Swan Lake for the 21st Century

By Susan Reiter
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Jean-Christophe Maillot, artistic director of Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, on his updated approach to the classic ballet.

Jean-Christophe Maillot does not shy away from well-known major ballet scores. He has created his own distinctive versions of Romeo and Juliet and Cinderella, both performed in New York by Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, the company he has led to international stature over the past two decades. In 2001 he choreographed La Belle, his take on Sleeping Beauty, and just this past December, he unveiled a new Nutcracker that reflects his experiences over his 20 years in Monte Carlo.

But this veteran French choreographer had steered clear of Swan Lake, even as he periodically contemplated such a project over a decade. It was not until 2011 that he took on the timeless Tchaikovsky score, devising a personal and individual approach in collaboration with the novelist/scriptwriter/lyricist Jean Rouaud. Some aspects of the dramatic action in LAC, his three-act production, will be recognizable to those familiar with more standard versions of Swan Lake. But this is a most contemporary interpretation, which explores themes and issues these collaborators found compelling during their investigations: the implications of human vs. animal; the deeper implications of what black and white represent; and the lingering, often submerged, fears that remain from our childhoods.

"Of course as a dancer, and being fascinated with Tchaikovsky's music, I had to face Swan Lake at some point. For me it is about trying to see if it's possible to bring some contemporary code into those traditional ballets," Maillot said recently, speaking by phone from the company's Monte Carlo headquarters. He noted that some productions—including those in which he performed during his own career—take an overly reverential approach to the traditional Swan Lake, while others layer it with irony and social commentary. "My approach is not to position myself as somebody who respects something, but just to wonder, as a choreographer, if I can reconsider the whole thing."
He met Rouaud when the author was on a panel of writers during the annual Monaco Dance Forum, an extensive annual international showcase of dance and related arts. "We discussed the mythology of those big classical ballets and tried to see if, by telling the story in a very precise way, we could bring something different to it that would be more connected to the reality of today, for the dancers," Maillot said.

The collaboration between the two men has continued to enrich the company's repertoire since they first joined forces on LAC. Since then, they have worked together on Choré, an unusual 2012 production that explores the world of Hollywood musicals, as well as on the recent Nutcracker (Caisse-Noisette Compagnie), and they are currently preparing for a new Taming of the Shrew which Maillot will create for the Bolshoi Ballet in July. "He allows me to not lose myself too much. It's a question-answer relationship," Maillot said of Rouaud, who had never seen Swan Lake, or even heard the score, before working on LAC.

The sentences pour forth at a heady pace as Maillot eagerly discusses the ideas and inspirations that shaped LAC. He occasionally uses a French word when he cannot find the precise one he seeks in English. "I was interested in that great question: what is it to be a swan during the day, and a woman during the night? That was the basic starting point of it. By trying to realize what makes the difference between an animal and a human being. And I realized that hands were probably what give us the chance to connect with our emotional intelligence. With the hands we are able to fight, protect ourselves, to defend ourselves. And then I tried to imagine what it would be like if your hands are replaced by feathers. Suddenly, you cannot communicate anymore with your hands."

Another issue Maillot and Rouaud addressed is the significance of the black and white swans, exploring beyond the standard imagery of aggressive temptress vs. yielding, vulnerable creature. "More than the good and the evil for me, it has to do with the ideal and the reality. That's why I immediately decided to have two ladies for the black and white swans, because it is not a question of two people in one. It's a question of two different kinds of people. We all try to reach this kind of idea that love could be completely pure, beautiful, unsullied— the way we experience love when we're very young. When you're a young child or adolescent and you fall in love, it always has to do with an ideal, where everything will be perfect. And then the reality of the black swan, for me, has to do with flesh, sexuality, desire and passion."

Among the striking aspects of LAC is the presence of both the Prince's parents. While in most Swan Lakes, only his mother— whose primary function is to urge him to settle down and select a bride—is present, here the King is a dynamic, even aggressive presence, trying to mold his son into his idea of what a man should be. "I felt it was very important to see that the father is actually pushing his son to be like him. He's a hunter, with an idea of what it is to be a man in a very dumb, basic way," said Maillot. The Prince's male companions are presented as unrefined, even oafish.

Despite being born and raised in such a society, the Prince carries with him an idealized vision of pure love, initiated during a childhood episode Maillot depicts on film during a brief prologue. It is here that the audience first meets one of LAC's most striking characters, Her Majesty the Night, a commanding and alluring figure whose machinations set the story in motion, and who may have a significant history with the King.

The 48 members of Les Ballets de Monte Carlo—often described as "sleek" and "streamlined"—move with innate expressiveness in Maillot's choreography and are highly attuned to the dramatic impetus behind his movement. "I'm interested in narration in ballet; I'm interested in the acting of dancers in ballet," he states unequivocally. "I always connect every step I'm doing to a text. I want the dancers to tell themselves a text when they dance. Everybody, from the last corps de ballet to the first soloist, has his or her own story. If you follow any person in the piece, they are telling you a story."

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Susan Reiter is a frequent Playbill contributor whose articles on the performing arts appear in the Los Angeles Times, Dance Magazine and many other publications.

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