is so well known it is impossible to miss.
CONCLUSION

The question that spurred this thesis is; why, if choreographers can pick from any sort of medium through which to express their views, do they chose to do it through someone else’s vehicle?

Through this analysis, Matthew Bourne’s and Mats Ek’s reasons for interpreting Swan Lake are uncovered. The strength of the original narrative and music seems an irresistible drawcard for both choreographers. Both interact with the canon by challenging the clichéd Swan Lake myth striving to make a topical and relevant work. Most importantly Ek and Bourne use the famously overused Swan Lake as their vehicle to express their own views. The immense success of both Ek and Bourne’s Swan Lakes proves that contemporary interpretations are truly a much loved part of the western dance culture.

Garry Stewart, on the other hand, does not choose Swan Lake as a vehicle to express his views. Instead Birdbrain is an exploration of the same question that I have asked above. Stewart’s work asks what the role of the Swan Lake canon is. Stewart (n.d, p. 2) states:

When I was first planning Birdbrain a couple of years ago a number of colleagues asked me why I wanted to have anything to do with Swan Lake given its current re-emergence into the popular domain. But this was precisely why I was drawn to it.

Stewart interacts with Swan Lake as a canonical entity. He engages with the notion that Swan Lake has been ‘done to death’. Birdbrain, from start to finish, is very much a celebration, critical and reverential, of the Swan Lake canon through a poststructuralist viewpoint. In the final moments of the piece, the schoolgirls appear curtseying onstage, imitating projected images of famous iconic ballerinas taking their Swan Lake curtain calls. Finally, five dancers, each with a large neon lit-up letter on their backs line up to spell the word BEGIN. The significance of ending the work this way alludes to Stewart’s attitude toward Swan Lake and its canon. The Swan Lake canon is here to stay, ready to live another beginning.

The popularity of contemporary interpretations, both for choreographers and audiences embraces the canon and supports the presentation of historic work in current performance. The existence of any classic dance work which succeeds its ‘original’ creator highlights the notion that the human being becomes more temporary and fleeting than the dance work created. The contemporary interpretation or any type of instantiation of a previous work contributes to the making of dance history. Lansdale states:

In this brave new world we cannot escape our history or refuse sensitivity to our past ... anymore than we can escape our cultural positioning locally, whether as creators of dance or as authors of texts about dancing. (2008, p. 5)
The many interpretations of *Swan Lake*, contemporary or otherwise, create a history of dance. New works inspired by the remnants of the old classic choreographies allows for a palpable, yet metamorphosing record of dancing to exist. Bourne and Ek serve in bringing about the adaptations necessary for *Swan Lake* to fit into their respective societies, the social, political and aesthetic changes materialise as required as Stewart faces the entire notion of change and continuity of the classic canon.

**Furthering the Canon**

In the future it would of interest to observe where and what the classical canon becomes. Given that *Swan Lake* is a perpetually evolving historic artefact stabilised and destabilised by so many different variables (social, cultural, aesthetic, political and economic) is there any chance of a *Swan Lake* constant existing in the future. The question to be asked is: can the allusions to what is recognised today as the *Swan Lake* constant (arguably the Petipa/Ivanov version, 1895) be decoded by future audiences? Will the canon continue to be valuable and readable if the ‘original’ *Swan Lake* is so far from home? Is recognition of the symbolism infinite? Or will the future societies’ tenuous knowledge of the history of *Swan Lake* be insufficient to preserve any semblance of the canon?

Perhaps there is an infinite expiration date. With the immense mainstream popularity of many contemporary interpretations, such as Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake*, will these works, in the coming centuries, become the traditional? Will the Ivanov/Petipa version fall to the wayside, lost in the history of dance like the little known 1877 ‘original’ by Julius Wenzel Reisinger? Can the source for symbolism also be a work in flux? Future contemporary interpretations can chose to interpret from the many sources of *Swan Lake*. The metaphoric ‘mother’ *Swan Lake* (today’s traditional version) becomes just one of the sources, while her many offspring provide a whole host of valuable resources.
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