



A new star takes flight in an enduring masterpiece

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Ismene Brown reviews Swan Lake at Sadler's Wells

When Matthew Bourne first unveiled his reinterpretation of Swan Lake at the cramped old Sadler's Wells nine years ago, he was one of modern dance's little guys. In a rare fit of accurate prophecy I wrote: "If this were a West End show, one would declare, 'This will run and run.' "

And so his inspiring and brilliantly imagined show did – becoming that oxymoron, a legend in its own lifetime.

Its return to Sadler's Wells finds a transformed theatre, and a world transformed, too. Those tabloid royal jokes, which looked naughtily satirical in 1995, now feel bizarrely real after Paul Burrell and Michael Fawcett. That shooting at the ball, which then felt too glib a plot turn, now – after Prince William's "comedy terrorist" gatecrashing and 9/11 – carries more sinister weight.

Other jokes wear less well. One expects the Prince's girlfriend now to be less Fergie than Camilla; and the trilling of a mobile phone from the royal box at the ballet is a tad predictable.

But the reason why this marvellous production has swept around the world like a tornado is the drenching sorrow and bigness of its vision.

On about my tenth view of it over the years, it still seems to me inexhaustibly enthralling because of its timeless core values.

Bourne's visualisation is bold and modern-world, and yet in complete, if fresh sympathy with Tchaikovsky's range from gaiety to vulgar pomp and thence into symphonic romanticism – the dirt and the dream.

The Prince is acutely recharacterised, lonely, feeble, at the mercy of those extraordinary male swans, no less than of his mother.

As for the swans, they are one of the few true coups de théâtres of our time, the masculine power of their bare torsos rising not in the least amusingly out of their feathered breeches (at least, not amusingly until they choose), as threatening as warriors and yet as enticing and innocent as these great birds are in nature.

And in the lead role a new star is born, fit to set alongside the great Adam Cooper. From the Royal Ballet, like Cooper, but unlike him never a leading dancer, José Tirado takes this taxing dual role with outstanding grace and sexual authority.

As the swan, he seems to dwarf the Prince of Neil Westmoreland, his sheer physical presence overwhelming and powerfully controlled, giving those sweeping moves and big springy jumps the clarity that implies flight, and something more, too, something heroic as well as otherworldly.

As the louche Stranger gatecrashing the ball, Tirado oozes promiscuous danger, using his tongue on Nicola Tranah's foxy Queen, Westmoreland's over-nervy Prince and all the princesses like a frog consuming flies.

Bourne is often better on character and sheer theatricality than on choreography, and yet how good that beaky, rough swan stance is, and how very sexually clever his

Czardas in the ball. And how shocking and mesmerising that final climactic scene, as the swan and human worlds have their savagely unhappy battle on the Prince's bed.

It's epic, tragic, personal and universal. Welcome back to this tremendous show.

- Until Jan 16. Tickets: 0870 737 7737

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