



## Swan Lake: A leap into the future

Matthew Bourne's renowned reinterpretation of Swan Lake is now showing as a 3D film. This is how the project took flight

By Jessica Duchon

TUESDAY 15 MAY 2012

It's the unforgettable concluding image of Billy Elliot: our hero blossoms into adulthood in Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake, taking an elemental leap onto the stage. Now, the choreographer's famed and radical reinterpretation of the ballet is leaping, complete, into cinemas internationally as a 3D film. It is a landmark moment for a production that has enjoyed phenomenal success since it first took wing back in 1995, becoming the longest-running ballet on Broadway and in the West End. The big-screen release arrives just in time for the 25th anniversary of Bourne's dance company, New Adventures.

What can 3D do for such a well-known work? There's no doubt that the medium has been making a splash in the dance world. Cinecasts from top international ballet companies have quickly become part of any enthusiast's calendar, but 3D is another issue altogether – because, while it can of course offer a better illusion of live performance, it has the capability to go much further as a genre in its own right. The techniques are still developing; everything rests on the imagination and expertise of the director.

Bourne's Swan Lake was first filmed with its original cast in 1996, but its creator has been itching to redo it: "I've worked on it so much since then that I find it quite difficult to look at that version now," says Bourne. "Capturing it in 3D was the perfect opportunity." The result, directed by Ross MacGibbon, is impressive indeed: the spatial depth highlights the power and virtuosity of Richard Winsor as the Swan and Dominic North as the Prince, while nuances of emotional complexity come across more clearly than they might to the back of a theatre.

Up until now, though, dance in 3D has seemed more of a curate's egg than a swan's. Last year a cinematic release of Giselle by the Mariinsky Ballet in St Petersburg was not an unqualified success: one critic described it as "so disconcertingly wonky it makes your eyes hurt". Fans marvelled over the lead ballerina, Natalia Osipova, but some grumbled about clunky

frames that chopped off the image at the ankle, or that the solo dancers seemed like superimposed "cutouts".

Wim Wenders, though, offered an extraordinary experience with his *Pina*: a tender tribute to the late German choreographer Pina Bausch. The director harnessed the format with extreme sensitivity, enhancing the beauty of the photography and subtly heightening the emotional content, rather than trying to dazzle us with technology for its own sake.

Bourne was well aware of the pitfalls as well as the potential. "I wasn't a huge fan of 3D at first," he admits. "Watching 3D movies, either I found it difficult to focus, or they'd keep throwing things at you all the time. But what it can do for dance is unique: it brings you into the live performance in a way that is very intimate and appealing.

"The 3D shots need to be longer so that the eye can focus. That means you don't edit lots of different shots so quickly; you stay with an image for longer so that you have the chance to see it. And that gives you more of the dance and more sense of presence.

"Most of all, it gives you a feeling of space, which is essential for dance, but difficult to capture on a flat screen. That makes 3D an amazing bonus for us. And I feel it has the potential to be explored much further." Now he dreams, he says, of creating a new dance work especially for 3D film, with enough time, care and attention to exploit its full capabilities.

For existing work to transfer successfully, he feels choreography has to be entirely reconceived, rather than attempting a compromise. "Either you try to capture the live performance with the audience and not pretend it's something it isn't," he says, "or you should go in the opposite direction and rethink the piece.

"If you stick cameras on the stage or go into the wings a little, it doesn't work, because most stage works are designed to be watched from the front. I noticed that in the *StreetDance* 3D film. Everything those amazing dance crews do is designed to be seen frontally: it's a theatrical experience. But they filmed them from the sides and above and I thought that lost the brilliance of what those dancers can do."

A cutting-edge medium should certainly attract new audiences to Bourne's *Swan Lake* – not that it has ever had trouble doing that. Repeated twists of fortune have added to its ongoing triumph. Its tale of a modern prince who longs to marry for love struck a chord in the 1990s, a decade full of royal scandals ("It seems the royal family likes it – now I get invited to things!" says Bourne). Then *Billy Elliot* arrived, with Billy's final transformation played by Adam Cooper, Bourne's original *Swan*: "That helped to give us an international platform. It was perfect for the film: Billy becomes a rebellious figure, ready to do something different, rather than being the Prince in a traditional *Swan Lake*."

Ironically, a traditional Swan Lake prince had sparked off the whole idea. "I was watching a performance by one of those famous dancers who had that faraway look, dreaming of true love," Bourne remembers, "and I thought: what if those swans were men? Would that mean more to him? It was pure daydream. I never imagined I'd be able to make it happen."

Next, after the company's forthcoming tour of Early Adventures, a triple bill of short ballets that helped to make Bourne's name, he will be busy creating a new magnum opus. It is a rethink of The Sleeping Beauty, due for premiere later this year, in which Princess Aurora is christened in 1890, falls asleep in 1911 and wakes up – well, round about now. According to Bourne, we can expect a look at our fading belief in the supernatural, a much enhanced love story, and a male Lilac Fairy. It may well be filmed. Possibly in 3D. But it sounds quite three-dimensional already.

*'Swan Lake' is in cinemas from today ([ind.pn/mbswanlake](http://ind.pn/mbswanlake)); Early Adventures is at Sadler's Wells, London EC1 (0844 412 4300) 21 to 26 May*