

Guidelines for Teachers

Curriculum Connections:

- Dance
- Writing
- Media Literacy

Learning Goals:

- Experiencing, responding to and analyzing classical ballet through reflective and critical writing
- Recognizing different characteristics of classical ballet movement and choreography in Act I Scene II of Erik Bruhn's *Swan Lake*
- Understanding how dancers tell stories in classical ballet

Big Ideas:

- *Swan Lake* is an example of ballet from the classical period
- Classical ballet choreography achieves a satisfying visual effect through balance, structure and harmony
- Classical ballet choreography often showcases virtuosic technique separately from storytelling

Big Questions:

- What kind of visual effect does the choreographer achieve through geometric formations?
- How do classical ballet choreographers tell stories?
- How are classical ballets collaborative productions?
- How does choreography evolve over time?
- Why do ballet companies still perform *Swan Lake*?

Getting Started:

- Assign the whole guide to your students as an extended project or pick and choose sections to assign at different times

Watch *Swan Lake*, Act 1 Scene II: www.nbs-enb.ca/loveballet

Student Viewing Guide

Swan Lake, Act 1 Scene II

Choreography: Erik Bruhn

Music: Pyotr Tchaikovsky

Pianist: Marina Surgan

NBS Principals Staged and Rehearsed by: Sergiu Stefanschi, Vera Timashova

Soloists and Corps de Ballet Staged and Rehearsed by: Martine Lamy

Soloists and Corps de Ballet Assisted by: Ilze Titova

Synopsis:

Erik Bruhn's *Swan Lake* is one of the most beloved versions of this magical classical ballet, and demands both technical skill and artistry of all its dancers. In Act I, Scene II of Erik Bruhn's *Swan Lake*, Prince Siegfried has just been informed by his mother that he must soon take a bride. Reluctant to marry without being in love and feeling melancholic, he sets out to wander the woods near his village. While there, he encounters Odette, a beautiful white Swan Queen. They speak, and she tells him that the evil black Swan Queen has cast a spell on her and her handmaidens, forcing them to be swans by day and humans by night. The only way to break the spell is for a good man to pledge his love for Odette. Siegfried, realizing he is in love with Odette, begins to declare his love for her when the black Swan Queen appears, and prevents him from breaking the spell.

About Erik Bruhn:

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, Bruhn entered the Royal Danish Ballet School and graduated in 1947. That same year, he made his professional debut in London, England with the Metropolitan Ballet. Bruhn soon rose to become the greatest classical dancer of his generation and established a dazzling international career. The companies with which he performed include England's Royal Ballet, the Paris, Rome and Milan Opera Ballets, New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, the Stuttgart Ballet and The Royal Danish Ballet.

In 1964, Bruhn began his association with the National Ballet of Canada, staging such works as *La Sylphide*, *Swan Lake* and *Les Sylphides*. During these years, Bruhn was also a visiting teacher for both the National Ballet and for students at Canada's National Ballet School. From 1967 to 1971, Bruhn was Artistic Director of the Royal Swedish Ballet. In 1972, he retired from dancing but in 1974 returned to the stage as a character dancer.

He became Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Canada in 1983, a culmination of his 20-year association with the company as choreographer, producer, coach and dancer. Bruhn held the position until his sudden death in 1986.

Before watching *Swan Lake*:

Some movement characteristics of classical ballet to look for while you watch:

- Geometric shapes, lines and formations
- Symmetrical shapes, lines movements and formations
- Highly technical choreography
- Harmonious dancing
- Balanced movement phrases
- Precise movement
- Repetition of movements or movement phrases
- Spectacular displays of technique

Dancer's roles in classical ballet productions:

- Principal dancers:
 - Play the lead roles
 - Showcase spectacular technique and partnering throughout
- Character dancers:
 - Play supporting characters
 - Use mime and gesture to move the story forward
- Soloists:
 - Perform solo and small group sequences
 - Showcase technique often separate from the plot
- Corps the ballet:
 - Support storytelling by setting the scene
 - Dancing in unison with precision
 - Act as a backdrop for the principal dancers and soloists
 - In many Classical ballets, there is a “ballet blanc” act traditionally performed by female dancers wearing white and playing some kind of mythical or ethereal being

Who are Marius Petipa, Lev Ivanov and Piotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky?

- Do an internet search to find out about who both of these people are, and what their impact has been on the world of classical ballet.
- Write a paragraph or point form notes, highlighting their contributions to *Swan Lake*, and their contributions to the evolution of ballet.

Watch *Swan Lake*:

Because this is a recorded performance, you can watch it once through to fully experience it, and then again to take notes.

Take Intentional Notes:

Use the following to create your own note-taking template before you watch. You can do this on paper or on the computer. This will help you keep your notes organized. You may already have a template for the previous viewing. If that template worked well for you, use it again, or make some modifications based on your experience using it.

- **Before:** There are many bits of information you can gather and include in your notes before you start watching.
 - Date
 - Performance location
 - Title
 - Choreographer
 - Composer
 - Designers (costume, lighting, set)
 - Cast information, if available
 - Reason for performance (e.g., regular season, fundraiser, part of an event, student showcase)
 - Context (societal, cultural, historical)
 - Details about plot/theme

- **During:** It can be tricky to take notes while you are watching a performance. If you look down at your notebook the whole time, you'll miss a lot. Remember that you do not need to retell the whole performance. Fully experiencing the performance is important, so focus your note taking during the performance on the following:
 - Specific details relevant to the development of the story or theme
 - Your aesthetic judgement of movement phrases, images, or patterns
 - Particular dancer or dancers that stand out for you
 - Movement motifs you notice (recurring movement patterns that develop the theme, the story, the characters)
 - Artistic details you think you might forget by the end (e.g., the way the costumes moved on the dancers, or a musical phrase that moved the theme forward)

- **After:** Write down your initial response. Use the following questions to help shape your response.
 - Which moments were the most memorable?
 - Which dancers stood out for you?
 - What was your aesthetic impression of the piece?
 - What was missing?
 - What message do you think the choreographer was sending?
 - What was the emotional effect?
 - Describe some images that stick with you.
 - How did the choreographer and dancers use the elements of dance (time, space, energy, body, and relationship)?

Short Answer Questions:

After watching *Swan Lake Act 1 Scene II*, answer the following questions in 1-2 paragraphs each.

1. How much storytelling happens in this act? Describe one example of storytelling through movement, and one example of movement that stands on its own.
2. How does the choreographer use geometric shapes throughout the act? What kind of visual effect do the geometric shapes create? Give at least five examples.
3. How do the dancers use shape and energy to appear swan-like?
4. Describe the dance partnership between Siegfried and Odette. How do they relate to each other through movement? What are their roles in the partnership?
5. After watching this excerpt, would you want to watch all of *Swan Lake*? Why or why not?
6. Do you think this scene from *Swan Lake* stands on its own? Do you think we need to know the whole story to appreciate the dancing? Why or why not?
7. Which was the most memorable moment of the choreography for you? Describe the movement. Why was it memorable?
8. How might this online viewing platform inform your experience of watching *Swan Lake*? What do you think would be different about watching this piece live? What would be the same?
9. Think about the following words. How does the meaning of each word apply to the choreography?
 - a. Balance
 - b. Symmetry
 - c. Harmony

Research Activity:

After watching *Swan Lake*, choose one of the following research activities. All of these activities can be done in small groups, pairs or individually.

1. How has *Swan Lake* evolved over time? How many different versions of *Swan Lake* exist today? Create a virtual timeline, using software approved by your teacher, charting how *Swan Lake* has changed over time. With each addition to the timeline, include the choreographer, date and location of the premiere, costume and set design, a photo (if it's available), casting, and any other ways the production has been adapted.
2. How have choreographers and dance companies reinvisioned gender roles and gender representation in *Swan Lake*? Consider Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo's adaptations, Matthew Bourne's adaptation, or another one of your choice. Record a podcast to discuss your findings, include a title, brief description, and graphic with your audio recording.
3. How might *Swan Lake* be represented and referenced in pop culture today? Consider movies, tv, music, fashion, advertising, social media etc. Find 3-5 representations and create a blog post, describing how each one connects to Erik Bruhn's Act 1 Scene II.

Journal:

After watching *Swan Lake*, respond informally to the following journaling prompts. Choose how long you would like your responses to be. Responses can be oral, written or graphic.

1. How did you feel watching *Swan Lake*? What emotions did the performance evoke?
2. Did watching the choreography bring up any memories for you? Why do you think that memory came up?
3. Did you feel a personal connection to this piece? Why or why not?
4. If you could tell the story of *Swan Lake* from a different perspective, who's perspective would you choose?
5. How would you describe this excerpt of *Swan Lake* to someone who has never seen it?

Performance Review

Practice writing a (1-2 page) performance review of *Swan Lake*, using the attached guidelines. Use your notes, your journal, and your short answer questions to inform your review.

Performance Review Guidelines

Introduction:

- Include the following:
 - Date (if it is a video, include the actual performance date)
 - Title
 - Choreographer
 - Composer
 - Designers (lighting, costume, sound, etc.)
 - Relevant historical and societal context about when/where/how the piece was created and/or performed.
- Include a short synopsis of the piece. Remember that you are not recounting the whole piece. The reader may not have seen it yet, so give just enough information for your reader to understand your opinion. No spoilers!

- Offer your general opinion about the piece. Like a persuasive essay, you will begin with a thesis statement, and supporting arguments.
 - A good thesis will go further than simply saying you liked or disliked the performance. The following questions might help you create your thesis.
 - a. What is the purpose of this piece? Do you think it was achieved?
 - b. Who might want to watch this and who might not want to watch this?
 - c. Would you see it again? Why?
 - d. What was well executed about the performance and what could be improved?

Body

- Develop your argument using specific examples from the choreography.
- Support your argument by describing and analyzing the following:
 - Choreography
 - Dancers
 - Theme/story
 - Costumes
 - Music
 - Lighting/stage design
- Make sure to provide evidence for aesthetic judgements by describing the movement you saw and analyzing why you responded that way.
- If possible, name dancers when describing their movement.
- When analyzing, avoid absolute statements like “the best”, “the worst”, or “perfect”.
- Instead, think about what you thought was effective or ineffective. For example, “the choreography was moving because...”, or “the storyline was confusing, because...”.
- Avoid exaggerations like, “she is the most beautiful dancer ever.”
- Instead, think about why you felt that way. For example, you could write that “her sensitive port de bras and graceful leaps were captivating.”

Conclusion

- Restate your thesis.
- Summarize your argument.
- Leave off with an engaging ending.

Before you start writing, explore examples of dance performance reviews on <https://dancetabs.com/>

Some movement verbs you can use instead of 'do' and 'be':

- Move
- Leap
- Exit
- Share
- Inspire
- Jump
- Travel
- Lift
- Step
- Stretch
- Enter
- Carry
- Support
- Reach
- Rebound
- Turn
- Execute
- Balance
- Connect

Some adverbs you can use to describe movement:

- Carefully
- Sensitive
- Gently
- Creatively
- Accidentally
- Precisely
- Vigorously
- Enthusiastically
- Elegantly
- Fluidly
- Energetically
- Quickly
- Confidently
- Boldly
- Mechanically
- Effortlessly
- Slowly
- Generously
- Awkwardly