

Something for Everyone to Dislike

THE MOVEMENT IN RECENT YEARS to alternative or against-the-grain casting in theatrical productions has produced some startling, if variable results: sometimes the flip turns out to teach us something, sometimes not. The actress Pat Carroll playing Falstaff made an indelible impression in Washington several seasons back, though the only change to the play was the character's somewhat higher than usual voice; a gender-reversed version of *Lear* played recently in New York, where the effect took longer to get used to; and a color-reversed version of *Othello* in 1997 at Michael Kahn's Shakespeare Theater in Washington (only the title character was white) made us reflect on our racial presuppositions. Matthew Bourne's no-toe-shoes version of *Swan Lake* is the most recent in this long line of "what if" alternative takes on classics: the swans are male. The gender switch is not across the board, however: the Prince remains a prince rather than becoming a princess, and longs for his object of lust and fantasy in just the same way as before. As a result, the switch ends up mattering a lot.

The piece has been wildly successful in stage runs in London and Los Angeles, and opened in October in New York. Its widest audience, however, was undoubtedly in the video version as cut (slightly less than ten minutes lost) for television, which I saw shortly before hearing the choreographer himself at the 1998 Dance Critics Association conference in New York (weekend of July 11). Noting the video release in a column for *DanceView*, the critic Robert Greskovic refused to react to the work until he had seen it on the stage. Rushing in where angels fear to tread, I am prepared to say some things about it based on the television version, though acknowledging that it will have been altered in the process. (I think of one of Twyla Tharp's pronouncements: "Television is about two things: the dollar sign and the square.") At least I can say some things about the gender switch, which after all is at the center not only of the work's buzz, but its very essence.

I find this work deeply puzzling. To me it seems simultaneously homoerotic and homophobic. On the one hand, it contains some of the most frankly steamy duets for two male dancers ever seen on mainstream stages. The Act II duets with the muscular Adam Cooper as "The Swan" (muscular by dancer standards, not Naval Academy weight-room standards) are gently affectionate if insistent, like extended foreplay. In Act III the macho-out-the-wazoo Cooper, now dressed to kill in leather pants and oozing tango-level forcefulness, drops the velvet glove to reveal the iron hand, vamping first the women in the room and then the Prince (Scott Ambler) before turning to the Queen (Fiona Chadwick).

(Here I thought of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Teorema*, where a blonde Terence Stamp seduces all the members of a proper Milanese family: daughter, mother, son, father.) Yet when the Prince wants to follow up with the Odile character, who after all has given him plenty of good reasons to expect something, he is brutally repulsed, almost cut down. And in Act IV, infantilized, shut away, awash in what seems fantasies, he dies. In best *Celluloid Closet* style, in short, the gay man is once again the misfit and victim, and must disappear in order for the natural order of things to be re-established.

By changing one of the sexual poles of the work but not the other, Bourne has made it impossible for us to think that he's primarily expressing "universal" themes such as longing and the impossibility of finding love. This works when we're not concentrating on the gender of the love-object—that is to say, when that gender is the expected one. When that issue is foregrounded, however, as it is here, we see the particularity of the male-male relationship. And I regard Bourne's pronouncements, at the DCA and elsewhere, that he thought of male swans because real swans are so aggressive, as so much wannabe-mainstream window-dressing blather.

At some level, this homoerotic/homophobic mixture makes perfect sense. Bourne's *Swan Lake* is the nightmare journey of a gay man who has finally gotten up the nerve to *do* something about his secret longings, and is punished. Not only does the object of his life-long desire turn out to be a (predominantly [?]) straight man, he isn't even a very nice one, apparently willing to lead on his admirer out of sheer malice before chopping him off at the knees. This may well correspond with reality for many gay men; what I have against this work is that Bourne seems to be telling us that this is the way things have to be. He feels, and shows, the Prince's pain, but as a remedy offers only fantasy and death. And then we're supposed to find it beautiful, attain a sense of dramatic closure. I couldn't.

Bourne is apparently voting for nature over nurture in the determination of sexual orientation. As a young boy in the work's first scene, the Prince has dreams of a rather diabolical-looking (bottom-lit, with a forelock) half-naked man ("The Swan") who bears not the slightest resemblance to the stuffed animal swan the boy cuddles in his sleep. The Prince is terrified by this dream, which is unsurprising, as children *are* afraid of the power of sex (they do *what* with each other??). But at the same time the dream obviously serves as a template for his adult desire: the real man he finally tries to approach is the same one he's dreamed of as a pre-pubescent.

One critic friend of mine has tried to correct my perception that the prince dreams of a hunky man: “Bruce,” he assured me, “it’s a swan.” And Bourne’s own mainstreaming comments in an interview included as part of the notes to the video version try to deflect the perception that this is a “gay Swan Lake” by insisting that the steamy Act II duet is, after all, a duet for a man and a swan.

I’m sorry to have to tell Bourne this, but it’s a duet for two men, both dancers. As far as that goes, the costumes the dancers wear do *not* telegraph “swan,” they telegraph “satyr.” The dancers wear white furry-looking (not feather-smooth) haunches from waist to knees, and nothing else. In the context of the hyper-rigid and meticulously clothed all-black world the Prince inhabits (costuming is one of this production’s more witty aspects: kudos to designer Lez Brotherston, who probably produced exactly the costume Bourne wanted), their bare chests seem positively provocative. Too bad that the dancers on the video don’t look all that great without their shirts. (Send them all to see a Paul Taylor concert, I say, to show them what some serious lifting can do for a guy.) The important exception is Cooper, who does look good, but largely because he looks. He’s sexy because of his direct gaze, his air of knowing exactly what he wants. Men, sit down and learn something.

Some critics, such as Greskovic, hold that there are no swans in the traditional Petipa/Ivanov *Swan Lake* except the toy one that glides, usually jerkily, across the stage at the opening of Act II. The women we see, that is, aren’t even “supposed” to be swans. Of course they flap their wings, but we assume that that is because their transformation back to women, which happens at night, is somehow imperfect, or that their magical stage exercises its power over them even then. Other critics cite a moment, now lost in most productions, where the swans change to women on the stage before us. After all, Siegfried’s friends are about to shoot until he stops them, hardly likely if what they see are already women. At any rate, we see this *Swan Lake* silhouetted against the version we know, not against swans in the park. In P/I we see female dancers, here we see male ones.

To be sure, the Prince has an early and not very passionate romance with a voluptuous and more than slightly vulgar girl (Emily Piercy, who looks like Goldie Hawn in a female impersonator wig), but apparently he finds the experience inadequate. Indeed, it’s clear he’s not getting affection from anybody, not from his mother the Ice Queen, and not from this girlfriend—who, it turns out, has been paid off by the palace’s Press Secretary (Barry Atkinson), a combination of Major Domo and procurer for both Queen and Prince. In the notes to the video that identify him as the Press Secretary, he’s called Von Rothbart—clever, no?—but he looks

like Lenin. The Web site for the production calls him the Private Secretary and gives him no name.

There's a lengthy scene where the Prince (still called Siegfried, at least in the video notes) takes the girlfriend with him to the Royal Box at the ballet. She's obviously from the wrong side of the tracks, applauding at the wrong time, dropping her program, and in short fully earning Mom's disapproval, which we suspect she would have gotten anyhow. I found the parody dance-within-a-dance, which is a ha-ha "funny" *Swan Lake* danced by insects with elements of *Giselle* and *Nutcracker* thrown in, simply dumb. Other critics liked it. At least it serves as a smaller version of the *Swan Lake* we're seeing, with its elements of *Nutcracker* and *Giselle* in Acts II and IV.

A good deal of the plot is unclear on video, and it seems unlikely that they will be any clearer on stage. What is Lenin doing pushing on Siggie, apparently behind the Queen's back, a girl so obviously not to the manner born? Backstage gossip I've heard has suggested that this character is a riff on Fergie: fine, but what explains the palace intrigue? If he was going to get the prince a trophy girlfriend, why didn't he at least get him one who knew the rules? Is old Vladimir trying to Make a Man of the Prince? Why doesn't he just get him a prostitute? Later, it seems he knows that Sig is gay, having apparently egged on his polymorphously perverse son to seduce him. (There has apparently been some vacillation on Bourne's part regarding this relationship, as the company's Web site makes no mention of paternity, and identifies the new arrival only as "The Stranger."). Is he therefore out to destroy the Prince? Nor is the reason for Mom's disapproval any clearer. Because the girl is so obviously dishy, Mom's disdain reads as a disapproval of Siggie's manhood per se. If she knew what he really dreams of, we think, she wouldn't be so disapproving of what he's actually brought home.

The scene between Sig and Mom that follows the bad ballet is no clearer. All I got was that he wanted something from her that she was refusing. She was horrified. Or was it furious? From the way he clings to her skirts and throws himself at her, I couldn't tell whether he had the hots for her, or whether he wanted to be a baby again. The characterization of Mom is equally puzzling. It hardly seems likely that the Queen could be such a public nympho in a world portrayed as being so repressive of Sig's sexuality (his childhood and young adulthood are a series of supervised public performances that make him seem boxed in); she's obsessed with protocol, so it seems unlikely she'd make such a spectacle of herself. She ogles the young men of the guard and has Von Rothbart set her up, and dances and smooches publicly with her boy-toys. (The sexually hyper-charged atmosphere that this produces, with its

slavering over well-built young men, is another reason the swans, in this context, look masculine rather than avian.) And how does this overt sexuality jibe with her characterization as Sonny's Great Castrating Female? One clever answer might be, she wants him to remain a child so she in some sense will cease to age (the Prince grows up but the Queen does not change appearance). But this is pure speculation.

There follows a scene in a sleazy bar, the kind where you can get anything, and apparently anyone, you want. The Prince has sneaked in incognito. The girlfriend, set up by Lenin, is there again, but the Prince gets drunk, and is such a wimp he doesn't hook up with anybody at all, not with her, not with the fan dancer, not even with one of the randy sailors, who goes off at the end with a guy from the alley. Sig ends up being thrown out, and it seems that Lenin has arranged to have the paparazzi there to take his picture in a drunken stupor. (Why would a Press Secretary be doing things like this? Why would a Queen so obsessed by public appearances allow her son to be publicly humiliated?) The Prince staggers off to a park, where he writes a suicide note and seems about to throw himself in the lake. Enter the satyr/swans, just like what he dreamed of as a tyke, and led by a replica of his fantasy, his Ken doll come to life.

It is at least arguable that the swans are all in the Prince's head: a park bench and light (to which he affixes the suicide note he later tears up) disappear when the swans come onstage (perhaps just to give them room to dance?) and re-appear when they are gone; nobody else ever sees the swans. Besides, dancing with swans just *has* to be a fantasy. In Petipa/Ivanov, they're not a vision, but reality, albeit a reality far from the "real" reality of castle life. But of course, to repeat the point, by the time the dancing starts in P/I, all the enchanted maidens are women.

From the dances that ensue in Bourne, it seems that what the prince wants is to *be* a swan. Unlike the nineteenth-century Prince Siegfried, that is, this Siggie dances *like* the swans, mimicking their movements. Finally, it's clear, he has discovered (or imagined into life) his "own kind." What a liberation! And he's beside himself with joy when the incarnation (or at least very real imaginary version) of his childhood vision appears. The swan nuzzles him, gives him The Look (Cooper does well to stick to this: he loses some of his magnetism when he opens his mouth to reveal over-large, boyish teeth), and finally cradles him off like Rhett Butler carrying Scarlett up those great stairs to, well, you know what with her. If these are swans, they're swans like Zeus was a swan when he came to Leda, as (in Yeats' words) the "brute blood of the air." There's none of that icky "be true to me" stuff of P/I either: here it's pure physical seduction, with no thought to the future.

At the same time, however, there's an undercurrent of violence in the Prince's encounter with his dreams. The only swan he really gets along well with is "The Swan" (what are the others?), which is to say his dream, Cooper. (Is Cooper the head swan? It's not so clear here as it is in P/I, though he does dance at the front of the ensemble.) The others apparently regard the Prince as a kind of interloper: they circle him, threaten him, and are only shooed away by Cooper. As in the parody ballet, Bourne is mixing in elements of *Giselle*. Here it's Act II (in the parody it was the bit with the sword in Act I): though a Wili herself, Giselle defends her prince against her more ruthless sisters, who are set on destroying him.

Whether the swans are real or not, they are clearly so to the prince, who is transfigured by his experience/vision. A bag lady (Reality?) hobbles on, the Prince tears up his suicide note, kisses the astonished wreck, and flings the fragments of the note all over the ground.

Act III. The party is okay but pretty sedate. The Prince is bored. Suddenly, who should suddenly enter but a smouldering Cooper with his hair gelled up. He vamps all the available women in best tango/apache style: it's fun to watch, because he's very good at it. He knows about kissing women's shoulders, and about running his fingers up their legs, and other good moves. He's still a great looker, shooting all sorts of meaningful glances that I think are probably more visible in the video than they must be in a theater, and slapping his leather-clad thighs. The women respond in kind, grabbing his butt and playing with a riding crop. The stage steams up fast.

The Prince is thrilled at finally being brought face to face with this real-boy version of his beloved fantasy, but gets more and more upset because the guy isn't paying any attention to him—and worse, is actively getting it on with the girls. Finally Sig just can't take it any longer, and makes his move. Hooray! we say! Wimp no longer! This guy's gonna be a normal person yet.

The Stranger/Junior/Odile not only reciprocates, but comes on shamelessly to the Prince. (Indeed, it could be argued that all the female seduction was part of a lengthy come-on to the Prince, to arouse his jealousy). This duet is as sensual as anything that goes on with the women, though it's all largely looks and teasing caresses (we're not talking deep kissing and crotch-grabbing here). There's a heartless aspect to it, as there is in Petipa's Odile role. It's apparent this guy knows he can have his way with anyone he wants. He's raw sexuality that can take any form. Instead of flapping his wings to nail the Prince, as the P/I Odile does, he dips his thumb in an ashtray and marks down his forehead a version of the forelock/beak that had added to his satyr/swan look in

Act II. (Because there's been no promise in Act II, Strange Junior isn't trying to make Siggie be untrue to anyone: he's just egging the Prince on. It really is only about getting laid, no more.) The other men are whispering behind their hands at the way the Prince is carrying on. But he's smitten, and doesn't care who knows it. And for one brief moment, it looks as if he's going to close that closet door behind him after all.

Yet then, apparently with the blessing of Dad (or whoever he is: at any rate, his protector), Junior puts the moves on the Queen herself, who instead of being furious, offers him a glass of champagne. He shares a ciggie with her (which makes her seem like Lauren Bacall, and renders even more puzzling her ongoing dumping on the Prince's sexuality). In no time flat, the Queen and her new boy-toy are making out right there on the stage. The Prince jealously intervenes. (Hooray! we say again. Go for it! Defend your turf!) Mom slaps him, apparently out of pique at his trying to steal her lover just as things were getting interesting. And then, more devastatingly, the stud, as if shocked, utterly shocked, that his gestures could have been so horribly misinterpreted, and acting with all the viciousness of a skinhead queer-basher, retreats into heterosexuality as his invincible armor, ruthlessly repulsing Sig and pushing him away. *What?* he seems to be bellowing. You thought I meant *that*?

Whoa, you say. Talk about the stuff of nightmares.

At this point things get really confusing, with several guns being aimed at once and one going off. According to the Web site, the Prince has pulled a gun, and the Private Secretary has pulled another to defend the Queen. At the end of the act, at any rate, the girlfriend, who has gotten in the middle, is dead. It seems as if the Von Rothbarts, *père et fils*, have been responsible for it all: they smirk and shake hands. (How much of this was planned? Is the Press Secretary plotting to have the Prince's gayness publicly revealed? To what end, especially as Mom seems unaware of it? Oh, that pesky plot.)

Act IV has us back in the bedroom. Reality hasn't worked out so well, so it's back to fantasyland. The Prince is being infantilized (that is, completely castrated). He's dressed in his pjs and curled up in fetal position in his childhood big bed. The program notes tell us he's medicated; what we see is an army of nurses and keepers. They leave and the swans re-appear from under the bed and The Swan from under the pillow. (Dreams, it's clear.) With the oversized bed and the scurrying now rat-sized also-ran swans, it all looks like *Nutcracker* again, and ends back in *Giselle* Act II territory: the swans attack the Prince.

Ultimately, however, in a free-for-all rough trade departure from *Giselle*, they attack his defender too. As if in a reflection of Bourne's piece as a whole, they cannot stand to see one of their kind happy.

(Again I thought of Pasolini, who was done to death by one of his pickups.) The Swan dies, then the Prince dies (the program notes suggest suicide, though this isn't evident). All the swans fade away. Mom comes in and cradles the dead body, *pietà*- or *Romeo and Juliet*-style, while in the same space over the headboard where The Swan appeared in Act I he re-appears, holding in his arms a spirit version of the Prince, who has regained his childhood.

No growing up! Bourne seems to be ordering. No coming out! No normalcy! Back into the closet! Back to fantasy! Back to the womb!

Romanticism too was all about the impossibility of finding happiness in the real world of adults. In both the P/I version of the story and Bourne's, that is, reality sucks for the prince, who finds happiness and his Significant Other only in death. Yet here, reality seems to suck worse for a gay man. That is, it seems to suck *because* you're a gay man. Society, or your family, or both (worst of all is Mom), conspire against your figuring out who you are, and when you do, they deny you all satisfaction. Not to mention the difficulty that isn't society's fault, but, it seems, biology's: that straight men who won't give you the time of day are frequently the most alluring objects of all, and that a relationship lasting longer than forty-five minutes with another gay man is apparently as scarce as hen's teeth. My impression is that this isn't fantasy for many gay men, it's reality. (If in doubt, read Paul Monette's searing *Becoming a Man*, or talk to me about my brother, who died five years ago of AIDS.)

I'm not saying that Bourne should have provided a happy agit-prop Gay Rights scenario, where the Prince comes out of the closet and is rewarded for his boldness by a well-built lover and society's approbation. But it certainly left me shaking my head in wonder. With the mainstream viewer turned off (I assume) by all this overheated fantasy of swoony beefcake, and the gay viewer turned off (I hope) by the ruthless punishment meted out to this poor confused Prince, who's left to like this titillating but ultimately deeply conservative parable? Or have I, contrary to my expectations, just explained precisely why it's going to continue to be so wildly popular?

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