

The Context of Melodrama in *Swan Lake* Based on its Performance in Some Soviet Regions

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This paper discusses the interpretation of *Swan Lake*, which underwent a transformation from being classified as a tragedy in the imperial era to a melodrama in the Soviet era, focusing on three perspectives: mime, choreography and aesthetics. This discussion on the interpretation of *Swan Lake* in three Soviet regions, rarely mentioned in studies of ballet history, is aimed at identifying the problems arising in the work's change from tragedy to melodrama¹.

Few previous studies have discussed Russian ballet in the framework of melodrama. Published in the mid-twentieth century, Gozenpud's *Russian Musical Theatre*² suggests that the scripts written by the Moscow choreographer Glushkovsky in the early nineteenth century already reflected melodramatic tendencies. However, the specific details of their performances are unknown because records of those works have not been found.

More recently, in a doctoral thesis entitled *The Bolshoi Meets Bolshevism: Moving Bodies and Body Politics, 1917–1934*, Douglas M. Priest³ has described in detail the process by which Romantic ballet, imported from France in the first half of the nineteenth century, was 'socialised' in its immediate post-revolutionary performance. He explains that the melodramatic tendency in Russian ballet, which was absent in the works produced in the late nineteenth century, was revived in the Soviet era.

Today's audiences tend to take it for granted that the Russian ballet *Swan Lake* is a melodrama. However, what is performed today is a result of the changes that the work underwent during the Soviet era. The drastic transformation from tragedy to melodrama was carried out through a gradual process, discussed here in the following order. Entitled 'The Second Classicism', the first section introduces the early *Swan Lake*, while the second section provides an overview of 'The Stages of Transformation (from the pre-revolutionary period to the 1950s)'. The third section scrutinises the critiques of performances of *Swan Lake* in three different regions and analyses their common problems.

¹ As for the socialist adaptation of Russian classical ballets, there is an excellent work by Christina Ezrahi, but she mentioned little about *Swan Lake* and didn't discuss it in the context of melodrama. Cristina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), pp. 30-118.

Cadra Peterson MacDaniel has a chapter dedicated to Soviet reinterpretation of *Swan Lake* in her following book. She took notice of Marxist idea and socialist realism represented in Bolshoi theater's *Swan Lake*.

Cadra Peterson MacDaniel, *American–Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's*

² Гозенпуд А. А. Музыкальный театр в России: от истоков до Глинки: Очерк. Л.: Музгиз, 1959. С. 450-473.

³ Douglas M. Priest, *The Bolshoi Meets Bolshevism: Moving Bodies and Body Politics, 1917-1934*. A dissertation submitted to Michigan State University in 2016.

1) The Second Classicism

This section explains that *Swan Lake* was not originally intended to be categorised as a melodrama. Peter Brooks identifies the source of melodrama in the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. The destruction of faith in traditional sanctity and in the institutions that represented it (the church and monarchy) resulted in the loss of meaning in tragedies and comedies of manners that had depended on the societies they sustained. In the midst of this trend was the rise of Romanticism⁴. In ballet, the French produced masterpieces such as *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841). In these works, the protagonists struggle between the real world and the supernatural world of spirits. These works reached Russia almost in real time. In the late nineteenth century, however, ballet as an art form began to decline in France, while reaching its golden age in Russia. Russia had not yet experienced revolution; therefore, the church and the tsar—who was the sponsor of the imperial theatre—were still at the apex of the social system. Ballet received a larger budget than opera and drama, and its productions thus tended to be more orderly and supportive of traditional authority⁵. Thus, classicism in Russian ballet was revived.

Swan Lake was first performed at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1877. The version staged by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov at the Mariinsky Theatre in 1895 made *Swan Lake* famous and has continued to influence choreographers. The plot in brief is as follows. Prince Siegfried falls in love with a maiden named Odette, whom he meets by a lake. Once a princess, she is cursed by the demon Rothbart to spend the daytime as a swan. To lift the curse, she needs a man who would swear eternal love to her. However, at a ball the next day, Siegfried mistakenly pledges his eternal love to Odile, Rothbart's daughter, who looks exactly like Odette. The tragedy ends with Odette throwing herself into the lake, followed by Siegfried, and then the apotheosis, which suggests that they are united in heaven⁶. This final act represents a worldview of associating divinity with a supreme being who establishes sanctity.

The structure of the piece also has features that make it difficult to classify the work as a melodrama. *Swan Lake* is composed of a series of dance scenes consisting of classical dances or character dances (folk dances arranged for the stage) and a mime section. Marius Petipa is particularly remembered for having perfected the structural order of the dance parts. In his works, dance was the dominant element, while the narrative played only a supplementary role of explaining the context. Another factor that reduced the role of the narrative was the way mime was performed at this time. The mime of this period was highly encrypted. For example, tracing around both cheeks with the back of the right hand

⁴ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995) from the Japanese version (translated by Inuhiko Yomota and Keiko Kimura, published in 2002), p. 38.

⁵ Красовская В. М. Русский балетный театр второй половины XIX века. Л.; М: Искусство, 1958. С. 191.

⁶ See Ежегодник Императорских театров: издание Дирекции императорских театров: Сезон 1894-1895. СПб., 1896. С. 205-215.

meant ‘beautiful’, which could only be understood by those familiar with this code. So at first glance it could have seemed as if dance played a minor role in the progression of events. However, Soviet scholars have tried to prove that each dance scene has its own logic and contains the essential meaning of the work⁷. Because this cannot be discussed in detail here, let us first confirm that *Swan Lake* came into existence as a tragedy rather than a melodrama.

2) Stages of Transformation (Pre-revolution to the 1950s)

This section describes the key stages in the evolution of *Swan Lake* up to the mid-twentieth century. Here I provide a brief description of the changes in mime. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mikhail Fokin, a dancer and choreographer at the Mariinsky Theatre, sought to change the language of dance. Said to have been influenced by the American dancer Isadora Duncan, he introduced more natural body movements into classical dance. The transformation of mime reflects this change. He criticised the encoded mime of the imperial era and developed mime closer to natural human movement. In this context, it is worth pointing out the arm gesture in the famous *Dying Swan* by Saint-Saëns (1907). In Petipa and Ivanov’s *Swan Lake*, the dancers playing the swans adopted the default curved arm pose of classical dance, but the dancer in *The Dying Swan* flapped her arms wide to imitate the movement of the bird’s wings. This was incorporated into subsequent performances of *Swan Lake*. The development of Mikhail Fokin’s naturalistic technique brought about a major change in the audience’s impression of *Swan Lake*⁸.

After the Revolution, some radicals denounced ballet as bourgeois entertainment, and the theatre’s existence was threatened at one point, but classical ballet remained popular with audiences. Nevertheless, the arts were subject to strict government control, and *Swan Lake* had to be modified to suit the ideology of the time. There have been many revisions of the work from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Some of the changes considered to be important from the perspective of melodrama are presented below.

In a series of articles published from 1918 to the 1920s, Gorky and Lunacharsky promoted melodrama as an artistic trend for the new post-revolutionary public. They drew attention to the ‘intelligibility’ of melodrama and emphasised the importance of making a clear distinction between good and evil characters, even if this was primitive as a form of expression, to provoke powerful

⁷ Ех. Лопухов Ф. В. Хореографические откровенности. М.: Искусство, 1972; Добровольская Г.Н. Танец. Пантомима. Балет. Л.: Искусство, 1975; Слонимский Ю. И. Драматургия балетного театра XIX века: Очерки, либретто, сценарии. М.: Искусство, 1977; Карп К.М. Балет и драма. Л.: Искусство, 1980; Демидов А. П. «Лебединое озеро». М.: Искусство, 1985; Константинова М. Е. Спящая красавица. М.: Искусство, 1990.

⁸ Добровольская Г. Н. Михаил Фокин: русский период. СПб.: Гиперион, 2004. С. 107-110.

emotions in the audience and to appeal to their social consciousness⁹. The ballet historian Surits has pointed out that this celebration of melodrama was not unrelated to the creation of the revised version of *Swan Lake*, first staged by the choreographer Gorsky at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1920¹⁰. The new version, in which Odile, daughter of the demon Rothbart, loses her mind after having her heart broken, was considered contrary to Tchaikovsky's music by dancers and critics and did not take root. However, the happy ending, which was first used in this version, was the beginning of moralistic staging and was continued in subsequent productions throughout the Soviet Union¹¹.

In the 1930s, Ivan Sollertinsky proposed a new direction for the art of ballet. He initially argued that the ballet of the future should abandon the language of classical dance and consist of mime and folk dances. Eventually, he developed his ideas further and proposed 'danced mime (отанцованная пантомима)', a mixture of classical dance and mime¹². This new dance language required dancers to improve their acting skills.

This practice appears to have been attempted in Vaganova's revised version of *Swan Lake*, which premiered at the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad in 1933. This version is not often discussed in the history of Russian ballet as a whole because it is considered a failure. However, it is a very important production from the perspective of melodrama.

Vaganova was the first to make fundamental changes to Petipa and Ivanov's 1895 version. Siegfried, a prince in the original production, is now a count, while the evil Rothbart is a bankrupt landowner in the neighbourhood. Rothbart plans to restore his finances by marrying off his daughter Odile to the count. Siegfried falls in love with a real swan. The story comes to an unsettling end as the count commits suicide after finding the body of the dead swan¹³. The story has melodramatic characteristics, such as its departure from the old social system and representation of mental illness. The creators sought to emphasise the social aspect of the piece but ended up encouraging a multilateral interpretation which was frowned upon at the time. In this version, apparently for the first time, the movement of wings was incorporated into the arm movements of the dancer playing the swan and the encounter between Siegfried and Odette was presented in 'danced mime' rather than the encoded mime of the imperial era¹⁴.

⁹ Муратова К. Д. М. Горький и Советский театр (1918-1921 годы) // Из истории русских литературных отношений XVIII-XX веков / Отв. ред. д-р филол. наук С.В. Касторский] ; Акад. наук СССР. Ин-т русской литературы (Пушкинский дом). М.; Л.: Изд-во Акад. наук СССР. [Ленингр. отд-ние], 1959. С. 287-301.

¹⁰ Суриц Е. Я. Начало пути: Балет Москвы и Ленинграда в 1917–1927 годах // Советский балетный театр. 1917–1967. С. 25.

¹¹ Демидов А. П. «Лебединое озеро». М.: Искусство, 1985. С. 241.

¹² Cristina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), pp. 41-44.

¹³ See Демидов А. П. «Лебединое озеро». М.: Искусство, 1985. С. 244-245.

¹⁴ Демидов А. П. «Лебединое озеро». М.: Искусство, 1985. С. 282-284; Добровольская Г. Н.

At the first Soviet Writers Congress in 1934, the Soviet Union aimed to promote socialist realism in all artistic genres. A discussion continues about the definition of socialist realism and its interpretation to this day, but it has been pointed out that socialist control of cultural activities had a political purpose¹⁵. Ballet was no exception: a new genre to express socialist realism called ‘drambalet драмбалет’ was created. Leonid Lavrovsky and Rostislav Zakharov, the chief choreographers of the genre at the Bolshoi Theatre determined the direction of ballet from the 1930s to the 1950s. Plots were organised with the aim of emphasising social aspects and being easily understood. In the pursuit of truthfulness, ‘pure’ dance, without any element of performance, was restricted to balls, festivals and other occasions when the story justified it. In time, the emphasis was shifted from the expressive possibilities of dance to mime. In the 1930s and 40s, classical literature, revolutions and wars were chosen as themes, but this resulted in a paucity of dance. In the 1950s, fairy tales and legends were more frequently chosen as themes because they provided more scenes in which dance could be used¹⁶.

One of the most successful and highly acclaimed productions of *Swan Lake* in the Soviet era was Vladimir Bourmeister’s version, which premiered in 1953 at the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Academic Music Theatre. The new production had a more coherent dramaturgy, overcoming the obscurity of the original plot. In Bourmeister’s version, guests from abroad attending the ball in Act III become minions of the demon Rothbart and seduce the prince. This expands Rothbart’s power, intensifying the conflict between good and evil. In the final act, the prince conquers the flood caused by the demon. His heroic appearance clearly conveys the message of man’s triumph over nature¹⁷, in line with the concept of socialist realism¹⁸. The work was a great success, and many reinterpretations of *Swan Lake* were produced all over the country. The ballet historian Slonimsky writes that ‘a literal epidemic of “creative reinterpretations” of *Swan Lake* broke out in the wake of

Михаил Фокин: русский период. СПб.: Гиперион, 2004. С. 107-110.

¹⁵ See Yasushi Nagata, “Soviet socialist realism drama as rhetoric,” *Drama studies: essays in the Japan drama society bulletin*, Vol. 38, 2000, p. 25 (in Japanese); Solomon Volkov, *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) from the Japanese version (translated by Akira Imamura, published in 2019) pp. 153-173.

¹⁶ Суриц Е. Я. Драмбалет // Русский балет: Энциклопедия / Ред. Е. П. Белова. М.: Большая Российская энциклопедия; Согласие, 1997. С.537; Чернова Н. Ю. Балет 1930-1940 годов// Советский балетный театр. 1917-1967. М.: Искусство, С. 116-117, 146-147.

¹⁷ See Суриц Е. Я. По Чайковскому: о повой постановке «Лебединого озера»// Театр. № 8. С. 49-62; Фере В. Г. Иньересный спектакль// Московская правда. 1953. № 115. С.3; Мусеев И. А. Творческое отношение к балетной классике// Советская музыка. 1953. № 8. С. 51.

¹⁸ The concept of socialist realism as defined by Gorky at the first Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934: ‘Socialist realism recognises life as an enterprise and as creative activity. Its aim is the triumph over nature and the continuous development of the vital individual faculties of man for health, long life and great happiness on earth’. My translation of Тимофеев Л. И., Тураев С. В. Социалистический реализм // Краткая литературная энциклопедия Т. 7: «Советская Украина» — Флиаки / Гл. ред. А. А. Сурков. М.: Сов. энцикл., 1972. [<http://feb-web.ru/feb/kle/kle-abc/default.asp>], accessed on 27 October 2020.

Bourmeister's version'¹⁹.

Another reason for their popularity was the establishment of ballet companies in each of the republics from the 1930s onwards. *Swan Lake* was almost invariably performed by these new ballet companies, possibly serving as a touchstone for ballet companies that had found their footing to some extent²⁰. The next section provides three examples.

3) Novosibirsk, Molotov (Perm) and Sverdlovsk

I have collected as many reviews as possible of the premieres of *Swan Lake* in various parts of the Soviet Union between 1953 and 1969. The upper limit was set in 1969, the year in which Grigorovich launched a new trend at the Bolshoi Theatre. In the versions of *Swan Lake* performed up to that time, a variety of production methods were used. Existing choreography was reinterpreted, partially used or mixed, while original choreography was also developed. The issues raised in the reviews of three of these theatres' performances of *Swan Lake* share common aspects and are interesting from the perspective of melodrama. Examples from the three theatres are presented below.

Reviews have been chosen for examination because in ballet, the script often differs from the actual performance²¹. As sources of information, reviews are fragmentary and the critic's subjectivity is inevitable. However, I consider stage performance to be the complete form, and thus, have opted for reviews as a medium capable of communicating this to a certain extent. Below are extracts from the reviews.

The first example was a premiere staged in 1955 at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre by the Moscow choreographer Mikhail Satunovsky²². The production was a combination of the versions by Petipa and Ivanov and by Bourmeister, coupled with Satunovsky's choreography. One critic complains that the choreographer was too preoccupied with heightening the dramatic conflict by structuring the events of the play logically. In this version, the role of Rothbart was enhanced to the point where it rivalled that of the protagonist, and the role of the prince was altered to counterbalance this. The prince is no longer the young romantic dreamer associated with Tchaikovsky's music, but a sturdy hunter, a prosaic figure. Certainly this prince should be able to defeat Rothbart easily; however, the story suggests that his struggle with Rothbart is not physical, but based on spiritual strength, endurance and loyalty. Moreover, the decision to have

¹⁹ Ванслов В. В. Балеты Григоровича и проблемы хореографии. М.: Искусство. 1968. С. 138.
.....после спектакля Бурмейстера возникла буквально эпидемия "творческих переосмыслений" "Лебединого озера".

²⁰ Keiko Saito, *The Dawn of "the Great Country of Ballet" - Japan: The Tchaikovsky Memorial Tokyo Ballet School (1960-1964)* (Tokyo: Bungei-shunju kikaku shuppan, 2019) pp. 299-230.

²¹ See Капр К. Балет и драма. Л.: Искусство. 1980. С. 15.

²² Сокольский М. Заметки о двух гастрольных спектаклях // Театр. 1955, № 11. С. 96-98.

Odile and Odette performed by different dancers results in a mere love triangle, rendering this device crude. In the third act, Odile seduced the prince in a number of traditional costumes, which was decried as pointless, as it is clear that the prince only had eyes for Odette.

The second example is an original version by the Moscow choreographer Olga Tarasova, first performed in Molotov (now Perm) in 1956²³. The encounter between Odette and the prince takes place not on the shores of the lake in the second act, but in the festive scene in the castle grounds in the first act; it is in this act that the prince falls in love with Odette, a modest and simple girl. It seems logical that Rothbart, the devil, interferes and turns Odette into a swan; however, this gives way in the lakeside scene of the second act, where the musical structure suggests that the two fall in love all over again. It would have been a romantic fairy tale if the prince had pledged his eternal love to the swan maiden on the shores of the magical lake, but the poetic sentiment, romance and fairy tale charm of the piece is lost in the everyday concreteness.

The third example is an original version by the Moscow choreographer Georgy Iazvinsky, first performed in Sverdlovsk in 1960²⁴. The first act is filled with everyday episodes and fencing scenes, with no dancing, only explanatory mime. The lakeside scene in the second act is partly based on Ivanov's choreography and the rest on Iazvinsky's, but lacks classical pathos, majesty and academic orderliness. The piece is short on the language of dance, and the arrangement of the group dances is uninteresting. The scene wherein the prince stabs Rothbart with his sword was also added to the final act, turning the symbolic battle between good and evil into a worldly duel.

What these three reviews have in common is the dichotomy between 'everydayness' and 'worldliness' on one hand, and 'romanticism' and 'poetic sentiment' on the other. The following quotation from the article on the Sverdlovsk performance is representative of the critics' views of the time on this subject:

The intention to 'justify', explain and describe everything to the audience is normal when seen from the perspective of typical forms of poetic sentiment and dance language, but misdirected when done from the perspective of truthfulness based on secular logic and narrow understanding²⁵.

This describes the vulgarisation resulting from the neglect of dance in the pursuit of 'intelligibility'. Classical dance in the late nineteenth century had guaranteed an aesthetic with God at its apex, which could not be replaced by the mime and character dance promoted in the

²³ *Обозреватель* Газетное обозрение // Театр. 1957, № 6, С. 97.

²⁴ *Эльяс Н.* Поиски хореографической образности // Советская культура. 1962, № 87, С. 3.

²⁵ *Там же.*

Soviet era. Here Brooks' discussion of sanctity comes to mind as well.

Yet by the end of the Enlightenment, there was clearly a renewed thirst for the Sacred, a reaction to desacralization expressed in the vast movement we think of as Romanticism. The reaction both reasserted the need for some version of the Sacred and offered further proof of the irremediable loss of the Sacred in its traditional, categorical, unifying form²⁶.

Brooks wrote about French Romanticism further on that "Mythmaking could now only be individual." In Soviet Russia the government attempted to find an alternative in the collective imagination of the people. However, as Soviet ballet history has shown, they failed in it. Transposed to Soviet ballet, the yearning for dance, which had become a loud voice by the mid-twentieth century, may be interpreted as a reaction against the idea of secularisation. It prompted a return to romanticism in the Soviet period.

This is also illustrated by one of the most successful examples, Bourmeister's version. The confrontation with nature in the final act reveals a romantic orientation. In addition, Tchaikovsky's music, classified as late romantic, was radically edited in the Petipa and Ivanov version according to Petipa's directions. It seems significant from the perspective of romanticism that Bourmeister based his version on Tchaikovsky's original full score²⁷.

The yearning for dance was sublimated in Grigorovich's version of 1969. In his production, mime was utilized in the dance, but the dance form was closer to the structure of the music than the narrative, and the character dances were transformed into classical dances by having the dancers wear pointe shoes. The demon Rothbart, who was internalised by the protagonist, assumed the role of the prince's shadow, thereby blurring the boundaries between good and evil. One of the characteristics of melodrama, the clear distinction between good and evil, was lost. As for the final act, the original plot called for the death of the protagonist and a complete departure from melodrama. In the end, however, the Ministry of Culture forced the ballet to adopt a happy ending²⁸. In other words, the melodramatic mode continued to exert its power as a political mode for a long time in the Soviet *Swan Lake*.

²⁶ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995) p. 16.

²⁷ Суриц Е. По Чайковскому (О новой постановке «Лебединого озера») // Театр. 1953, № 8. С. 51.

²⁸ Театр, которого не было: «Лебединое озеро» Юрия Григоровича. Проект Ольги Федяниной и Сергея Конаева. «Коммерсант» №13 от 19.04.2019, С. 29 [https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3940135]