

REVIEW: 'Swan Lake' by the Joffrey Ballet ★★★★

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Laura Molzahn, Chicago Tribune

At what point does the animal turn into the human? Fear into love? The everyday into magic? The brilliance of choreographer Christopher Wheeldon's re-imagined "Swan Lake" is to bring into high relief those transformations — as well as their reversals, in a tragic loss of art, of love.



The Joffrey achieves its own transformation in its first-ever staging of this most wonderful of classical ballets, through Oct. 26 at the Auditorium Theatre. On opening night, conductor Scott Speck and the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra outdid themselves, delivering Tchaikovsky's score in vivid strokes. And though Chicago has seen "Swan Lake" before, witnessing our home troupe's sensitive performance — in which the perfect was never the enemy of the great — in our hometown produced a thunderclap of civic pride.

Wheeldon's bold choices heighten the story's chiaroscuro shifts from the mundane to the ideal. Inspired by Edgar Degas' ballet paintings, Wheeldon sets the first and third acts of his 2004 staging not in an elite court but in a business-as-usual, late-19th-century dance studio, where "Swan Lake" is being rehearsed. Prince Siegfried isn't a bored aristocrat but the hardworking principal male dancer. Von Rothbart is both a wealthy, lecherous old patron and the decrepit, tattered sorcerer who's enslaved the swans.

An exceptionally clean scenic design, expertly lit to shift the mood, takes the action in Act 2 from a blank-slate studio to an enchanted lake that's, well, all lake: choppy, chilly gray swells and whitecaps as far as the eye can see.

Wheeldon's third-act innovations move the story from the ordinary into much darker territory. They're also great fun — blackly humorous and hypersexualized. Playing a magnetic siren, Christine Rocas drew a flock of men even before she started removing her clothes. But best were the four louche, floppy, comically obscene can-can girls, led by a delightfully frowzy Erica Lynette Edwards. This was the perfect setting for Von Rothbart's accomplice Odile and her brazenly triumphant fouettes.

Dylan Gutierrez seemed made for the role of Siegfried, whose idealism is the focus of this "Swan Lake." Attenuated, self-contained, Gutierrez has at times come across as uncertain, aloof — though seldom in his dancing. Here, as the character struggles to find his way through the corrupt and the ideal, Gutierrez emerged as touchingly young and bewildered even as his mighty leaps and spinning turns conveyed all the bravery of a high-minded warrior.

As Odette, Victoria Jaiani made the moment of falling in love visible. Initially taut as a little missile, when she allowed Siegfried to release her hand in a second-act arabesque, her face softened, relaxed: We could see Odette freed by simultaneous self-actualization and commitment to another.

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