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Swans that will ruffle feathers



Ballet in the West End? Ismene Brown talks to the creator of a Swan Lake with a popular touch

MATTHEW Bourne's thoughts are torn between little white fluffy swan toys and Mikhail Baryshnikov. The Russian ballet superstar dropped in on his rehearsal of *Swan Lake* the other day and asked him to consider choreographing him a work.

All Bourne wants to do is hug this extraordinary thing to himself, ponder it, try to believe it. Unfortunately the fluffy swans are much more important; they'll be on sale in the foyer of the Piccadilly Theatre tomorrow when his unusual production of *Swan Lake* opens, and they've got to be as tasteful as the fridge magnets and T-shirts.

There are many things that Bourne finds hard to believe just now, and it is easy to share his incredulity. For here is a ballet hitting the West End, made by an East End boy who didn't learn dancing until he was 22, and mainly performed by the members of a tiny modern dance group that until last year was touring to the smaller provincial theatres thanks entirely to the generosity of the Arts Council.

It speaks volumes that Matthew Bourne's 'Swan Lake' is being managed by Cameron Mackintosh. This is the 'Swan Lake' that got everyone talking. This is the 'Swan Lake' starring chaps in make-up and feathers. The same 'Swan Lake' that conquered serious ballet critics when it first appeared at Sadler's Wells last November.

"I do intend this seriously, but in a completely fresh version," says the man who has made a speciality of upending classical ballets into modern theatrical dance, to some controversy. "I'm not saying, take it as seriously as the classic ballet version - but then how seriously do a lot of people take that? To some people, the original *Swan Lake* looks ridiculous. As long as you approach the music in a truthful way, there's no reason why it must always have the same steps and same images."

Bourne doesn't look like a controversial figure, but our meeting in the Royal Ballet School (where he is rehearsing) is the first time he has stepped across a Royal Ballet threshold.

"I am not one of their inner sanctum," he says, regretfully. Affable, calm, a chubby-faced 35, his slightly abstract air is due to his amazement at the people who've been turning up. Long ago, in his teens, he avidly collected stars' autographs ("1975 was my best year - I got Fred Astaire, Bette Davis and Gloria Swanson"). Now it is Baryshnikov and another incomparable ballet star, Lynn Seymour, who have come to him. Seymour asked if she could dance the Queen in *Swan Lake*, and she will take over from Fiona Chadwick in October for five weeks.

"I'm pinching myself," says Bourne.

Then there's Cameron Mackintosh, who after the first night of "Swan Lake" at Sadler's Wells boomed at Bourne, "Take it in, darlings, take it in." Meaning - take it into the West End.

Bourne says word of mouth is what has made Adventures in Motion Pictures such a phenomenal success. His company, just seven people a couple of years ago, now outnumbers Rambert, with 35 dancers in *Swan Lake*. Even Royal Ballet dancers are quietly sneaking in to audition for his 1997 production, *Cinderella*.

The "gay *Swan Lake*" tag hasn't done him any harm. "I was terrified of it at first, but I don't mind now if people have misconceptions. They'll get a shock when the swans come on anyway. I give them plenty of funny, campy stuff in Act 1 [in which the Prince is shown as a forlorn Prince Charles figure]. They should be ready for something more mysterious and alluring in Act 2."

HAVING male swans was obvious to Bourne, who knew he wanted to make his story less a romantic love story than a search by a timid, constricted man for freedom, a fearless alter ego - represented by a magnificent male swan, Adam Cooper of the Royal Ballet in full flight.

The Prince and the Swan dance together - the most difficult part for Bourne to choreograph. "It took

ages. I didn't want it to be sloppy or homo-erotic or dull. The thing that did it was realising that the swan was a bird, not a human. The man has human intensity, but the bird is a creature. Then I found the movements I wanted. His wings can bear weight, but they can't grip like hands."

It's a singularly adept observation, like his insistence that swans are not delicate, gentle creatures but rough, strong and wild. Anyone who has seen swans in nature will recognise how fascinatingly Bourne has caught both their physical presence and also our own desire to presume in them some supernatural percipience about the human condition (which has charged swan myths through the ages).

"The idea of wanting something that you nearly get, but then can't have, appeals to me. Unrequited love is very moving. The bit that moves me most is in Act 3 when the prince dances with the Black Swan [now reincarnated as a sexy, louche man in black leather]. That's the nearest that the prince ever gets to what he wants. I suppose I love making people suffer on stage - I'm quite keen on that." A big laugh, followed by an admission of a rather bruised and lonely heart of his own.

Unlike the Prince, though, Bourne has achieved more than he ever imagined. His biography one day will be an extraordinary read - as an infant, staging a cross-dressing *Cinderella*, then putting on musicals in the tough Leytonstone youth club where his parents were youth workers, the job filing obituaries at the BBC, the first dance lessons at 22, the founding of AMP and his rocket-ride through amiable but undemanding dance-theatre pieces to the revamped classics, and commissions from the Royal Shakespeare Company (*As You Like It*), English National Opera (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Ninagawa (*Peer Gynt*), Mackintosh (*Oliver!*) and now... Baryshnikov?

Bourne is not the world's most inventive and innovative choreographer, but he has an uncanny eye for what works in theatre. *Swan Lake* is a fine creation, as true as it is kitsch. He appears to be an iconoclast who's daring to pick up and shake classics, but he is really a traditionalist.

Adam Cooper, switching from the august heights of the Royal Ballet to Bourne's Swan, says he's never had such a tiring role. Bourne, he thinks, has a way of drawing people into the heart of a story that is very rare.

"There are probably a large number of people who would never go to see the traditional *Swan Lake*. After this, I think many of them will be very curious about it. Matthew's very good for dance."