

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Cue the homoerotic swans

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, December 11th, 2019

When the Ahmanson Theatre presented the U.S. premiere of *Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake* in 1997, some seasoned ticket holders walked out mid-performance – aghast at the male swan corps' sweaty bare chests and feather-clad thighs. Shocking!

Those menacing swans are back. But Thursday night's Ahmanson opening drew only a rapturous response – those in the first row catching glints and even spritz from those glistening torsos.

The Queering of Swan Lake

Times have changed, and Bourne's upending of the 1895 classic scored by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky can now seem curious if not sometimes quaint (the dancers' quirky waddles, beak-hand gestures and always those curved arms doubling as slender throats). Moreover, Bourne's production has since been ceaselessly mused over and analyzed – witness “The Queering of Swan Lake,” published in the 2008 issue of *The Journal of Homosexuality*.



Will Bozier (center) and company in *Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake* at Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

“Until Bourne's ballet, gay themes in dance were so repressed as to be unrecognizable to all but the most insightful reviewers,” writes author Kent G. Drummond. “He thrusts center stage an unstable relationship between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire, which is itself a hallmark of queer moments.”

Bourne's [New Adventures](#) production company launched its fowl enterprise in 1995, upending the stodgy ballet world and mocking Britain's royal scandals in a story that sets a cold queenly mother and sexually confused prince off on a journey that ends badly.

Tchaikovsky's passion for men

Dual natures, flip sides and studies in black and white permeate the work, with [Tchaikovsky's own buried homosexuality](#) perhaps the deepest layer at the murky bottom of that famed moonlit lake.



Nicole Kabera and Andrew Monaghan in *Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake* at Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

The opening night principals (players alternate) were staged by Andrew Monaghan (the Prince) and Will Bozier who doubles as the Swan and the rogue Stanger, the Swan's edgy black-clad double.

A fetching pas de deux

Nicole Kabera played the coolly elegant Queen, delivering a fine-lined and always nuanced performance. Katrina Lyndon was the Prince's ever-flirty Girlfriend, played broadly as a tart – and not helped by the garish hot pink poof dress that was distractingly harsh. Set and costume designer Lez Brotherston's other creations, however, were spot on wonderful.

Monaghan and Bozier's pas de deux was elegantly fetching, Bozier's enticements and foils bewitching the Prince, who first embraces his true nature, but via his emotionally-incestuous relationship with his Queen mother, falls to confusion. Both men were indefatigably present, their gazes locked with alluring chemistry.



Andrew Monaghan (on the bed) and company in *Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake* at Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

The always athletic swan corps-de-ballet was at times ponderingly earthbound, as it often should be, given the nature of the creatures portrayed. There were, however, plenty of soaring elevations, both by the principals and the corps. The ferocious bedroom attack at the ballet's conclusion was gripping, culminating in a tower of vicious swans atop the Prince's bed.

The opera scene in which the royals view a parodied classical ballet is an audience favorite, giving voice to Bourne's incisive and offbeat wit. Mari Kamata's quivering portrayal of the Moth Maiden was perfection (at one point, I think even her ears shivered) – as well as Alistair Beattie's dippy portrayal as the lederhosen-clad Nobleman.



Will Bozier (upstage center), Andrew Monaghan (downstage center) and company in *Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake* at Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Craig Schwartz

In the end, Bourne's tale endures and indeed weathers a 21st century's jaded eye. What's not to love about the call of the magical other, a wild and seemingly untamable creature that enters one's life, alerting it forever? Even if you do end up being pecked to death by swans.

Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake plays through January 5 at the Ahmanson Theatre. [Tickets](#).

Top photo by Craig Schwartz.

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