

SHADOWS IN THE SHAPE OF SWAN LAKE

by

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SHADOWS IN THE SHAPE OF SWAN LAKE

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ABSTRACT

Swan Lake, with its rich history of productions and iconic place in culture, is easily one of the most famous ballets of all time. Each new reimagination of the popular story situates itself uniquely as a form of artistic commentary and reflection of the time and space in which it was created. Taking into consideration the historical context of the ballet as well as creative choices made in previous adaptations, I have choreographed and produced a short film adaptation of Swan Lake through the lens of authoritative censorship.

The story of Swan Lake is inherently about freedom: Odette is trapped by both Rothbart's curse and then later Siegfried's betrayal of their love. My film follows Odette as she navigates a morally gray world in search of truth. She encounters the Swans, a censored version of the people she knows as well as their puppeteer, a stranger who alternates between the roles of both Siegfried and Rothbart. After being tossed about this ambiguous space, Odette eventually finds reality and truth, but not without serious repercussions. With this film, I speak to the voicelessness that artists and citizens experience during times of suppression of information and speech. Furthermore, this film asks this question to audiences: who gets their voice heard in modern media and how is that voice and its accompanying statements interpreted and used over time?

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ARTIST STATEMENT

I am a storyteller, focused on conveying narratives in an accessible way through dance, film, and digital art. I create with the conscious intention for my work to be shared between people and spark internal reflection and external interaction. I strive to capture the potential of the mundane equally to that of the grand. When creating, I aim to democratize the space I work in and equalize channels of communication between everyone I encounter.

Background

The story of Swan Lake is known and referenced across the globe. It follows a prince, Siegfried, who falls in love with Odette, a woman enchanted into the form of a swan. This curse has been placed upon her by a sorcerer named Rothbart, and the spell can only be broken by true love. Upon learning of their meeting, Rothbart seeks to separate the pair. He prevents Odette from attending a ball at which the prince plans to declare his love and subsequent intentions to wed her. In Odette's stead, Rothbart sends Odile, an exact lookalike of Odette to deceive the prince and seduce him away from his true love. Upon realizing his mistake, Siegfried tries to redeem his relationship with Odette, but the original ballet ends in tragedy as they both die plunging into the lake.

Upon its premiere in 1877, Swan Lake was met with harsh reviews from critics and audiences alike. Nearly every element was rebuffed by the public, with Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky's score, Julius Reisinger's choreography, and the German setting deemed particularly offensive. The turn of public opinion began only after Tchaikovsky's death with the Mariinsky Theater's 1895 revival. With permission from Tchaikovsky's brother, Ricardo Drigo rearranged and reorchestrated the score into the version that's most used today. Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov collaborated on the choreography, splitting up each act. Though the reviews were still mixed, their staging has proved to have the most lasting impact on future productions.

As it was conceived in Imperial Russia, Swan Lake innately held within it the attitudes and values attributed to that time. There was the glorification of the royal court in the grandeur of the costumes and set, as well as acknowledgement of social rank within the characters performed. The fall of the Russian Empire and the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922 brought forth a stricter set of boundaries for the arts to adhere to.

The style of socialist realism dictated that art should be made for the purpose of supporting communist values and uplifting the common man. The strict enforcement of these state-sanctioned guidelines caused many ballets to undergo revision. Swan Lake, a ballet so engrained in the courtly style of the former Imperial Russia, was one that required modification, though not so much was done as might have been expected. The largest of the changes that were made was the reconfiguration of the ending. In the approved production, Odette and Siegfried defeat Rothbart and live happily ever after, proving that good is more powerful than evil.

As time went on, the ballet became a symbol of Soviet excellence, and the swans, in their uniformity and precision, came to represent the country's militaristic might. It was performed for most visiting dignitaries as a nuanced display of power and culture to the West. To their own citizens, however, it became a tool for censorship and propaganda. During times of political upheaval, but most famously in 1991 during the fall of the USSR, Soviet state-controlled TV stations cut news broadcasting and replaced it with a recording of Swan Lake that played on a loop for hours on end.

This connection between the ballet and censorship and propaganda is still present in the minds of the Russian people. When Russian President Vladimir Putin disappeared from the public eye for eleven days in 2015, Russian web marketer, Andrii Kapranov, created a website to track the time the president was missing while playing Swan Lake on a loop in the background. At Putin's 2018 reelection, graffiti art featuring the ballet's iconic "Four Little Swans" appeared in St. Petersburg (See Figure 1). On March 3rd of 2022, Rain TV, which had been proclaimed as the last independent news station in Russia, was forced to shut down operations after threats from Russian telecommunication regulators. Amid their coverage of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, the channel was accused of inciting protests and misleading the public. The organization

chose to leave the air by playing the same production of Swan Lake that had been looped on TV



Figure 1 This photograph of a mural depicting Swan Lake's "Four Little Swans" was created by a member of the Yav Art Group and posted to Instagram by @yav_zone

broadcasts during the days of the USSR.

The use of propaganda and censorship is not exclusive to Russia and her history, but the ongoing struggle for freedom of speech and information in that specific corner of the world

reestablishes the issue's relevance throughout the globe. In creating my short film, I aimed to recognize and call attention to modern forms of censorship and propaganda. I also sought to explore the repercussions of how people interact with online media.

Research Methodology

My research was split into 4 forms. I took part in traditional research where I gathered written materials about censorship and propaganda as well as how dance has been used as a tool for communication. This was also where I spent time learning about the details of early productions of Swan Lake and the changes that were notated over time.

The second prong of my research included choreographic analysis of varying productions of Swan Lake. As a recognizable cultural asset, the ballet has become a vessel for countless choreographers to convey critiques and comments of the social reality within which they exist and create. The notoriety of Swan Lake as it's traditionally performed allows for artistic changes to make a noticeable impression upon viewers. In analyzing the work of others, I sought to

understand how they had manipulated the elements of artistic production to use Swan Lake as a vehicle for their own message.

I looked at adaptations from choreographers with a diverse range of styles, backgrounds, ages, and geographic origins. Especially influential considerations were as follows: Matthew Bourne's "Swan Lake," Corey Baker's "Swan Lake Bath Ballet," Mats Ek's "Swan Lake," Fredrik Rydman's "Swan Lake ReLoaded," Alexander Ekman's "Swan Lake," and Darren Aronofsky's "Black Swan."

I also engaged in embodied research, which took the form of improvisational dance and choreographic conversation with the dancers that I worked with. The work I did in that process played directly into my last method of research, creative experimentation. From the beginning, each element of the production was ideated and tested before being rewritten, revised, or reconsidered. The movement sequences, camera angles and editing structure were the most notoriously reworked, but other details such as the set and costumes were also experimented with.

Creative Process

When it came to building my piece, I created with my artistic and personal values on the forefront of every decision. A major component of this process was my desire to "democratize the space" inside and outside of rehearsals. At first glance, dancers can appear to have silent roles in the creative process because their parts are traditionally non-speaking. Historically, any contributions they make beyond performing the work are under credited or unacknowledged. In creating a short film surrounding censorship, I needed to become cognizant of how I could listen to and understand the dancers that I was working with. Redefining the rehearsal space so that everyone participating feels comfortable to share their opinions and perspectives is a practice

that I will continue to develop beyond this project. It is not something that can be immediately mastered, rather it must, as all other aspects of this work, fall into the cycle of testing and revision. There are several distinct principles, however, that served me and my collaborators well. The first was a clear, verbalized emphasis on communication. At the beginning of the process, I told the dancers that I would be working with that I supported their right to self-advocate in and out of the studio. They had full reign to speak up at any point of the process to convey discomfort or confusion as well as address potential problems and discuss solutions. I trusted and valued their opinions, deferring to their judgement at several points of the process. I kept them briefed on any updates to the story and any other creative elements as the vision for the final product developed and asked for their input on an ongoing basis.

I knew early on that this project would be a screen-dance. Video media has had a profound influence on the world, and the growing access to both video content and the tools to create that content has made it even more so. This access can imply an increase in the sharing of information, but it also opens opportunities to mislead content consumers. By making my version of Swan Lake for film, I acknowledge this modern mindset as well as address how film has previously been used to censor or twist certain perspectives.

Conclusion

“Shadows in the Shape of Swan Lake” ties together a vast web of historical context and inspiration from previous productions while standing on its own as a testament to Swan Lake’s ability to serve as a vehicle for a message. The intention behind this piece has been to call attention to the importance of the freedom of speech and information, but I recognize that ultimately, it is up to the audience to interpret the communications crafted within this film and to take from it what they can.

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