

One Swan, Two Swan, Black Swan, White Swan:  
The Queer Pas De Deux and Subverting Normativity in Swan Lake

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## One Swan, Two Swan, Black Swan, White Swan: The Queer Pas De Deux and Subverting Normativity in Swan Lake

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### Abstract

This essay theorizes through the lens of queer dance that the contemporary adaptations of Swan Lake by choreographers Matthew Bourne and Alexander Ekman act as a cultural catalyst, challenging the ways in which audiences interpret and view gender, sexuality, the body, and relationships. By first defining queer dance, the project continues on to look at the choreography structure of relationships and meaning, particularly through the structure of the pas de deux and its entrenchment in the narrative of heteronormativity. Once defined, through close analysis and comparison between the original choreography and the performance of the adaptations, it becomes clear that the work of Ekman to investigate gender and identity and the work of Bourne to challenge notions of sexuality in performance are both forms of queer dance. These Swan Lake adaptations and the queer pas de deux act as a liberation and an opening of new movement potentials for dancers and individuals of all gender presentations and identities.

Keywords: : Queer dance, Swan Lake, Choreography, Gender, Sexuality, Pas de deux

## Introduction

A hush falls over the crowd as the strings of the orchestra spring to life. The sound hovers in the air and the tension builds. The strings sink only when the lone voice of the oboe rises. The oboe's strains in C minor give a sense of deep loneliness and loss. Both desperate and beautiful, the ethereal and eerie melody is instantly recognizable as the opening of the second act of Tchaikovsky's famous ballet: *Swan Lake* (Plumley 1:15-2:12).

Ballerinas dressed in white flood the stage. Their heads are wreathed in white feathers and their movements are demure and delicate. They move together, their arms rising and falling in tandem, pumping the air up and down. Although they appear to be women, they are another creature entirely; they are swans. Once, these swans were girls, but they have been cursed to live their lives as birds by the evil Rothbart. There is one swan who stands above the rest, their queen Odette, whose love for a human prince will inevitably lead to her death. *Swan Lake* is a love story and a tragedy. It is a story of love that cannot be fulfilled. A man destined to marry a princess has eyes for no woman. His chosen mate is instead a bird (who is shaped like a woman, but is still a bird nonetheless). Theirs is a love that does not follow convention, and in the end, it is one that can only lead to tragedy, for although they cannot be together, they would rather die than live apart.

*Swan Lake* is the first of only three ballets composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. When the ballet premiered in Moscow in 1877, it garnered an unenthusiastic response from audiences. Two years after Tchaikovsky's untimely death in 1893, the ballet was re-staged and this time was met with success. Since then, *Swan Lake* has been restaged and performed across the world over the last century and has become a staple of classical and contemporary ballet companies around the globe (Rudolf Nureyev Foundation). At first glance, the history of *Swan Lake* may appear to be a performance reproduced and left unchanged since the initial re-staging during the last century. It appears that the ballet must have outlived its relevance in our current world.

However, this is not the case. In recent years, there appears to be an upsurge in interest in *Swan Lake* even outside of the classical ballet arena. In the last several decades, *Swan Lake* adaptations have become more and more prominent as choreographers take greater risks

and liberties with the source material. Perhaps inspired by the original tale of an unconventional romantic love, dance artists continue to push the envelope even further by queering the performance in both more literal and abstract terms. In this essay, I posit through the lens of queer dance that the contemporary adaptations of *Swan Lake* by choreographers Matthew Bourne and Alexander Ekman act as cultural catalysts, challenging the ways in which audiences interpret and view gender, sexuality, the body, and relationships.

## Queer Dancing

Before looking closer at *Swan Lake* and its adaptations as queer, we must first define what it means to dance queerly. To begin, the label "queer" resists a concise definition. Queer is an adjective meaning to "differ in some way from what is usual or normal"; a noun referring to "a person who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise not heterosexual" or "a person who is not cisgender"; and, when used as a verb, queer means "to make or modify (something) in a way that reflects one's rejection of gender and sexuality norms" ("Queer"). When looking to define a work as "queer dance," we must consider all of these definitions as potential points of entry. However, it is important to isolate the ways in which queerness manifests through dance, particularly through body, space, and shape.

In her text *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Sara Ahmed writes extensively on the topic of queerness and singles out the particular ways in which the body and shape are both closely tied to what it means to move through the world queerly. To be queer is to exist outside the norm. The norm is made up of shapes, and we are conditioned to expect the world to fit into those shapes perfectly, creating the narrative of normativity. Normativity, Ahmed claims, is closely linked to reproduction and tradition. Something becomes "normal" when it is repeated and reproduced (Ahmed 144). In the context of dance, if a dance copies or reproduces what is reflective of the culture and tradition, it is following the narrative of normativity. In this way, the classical *Swan Lake* is normative because it perpetuates the view of a heteronormative culture.

Individuals who challenge the cultural norms do so by orienting themselves in a manner that does not align with the assumptions placed on them by the heteronormative narratives of the culture. These narratives

of normativity “—shape bodies and lives including those who depart from those narratives” (Ahmed 145). By acting as a contrast to the norm, a queer narrative emerges. When taking on a shape that does not fit with expectations, queerness can be perceived while simultaneously drawing attention to the shape that it is defying: the norm.

One could argue that an ultimate goal of the arts is to offer observers a unique and alternative perspective outside what they would experience in their day to day lives. Dance scholar Clare Croft, in her introduction to the anthology *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, gives us a sense of why this is a poignant angle to observe queerness and the arts in intersection. She suggests that because the arts have a reputation for being a safe space to offer an entrance into an alternative mode for viewing the world, the arts are an ideal platform to advocate for queer-identifying individuals. Croft states, “queer performance becomes a kind of pedagogy, teaching someone what it might look or feel like to refuse norms, particularly those related to gender and sexuality” (16-17). Queer dance is an opportunity to escape the straight, white, male perspectives that dominate our culture in a way that is available to everyone, regardless of racial, sexual, or gender identity (Croft 3).

By this account, we can declare that queer dance, in its performance, is a form of activism because it actively challenges the current expectations and narratives of normativity designated by the culture. Because of the heterogeneity of the designation “queer,” this is a helpful way to think constructively about what dancing we assign to this category. If the performance explicitly or inexplicitly reimagines heteronormative narratives, we can safely assign the title of “queer” to it. Classical ballet, however, has a reputation for living in a thoroughly exclusive heteronormative scene (Drummond 243). Ballets such as *Swan Lake* are thoroughly entrenched in the reproductive narrative, to the point where “tradition” seems unbreakable. How then and why are choreographers such as Bourne and Ekman able to reproduce *Swan Lake* while simultaneously rejecting heteronormativity? It is through their purposeful reimagining of relationships expressed on stage that challenge the narrative of the choreography and the subversion of shapes and patterns dictated by our heteronormative society. To better understand this, we can look at and compare the various approaches to the iconic ballet form, the *pas de deux*, and its depiction of relationship, gender, and dynamic.

## The Dance for Two

The *pas de deux* is a staple of classical ballet. The term refers to the number of dancers performing on stage together, meaning literally “step of two” (Drummond 239). A *pas de deux* in classical ballet is danced by one male-presenting dancer and one female-presenting dancer. These two dancers move together in a duet separate from the *corps de ballet*, the large groups of dancers in the company that primarily dance together in unison and complex formations. The male-presenting partner lifts the female-presenting dancer above his head, spins her around in her *pirouettes*, and guides her by her hands and waist as she shows off the extension of her legs in long, luxurious lines. Although there is a certain level of variation, the steps of the *pas de deux* remain consistent across classical ballets, as does the relationship between the dancers. However, it is crucial when defining a *pas de deux* to consider the implications of this very specific relationship being presented.

Relationship in any dance form is a vital part of the choreographic composition and is a key source for how we derive meaning from movement. To understand this, it is necessary to think of relationships in more abstract terms, defining them as the sculpted space(s) between the dancers and their environment. Relationships exist between the dancers, between the music and the movement, and between the audience and performer; every aspect of the performance is in constant relationship with the environment, shaping the space and constructing meaning (Smith-Autard 55). These many relationships layer on top of each other to create various combinations. While this may seem incredibly complicated, the interpretations of these relationships to form meaning happen at a subconscious level when it is perceived. The audience will recognize, relate, and react to what they are seeing on the stage based on their own experiences and expectations.

The relationship of the *pas de deux* is full of layers. Primarily, however, we can see a relationship of contrast. This is evident in the relationship between the male body and the female body and the contrast between them. Although there is a potentially romantic connotation with the relationship, their connection is far from overtly sensual or sexual. Drummond points out, “the *pas de deux* [happens] in close physical contact. Yet there is no eye contact between them” (239). There is a level of trust, in which the female-presenting dancer allows herself

to be supported and guided through steps and lifts that she could not execute on her own. She submits to the male-presenting dancer's control. However, his goal is not to conquer her, but to display her (Drummond 239). The role of each is vastly different and within their roles there is a lack of equality. While this may not explicitly say anything about gender and inequality of the sexes, it is undeniable that the way our society perpetuates the narrative of gender roles plays a part in how the form of the *pas de deux* is constructed.

What is also important to recognize is how the layering of these relationships is presented. For example, the gender of the performers can be one layer; the interaction with each other is another layer separate from that. In the classical *pas de deux*, these layers create a narrative of normativity in the shape of a hetero-romantic relationship. *Swan Lake* is no different. Although the *pas de deux* is supposed to be between the prince and a bird, she is shaped like a woman, and we are intended to view Odette as a woman and not a swan. In queer dance composition, these layers are peeled away and reordered to juxtapose against each other in new ways. For this reason, queer dance is often perceived as comedic, because there is an element of the unexpected or surprise. However, queer dance is not always funny. A layering of relationships presented on stage in a configuration that does not align with the norm can result in an incredibly powerful message and meaning. We will now examine Bourne's and Ekman's takes on the *pas de deux* in their renditions of *Swan Lake* and how they disrupt the heteronormative narrative.

### **Bourne, Odette, and Intimacy on Display**

Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, informally known as "The Gay *Swan Lake*," premiered in 1996 (Juhasz 58). Bourne's version primarily adheres to the original. The plot is essentially the same, except positioned in a modern setting. The sets are boxy and functional rather than elaborate and ornate, and the costumes, although somewhat timeless, adhere to 1950s fashion sensibilities. This post-industrial era staging makes this story instantly much more relatable to our current cultural climate than the classical, pre-1800s aesthetic of *Swan Lake*. The musical score is exactly as Tchaikovsky originally composed and the pacing and acts align. The dancing is not classical ballet and is a more contemporary style that abandons the notion that all movement must be light, indirect, and have soft lines and shapes. There is more

freedom in the composition, which allows for modern dance aesthetics, such as strong weight, momentum, and angular shapes, to permeate the choreography. In classical ballet, because all the dancers must remain silent, there is a mime language with gestures to help tell the story. Bourne also employs this method, but the gestures are more pedestrian and functional, rather than the embellished flourishing of hands common in the classical vocabulary. These changes, however, can be seen simply as updating the narrative norm to be relatable and approachable to a modern audience. These changes are not compositionally queer, because they situate the audience in an experience that continues to align with their assumptions. Bourne truly begins to diverge from the narrative when we look at his swans.

Bourne's *Swan Lake* also has an Odette. The difference is that the role is danced by a male-presenting body. In fact, all of the swans in this version are male. It is for this reason that many refer to the adaptation as "the gay one," because the prince falls in love with a male swan. This portrayal of a romantic same-sex relationship between the swan and the prince unfortunately still carries the weight of the social stigma associated with LGBTQ+ relationships. This is especially true in more conservative circles, which tend to be the audience for ballets like *Swan Lake*. Bourne has rejected the notion that this was a "gay" relationship because the swan is not a man at all. To him, the swan is a bird that just so happened to be played by a male-presenting dancer (Juhasz 58). His initial inspiration was to depict the swan as a wild animal, aggressive and strong. Much of the movement and choreography were based on the way real swans move rather than the fictionalized, fanciful, and feminine representation of the creature depicted in classical ballet. He believed the use of male bodies to encapsulate the untamed side of the swan would be the most effective method to achieve this (Bourne 1:25-2:15). But simultaneously, Bourne wholeheartedly embraces the nature of the gay relationship he created. Bourne states, "I would certainly not deny that it can be read in this way...[the relationship] between the Swan and The Prince does have a very powerful erotic charge" (qtd. in Drummond 236). Whatever way one looks at it, Bourne has certainly diverted the heteronormative narrative of *Swan Lake*. Drummond states, "by re-gendering it, Bourne has queered *Swan Lake*" (237).

Compositionally, besides the redefining the gender of Odette, Bourne also pushes the standard rules of the *pas de deux*. In *Swan Lake*, the *pas de deux* between the



prince and Odette in Act II is an adagio, which means the dancing is slow and sustained, like the music. It is supposed to appear light and easy, as if the dancer's legs naturally float up by their ears. Bourne's *Swan Lake* is different in this regard. The swan scoops the prince into a dance. As the Prince and Odette leap dynamically together, they land and launch themselves again in quick succession. The allegro motion contrasts with the adagio tempo and the dance is wild and erratic in comparison to the delicate nature of the *pas de deux*. At moments it seems almost as if they may collide with one another. They rely on each other's strength, sharing their weight between them when they touch. First, the prince lifts the swan, and then the swan lifts the prince, which contrasts the relationship between the characters in the normative iteration of *Swan Lake*. The swan and prince both play the role of leader and follower, simultaneously swapping back and forth. This is a new kind of *pas de deux*. It is one made of two equal halves.

The loss of the adagio tempo does not result in the loss of tenderness between them. There are moments of pause. The dancers lean into each other's weight and press their bodies close. The swan even rubs his face along the prince's chest. At one point, the prince wraps his whole body around the front of the swan's torso. His legs come off the ground as he presses as much of his body against the swan's chest as possible. It is not a beautiful, dynamic, or comfortable position to see. It expresses a deep vulnerability that is not generally allowed in a classical *pas de deux*, where the goal is to appear beautiful, lengthened, and performative. This position is none of those things. In our culture, touch like this is intimate and private, which goes against the goal of the *pas de deux* to display. Although the touch in the *pas de deux* may be similarly expressive, the dancers do not show or give in to their bodies' physical reaction to that touch. This is a different kind of partner work, one that mirrors contact improvisation technique, which is a social dance form built on the principle of listening to the bodies in contact. Contact improv actively addresses and embraces the body's reaction to touch in a way that allows it to respond instinctively to a partner. Moreover, by utilizing the *pas de deux* to display this private moment, Bourne is subverting the audience's expectations.

The final pose in the *pas de deux* in Bourne's version is similar to the original *Swan Lake*. The original features Odette in an *arabesque*, a classical position where the dancer stands on one leg and the other is ex-

tended behind her. She is held around the waist by the prince, and as the last note is reached, she dips forward into a *penché*, so she is positioned in a vertical split. If not held around the waist, she would fall flat on her face. Bourne's Odette also ends in an *arabesque*, but as the prince reaches out to the swan, Odette lifts upward onto his toe and darts off stage. The prince is left standing alone, hand still outstretched. This difference is significant. It is similar enough to be a personal homage to the original choreography, but Bourne presents a conclusion that sends a different message. Bourne's Odette does not need to rely on the prince. He is independent and does not require a partner. They are once again in an unequal relationship, as is customary in the *pas de deux* form, but this time the roles are reversed. The narrative is diverted once again as the swan leads the way and the prince follows, chasing after Odette.

### Ekman, Odile, and Disrupting the Gender Binary

Alexander Ekman's *A Swan Lake* premiered in 2014. The musical score features excerpts of Tchaikovsky's composition, but the primary score for the production was composed by Mikael Karlsson. Like Bourne, Ekman was interested in an alternative swan, but his revisioning of the classic is far more abstract. All that Bourne leaves intact from the original ballet, Ekman turns on its head. We enter into a zany world where it seems anything goes. The dancers talk, sing, and swear; there's a man in rainboots playing the tuba, and—wait a minute—are those rubber ducks falling from the sky? But perhaps the most significant aspect of the work, hidden under the accumulation of everything and the kitchen sink, is what is absent: gender.

Perhaps it would be inaccurate to say that gender is missing entirely from this *Swan Lake*. Gender exists here, but it is fluid and does not follow a binary. The cast is composed of equal parts male- and female-presenting bodies. In Act I, the dancers are costumed in a wide array of garment styles and shapes. Traditionally female shapes, such as the skirt and high-heeled shoes, and traditionally male shapes, like boxy shoulders and straight pant legs, are mixed and matched across the company regardless of body shape, sex, or gender presentation. The result is a collective of bodies, which are neither male nor female in shape, but embody aspects of both. Each dancer is androgynous, offering a new possibility of viewing dance on a body that is not confined

to gender. The gender binary usually placed on the human body has been obscured, and so the movement is revealed unobstructed and freed from the construct of gender.

Ekman's version also features a *pas de deux*. However, rather than the swan dancing with the prince, the white swan meets the black swan in a duet never before seen. In the original *Swan Lake*, there is a white swan, Odette, representing goodness and the light, and a black swan, Odile, representing evil and darkness (Drummond 240). The prince is seduced by Odile in Act III, after he mistakes her for Odette. There is a trope associated with these characters and the dichotomy they represent, although they never even meet each other in the ballet. Traditionally, Odette and Odile are played by the same dancer, both opposite sides of the same person. Ekman proposes a duet in which these two halves meet for the first time.

The stage is covered in several inches of water, and from opposite corners, the swans enter: the black swan from upstage right walking backwards and the white swan from downstage left along the front edge of the stage. They are both played by female-presenting dancers. They wear the traditional pancake tutu, a flat disc of stiff tulle around the waist, and a bulbous waistcoat that creates a hump on their backs. Instead of a crown of feathers around their heads, they wear helmet-like swimming caps. Walking slowly in silence, the dancers eventually meet face to face at center stage. They stare into each other's eyes without moving for some time, leaving the audience waiting with bated breath. Abruptly, the black swan pulls her hand back and forcefully smacks the white swan across the face. The resulting *crack* of flesh against flesh reverberates, echoing in the stunned silence of the theater. The white swan responds by cradling the black swan's face between her hands gently. The moment Odette's hands drop, Odile strikes her again. The cycle is repeated—slap, caress, slap, caress, slap, caress—getting faster and faster, until finally, they stop. No matter the black swan's aggressive efforts, the white swan remains, and the black swan will not pull away from the white swan's affectionate touch.

Metaphorically, this duet is not between two people, but one person, who must learn to embrace both aspects of their identity: the so called "good" (the acceptable narrative of normativity) and "evil" (the repressed and the queer). An interpretation could be a representation of internalized homophobia or denial of experiencing

gender dysphoria. Internalized homophobia, the involuntary belief that homosexuality is wrong and a denial or repression of a one's sexuality, can be a very painful and stressful experience that can lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders (The Rainbow Project). Internalized homophobia manifests itself in many different ways. The Rainbow Project states that individuals with internalized homophobia may, "[engage] in homophobic behaviors – ridicule, [harass, verbally or physically attack] other LGB people" or "[become] psychologically abused or abusive or [remain] in an abusive relationship." Both these behaviors reflect the actions of Odette and Odile in this sequence.

Gender dysphoria, on the other hand, is a disorder that sometimes affects transgender, transsexual, or gender-nonconforming individuals. According to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), "gender dysphoria refers to discomfort or distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth (and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics)" (2). Often, because there is a stigma surrounding gender-nonconformity, individuals who experience gender dysphoria may not have access to treatment or feel safe enough to seek out help (WPATH 3). Pushing away from family and friends to hide or attempting to deny experiencing gender dysphoria can lead to a great amount of stress, anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (WPATH 3). In both cases of internalized homophobia and gender dysphoria, when left untreated, people can feel intense self-loathing and may attempt to fight the part of themselves they perceive as "queer," "evil," or "wrong." The physical assault paired with the loving caress in Ekman's *pas de deux* embodies the conflicting and confusing negative feelings an individual living with internalized homophobia or gender dysphoria might experience.

As this alternative *pas de deux* continues, the dancers mirror each other's movements. They dance in unison, solidifying the inherent connection between them. Aggressively, they swipe at the ground with their feet and tear at the air, sending water droplets flying. The dance comes to a head as they become locked in a frenzy of strikes and last second dodges. Seemingly exhausted, they break away for the first time. Swans from the company enter the scene to drag them through the water on stage. They pass each other like ships in the night, both trying to passively ignore and deny the existence of

the other. Finally, the white swan approaches the black swan, and the duet begins again with a new energy. This time, the movement is accompanied by the sweet sound of strings. The black swan rests its head on Odette's chest. They nestle into each other, still mirroring, but the aggression is replaced by comfort and relief. The black swan takes the white swan's hand possessively, as if finally, the swan is able to claim this part of their identity and become whole. Black and white merge together as one as Odile, still holding on to Odette, permits the white swan to lead the way around the stage, accepting and placing trust in this new identity. This *pas de deux* is also a love story, but it is one about falling in love with yourself and gaining self-acceptance.

### Conclusion

The work of Bourne and Ekman to disrupt *Swan Lake*'s narrative is immensely important in the world of dance and performance art. While they could have created their own original works, the decision to re-stage this iconic, classical ballet is profoundly significant. Ballets such as *Swan Lake* live on through reproduction, and by joining that project, Bourne and Ekman have impacted the lineage of the work. As a result of their efforts, the lineage of *Swan Lake* now contains a new potential. The nature of queer dance is that it is always shifting and challenging itself. To create innovative possibilities within dance, queerness is a necessity; it is the source of the most vibrant and exciting aspects of human expression. Queer dance offers more than just answers; it offers living questions and brings new prospects to dance performance.

It is crucial to label and give visibility to that queerness, particularly in dance. As Croft argues, "not speaking about sexuality in robust ways allows homophobia to thrive in our dance institutions and representations. Treating queerness and homosexuality as only existing in the non-verbal realm marginalizes both" (15). By presenting a relationship on stage that is perceived as gay, Bourne is providing a clear connection to the LGBTQ+ community. Even though that was not his main focus, he is providing a lineage and representation for queer-identifying individuals in the arts. Ekman's work is equally vital, because it offers an androgynous viewing of the body, free from the gender binary. It is a liberation and an opening of new movement potentials for dancers and individuals of all gender presentations and identities.

There is great vulnerability and strength presented in both these queer *pas de deux*.

If the original *Swan Lake* is like a deck of cards, arranged, ordered, and stacked neatly, Bourne and Ekman have reconfigured the rules of the game. Bourne takes out some cards in the deck, (e.g. a female swan and a classical ballet movement vocabulary) and puts in some of his own, presenting a re-gendered swan and a contemporary movement vocabulary. However, the narrative is still recognizable as *Swan Lake* with the musical score and plot still ordered the same as the original. Ekman, on the other hand, took a different approach. He shuffled the deck into a new order and disrupted the gender binary entirely. He got rid of half the cards, bent a couple of the ones he had left in new ways, and dunked the whole thing in a stage filled with water. Although their approaches were different, their work is undeniably queer because they subvert the narrative of normativity. Queer dance is making a name, voice, and place for itself on the stage and in the world, with a little help from a man named Tchaikovsky and lake full of swans.



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