

Do you know
Swan Lake?



Swan Lake is an endlessly fascinating work. It has inspired audiences, choreographers and dancers alike for well over 100 years. From hairy legged men in fights to Barbie in pop-up wings, Michelle Potter explores the ways in which one of the oldest ballets has permeated our popular culture.

In the late 1980s, American dance scholars estimated that over the years since its premiere there had been 155 versions of *Swan Lake*, performed by 115 companies from 25 countries. Now, The Australian Ballet can certainly add to those figures with its current production of *Swan Lake*.

This ballet has enticed dance critics, writers, artists, photographers and researchers to put pen to paper, finger to keyboard, brush to canvas, voice to tape, image to celluloid. The bibliography of writings on *Swan Lake*, and the pictorial and audio-visual collection of material about it, is extensive. *Swan Lake* clearly commands attention.

But while *Swan Lake* is undoubtedly an important work in our rich balletic heritage, its power extends beyond the dance world. *Swan Lake* has entered the popular imagination too. It is, for example, source material for jokes and taunts. 'Do you know *Swan Lake*? Well go jump in it!' was a schoolyard expression in the 1950s. And *Swan Lake* has for many years been the one ballet consistently held up to gentle ridicule in revues and popular theatre. A version of the *Dance of the Little Swans* has over and over again been performed as a skit, usually by large, muscular men with hairy legs, sometimes even footballers, who can occasionally manage to teeter along on pointe. Audiences are always captivated and *Swan Lake* always emerges with dignity and carries on triumphantly.

What's more, if we look at present day ways in which *Swan Lake* has become part of our popular culture, a Google search will find for sale over the Internet a doll named Barbie of *Swan Lake*. She is advertised as wearing 'a swan inspired gown with pop-up wings that light up'. The story of Barbie of *Swan Lake* is also available as a junior novel, a sticker book, and a DVD. In one online advertisement this manifestation of Barbie is described as 'the beautiful Odette, who must find the courage to save the Enchanted Forest from the evil Rothbart'.

Some of *Swan Lake*'s most recognisable music can be downloaded as a ringtone on your mobile phone. One dealer even offers a customised service. If what is instantly available in the *Swan Lake* range is not what you are looking for, then the dealer states that his staff can very quickly create a '*Swan Lake* ringtone especially for you'.

Why does *Swan Lake* have such power? What is it about *Swan Lake* that allows it to be part of both the dance world and our popular culture without damage to its integrity? Why are we so bewitched? Why do so many choreographers feel inspired, as did Graeme Murphy and his collaborative team, to restage the work according to a decidedly individual vision?

The most obvious answer to these questions is the music. Tchaikovsky's haunting score is perhaps the best-known ballet music of all. It is loved and admired by those who play it, those who listen to it and those who dance to it. Much of the score is as well known to the casual theatregoer as it is to the ballet fanatic.

How often have we sat in the theatre for a *Swan Lake* performance only to be entertained by the person sitting next to us humming along, especially to the swan theme or the lilting Act 2 waltz? When we watch a performance of *Swan Lake* we see its poignant music made visible through the choreography. There is a certain kind of reassurance and comfort in seeing that familiar music brought to life in such a very human way.

Another seemingly obvious answer relates to the fact that *Swan Lake* is, in the eyes of many, both within and without the dance world, the quintessential ballet. It is a full-length, narrative work, a form much loved by audiences worldwide. And its two white acts, in which the stage is so often filled with the beguiling vision of elegant, tutu-clad artists dancing in precise patterns, give it a kind of magical power. It represents for many all that they think is so beautiful about ballet. It is, in its structure and in the images that we see on stage, an archetype.

But while the music and the structure of the ballet can take some of the credit for the popularity of *Swan Lake*, they cannot take it all. The power the ballet has over us also stems from the fact that *Swan Lake* addresses significant themes and deals with the big issues that confront us as human beings.

Whether we are watching *Swan Lake* in traditional mode or contemporary reworking, we see before us a range of contrasting ideas – light and dark, good and evil, the natural and the supernatural. We are asked to examine some of life's most enduring values and some of its most heartbreaking traits – fidelity and betrayal, strength and frailty, tenderness and aggression, freedom and the lack of it. We ponder on how love can be fulfilled and how it can be thwarted. We watch as the protagonists search for the unattainable. We are presented with unanswerable questions – how can we misunderstand what is so clearly before us?

While some versions have more intellectual and thematic clarity than others, the development of grand, human themes is characteristic of any version of *Swan Lake*. Even Barbie needs the quality of courage to engage in her quest and her very endeavour involves the act of saving what is good from the clutches of evil. The great strength of *Swan Lake*, the ongoing fascination we all have with it, comes from the way it presents us with an insight into the human condition and invites us to question, ponder on and debate that condition.

Do you know *Swan Lake*? The answer to the question in Australian schoolyards of the 1950s was 'Go jump in it' – and we could probably do a lot worse than respond, at least metaphorically, in just that way. We could probably spend the rest of our lives immersed in the intricacies of *Swan Lake*, in pondering on the depths of understanding to which the ballet can lead us. *Swan Lake*, in whichever of its many and varied versions we are fortunate enough to know, will continue to engage the minds and hearts of many for years to come. Jump in for the experience.

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Former Principal Artists,
Marilyn Jones and Jonathan
Kelly rehearsing for the world
premiere performance of
Anne Woolliams' production
of *Swan Lake* in 1977.
Photograph by
Michael Cook 1977.