

# A swan to remember

The Australian Ballet is returning to a traditional version of the classic, **Michelle Potter** writes

As the London Olympics were drawing to a close, one of the dance critics for *The New York Times* published an article on the dressage events in which she considered similarities between the endeavours of horse and rider and ballet. “Not quite *Swan Lake*, but surprisingly close” ran the headline. *Swan Lake* is one of the great classics of the ballet repertoire but, as that headline intimates, *Swan Lake* also epitomises in the popular imagination the essence of ballet as an art form.

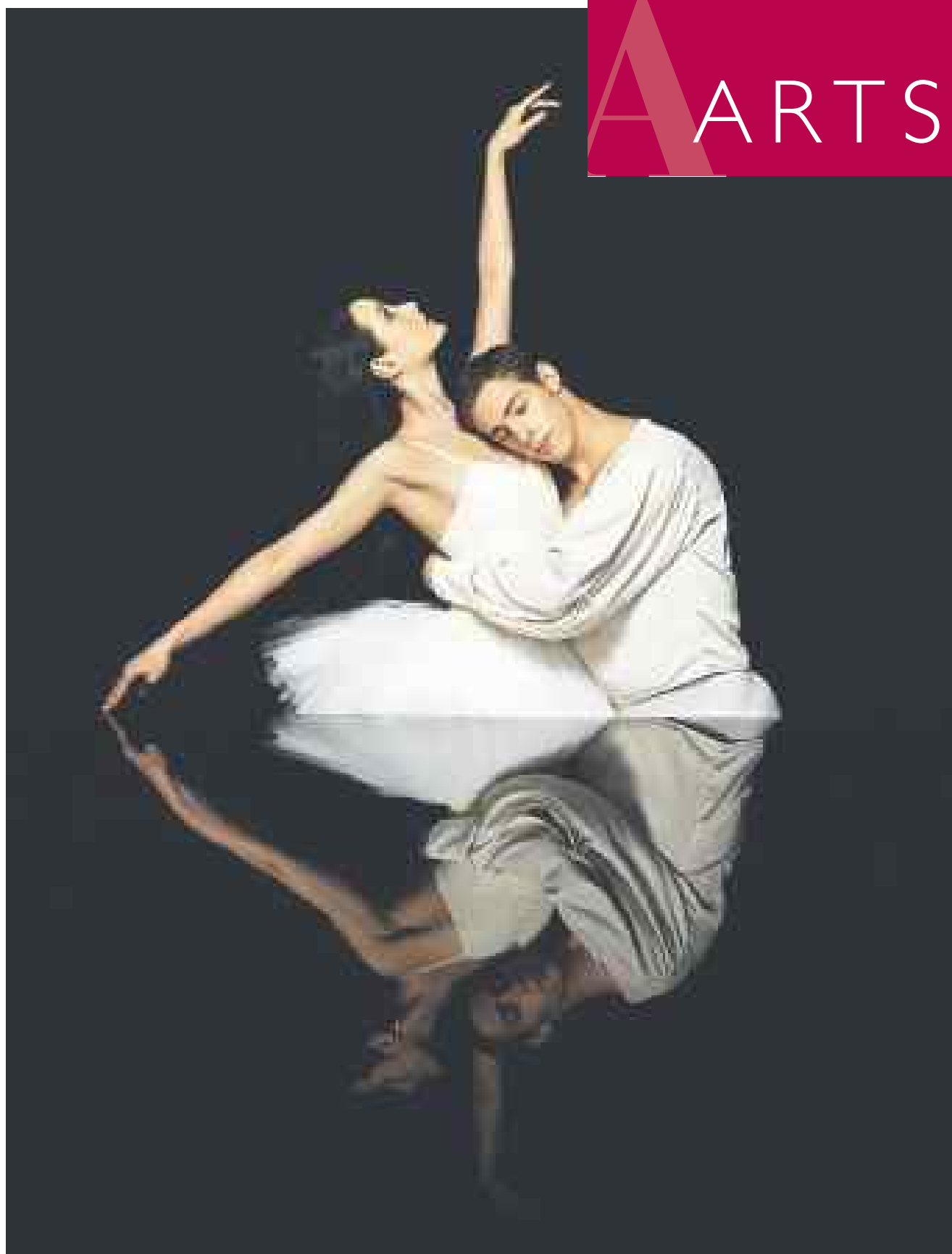
*Swan Lake* was the focus of the thriller movie, *Black Swan*, which won an Oscar for its star, Natalie Portman; it featured not so long ago on an episode of the British television detective series, *Midsomer Murders*; Barbie fans can have their own *Swan Lake* Barbie doll; and over and over again the ballet has been held up to gentle ridicule in revues and other popular forms of theatre. *Swan Lake* skits usually centre on the famous quartet in Act II, the Dance of the Little Swans, when four ballerinas, dancing together with hands linked, generally bring the house down with their unison dancing and precise, fast footwork. The comic versions usually feature four muscular men with hairy legs who teeter through the steps, sometimes in pointe shoes. I’ve even seen trainee clowns from the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne dance a version of Little Swans while pushing wheelie bins around the performance arena.

But despite all, the ballet *Swan Lake* retains its integrity and continues to be performed as a serious piece of theatre around the world. There are many versions, some traditional, some less so. Harry Haythorne’s 1985 staging for the Royal New Zealand Ballet, for example, has the prince marry a “mystery princess” at the end of the ballet, instead of throwing himself into the lake in despair. A 1995 production by British choreographer Matthew Bourne features a cast of male swans and has a homoerotic narrative. Graeme Murphy’s production made for the Australian Ballet in 2002 all but removes the fairytale elements of the traditional story and suggests to us that we might see parallels between Murphy’s retelling of the story and the triangle of intrigue between Charles, Camilla and Diana.

Now the Australian Ballet is preparing to stage a new *Swan Lake* with choreography by the company’s resident choreographer Stephen Baynes. It seems like a slightly odd step to be taking given that Murphy’s production has scarcely been off the stage since it was made. Is there really a need for another version? And will the Murphy version disappear from the stage? How many *Swan Lakes* does one company need? David McAllister, the Australian Ballet’s artistic director, thinks there are good reasons to have a new production, one that will look back to the traditional version as performed in Russia at the end of the 19th century.

“Looking back to our two productions of *Nutcracker*, Graeme Murphy’s extraordinary version and our more traditional one,” McAllister says, “it is clear that there is an audience for both, and that there is also a cross-over audience, a group of people who will go to both. I think *Swan Lake* is similar. We will maintain the Murphy *Swan Lake* of course. It is probably our most successful ballet in recent years. But there is a definite audience for a production that takes a more traditional approach. Besides, our dancers see the traditional *Swan Lake* as something that is part of their dance heritage and they want the opportunity to perform in it. So we are giving them that experience as well as opening out to those of our supporters who like tradition.” It is proving already to be a popular decision as the Sydney season of *Swan Lake* is already 90 per cent sold.”

*Swan Lake* is Stephen Baynes’ third full-length work for the Australian Ballet and he too believes that the traditional ballet is important to dancers and audiences alike. “To tell the truth,” he says, “I was at first a little reluctant to take on the



Romanticism: Amber Scott and Ty King-Wall in a scene from *Swan Lake*. Photo: Georges Antoni

commission, but once I started I quickly realised that the dancers, all the way through the ranks, wanted to do it. And for the audience too, *Swan Lake* is still the epitome of classical ballet.”

Choreographically, the famous Act II, the “white act” that is often presented as a separate production divorced from the full-length version, will be absolutely recognisable to audiences. We should expect, however, some choreographic changes in other acts. “But,” Baynes says, “I am aiming to ensure that any changes are within the overall aesthetic of the ballet. At the heart of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* music there is a late 19th-century romanticism. I hope the audience will feel that romanticism but that they will also be inspired by the production to look afresh at what they know of the ballet.”

Without giving too much away, Baynes says the character of Rothbart, the main antagonist in the ballet, may surprise some audience members. He suggests there is a particular element that he has used sparingly, but he hopes judiciously,

in the ballet that will have us see Rothbart somewhat differently from our usual vision of an evil birdman cum sorcerer running around the stage.

The work is designed by Hugh Colman and earlier this year Colman showed me a very early concept sketch. A tiny figure standing before large, ornate gates seemed to ponder the very European landscape of snow-capped mountains in the distance. It was very much in the style of Caspar David Friedrich, the 19th-century German landscape painter. “That kind of wistful, contemplative mood permeates the ballet,” McAllister says. Maybe this production, including the revitalised Rothbart, will be what traditionalists seek – the *Swan Lake* of their dreams?

• *Swan Lake* is at the Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne, September 18-29, and the Sydney Opera House, November 30-December 19. [www.australianballet.com.au](http://www.australianballet.com.au)