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Swan Lake, the ballet

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Moira de Swardt: The great white ballet, Swan Lake, is on stage at the Joburg Theatre.

"Swan Lake" has two endings, the old traditional one where the lovers, unable to be together in life, fling themselves into the lake at dawn to die together, and a newer one, developed in Communist Russia at a time when ballet had to be uplifting, where love triumphs and the lovers head off into the dawn hand in hand to live out their lives happily ever after.

Burnise Silvius and Hyun Kyung Cho danced the lead roles at the first performance I attended. Silvius needs no introduction to Gauteng ballet lovers as she has a string of dance awards and other dance credits to her name. She was, as usual, lovely and her dancing is light and graceful. Her balance is amazing and twice during the black swan scene she stood, unsupported, on one point, defying gravity, almost floating. Cho is young. The first time I really noticed him was in last year's production of Giselle. At the time I wrote that "... he never put a foot wrong." ". For such a young dancer he did a most creditable performance as Prince Siegfried. He brings a very modern "people's prince" to the stage.

My sister, in a previous job, met one of the minor European princes at the airport, took him to lunch where she entertained him for the two hours until the required meeting time. She said he was charming, likeable and unassuming. No old-fashioned and unattractive arrogance. Cho is that kind of modern prince. An additional endearing touch was that his interaction with Silvius was always one of admiration, reverence, veneration and even love. Swan Lake is a love story and Cho managed to convey this so sweetly. Apart from the lovely dancing, it is worth seeing this partnership purely for this aspect.

This season of Swan Lake is the last opportunity for ballet lovers generally, and fans of Angela Malan particularly, to see Malan dance as a member of the SABT. It is with both great pride in our national treasure and sadness at her going that we wish Angela Malan well as she takes up her new appointment at Tivoli, Denmark. She is to be congratulated on this wonderful achievement, and we wish her well. But we will miss her. I managed to see Ms Malan dance the role of Odette/Odile with Raymond Martinov at her second last performance. Ms Malan is the prima ballerina of the South African Ballet Theatre, and her beautiful, disciplined technique is unmatched.

I have always liked the Malan/McDonald partnership, but Martinov is also tall and good looking enough to make a wonderful romantic lead. Seeing them dance, with Malan's impending departure in mind, made me sad about all the marvellous dancers like Christian Tatchev, Kimbrian Bergh and Andries Weidemann we have lost to other companies and countries over the years. Of course, as Iain McDonald says, part of the problem is that there is no real money in ballet in South Africa and together with the uncertainty of ballet's future and he can neither stem

the tide nor hold it against the dancers. The shortage of male dancers the world over has seen South African male dancers particularly being poached by international ballet companies who are offering competitive salaries in US dollars or Euros. The SABB is supplemented by Robin van Wyk from the Cape Town City Ballet and Raymond Martinov from Latvia. Collaboration between the Cape Town City Ballet and the South African Ballet Theatre is a positive spin off arising out of the present crisis. Laura Bosenberg is also a visiting artist from the CTCB. Ballet in South Africa is not going to survive without a concerted effort from all concerned.

The South African Ballet Theatre is in financial crisis, and the situation makes itself apparent from time to time during this production. The overture begins and the music is recorded. Iain McDonald says, somewhat regretfully, that he cannot justify paying musicians for a season of live accompaniment when he was obliged to retrench dancers last year and while the company cannot afford to pay dancers "decent" salaries or provide health and retirement benefits for them. The "we will do our best" attitude still prevails. The recorded music is that which was made the Johannesburg Festival Orchestra for the use of the South African Ballet Theatre a few years back.

Another thing that I would dearly like to see is tutus for the swans rather than the all-purpose ballerina length dresses used for Giselle and Les Sylphides and other "white ballets". Audiences who don't have a ballet background are easily confused between them, and one person I was chatting too was horrified that the ballet ends without the hero mourning over Odette's grave (which is, of course, a scene from Giselle, not Swan Lake).

The perceptions of audiences are often a problem. Iain McDonald says that he was in a performance of an indifferent (second or third cast) visiting Russian company when one of the audience commented that local companies can't offer anything like it. I laughed. For the most part, our dancers don't offer anything like the visiting Russian companies. Our best dancers are better than other countries second rate ones but as the Bible says "a prophet is without honour in his home town". My former partner was amazed at how good the South African Ballet Theatre was when I took him a performance a few years back. And the corps continue to get better and better.

This season sees a slightly shortened version of Swan Lake, making it edgier for modern audiences used to television length productions. None of the famous scenes have been lost and most people won't even notice the cuts, but for those who might lose enjoyment of the dance while trying to work out what is not there, the bits removed are the first act pas de trois, the Russian dance in Act 3, and a big group piece has had some tweaking in Act 4. What this does mean is that the principals have to work even harder with fewer breaks between their times on stage.

"Swan Lake" is a perennial favourite and it is always a treat to be able to see dancers of the calibre of Angela Malan, Burnise Sylvius (as well as the other lead dancers, Lauren Summerley, Shannon Glover, Yolandi Olckers, Guy Wheatstone, Sanmarie Kreuzhuber, Robin van Wyk and Raymond Martinov) and our corps de ballet which continues to go from strength to strength, amazing me with its lovely grace and precision. The financial crisis has forced the remaining dedicated dancers to work harder and longer than ever before and it is showing in ways which

really do count. Back in the days of government funding the PACT corps de ballet often looked as if they were cricket fans doing a badly coordinated Mexican wave. Now while we, the ballet loving arts community, want adequate government funding for ballet, we also want the glorious standard of work we are currently seeing from the SABT. The two things are not mutually exclusive.

It was great to see both Karen Beukes and Fiona Budd back on stage in the non-dancing role of the queen. Anton Labuschagne was Von Rothbart, the Master of Ceremonies was Humberto Montero, the Jester was Dilano Maritz, the Grand Waltz leads were Chloe Grove and Guy Wheatstone, the big swans were Chloe Grove and Sanmarie Kreuzhuber, both of whom were wonderful, with the cygnets being Lauryn Summerley, Elizabeth Nienaber, Haydee Baker and Yolandi Olckers.

The Neopolitans were Laura Bosenberg and James Fraser on the first viewing. Now there is a dancer to watch. The pair performed beautifully. Fraser is also young and has been plagued by injury which is now, hopefully, completely sorted out. He has an elongated waist which gives tall, slender dancers their graceful, romantic lead look. His technical ability also looks to be sound and with dedication and hard work he has a rosy future as a classical dancer before him. The Spanish dancers on both nights were led by Lauren Dixon-Seager and Chase Bosch. Chase Bosch has also made a satisfactory return from whatever it was that was giving him problems in Giselle and he danced well. All in all both casts acquitted themselves most admirably.

Iain McDonald's frustration at the financial crisis is tempered by the hope that there is a solution to the funding problem. As I sit through the final act watching our hero take a knock from the evil Von Rothbart I wonder whether Swan Lake is going to have the happy ending or whether the lovers will walk into the lake. I wonder too whether the SABT will have its happy ending, or at least will eke out an existence into happier funding times. I watch the men battle it out and then the human form of Odette appears once more. The lovers are safe until the next performance. Let's hope the SABT will follow suit.

The public is invited to contribute financially to the future of the ballet in any way they can, and certainly by supporting the ballet with ticket sales. Swan Lake is on at the Joburg Theatre until 4 April 2010. Fundraising events are ongoing and details can be found on www.saballettheatre.co.za

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