

Books & Culture

Of a different feather

Tchaikovsky's music remains but the classic *Swan Lake* is being reinvented in a Royal New Zealand Ballet production inspired by choreographer Mário Radačovský's battle with cancer. **by SARAH CATHERALL**



The Royal New Zealand Ballet's connection with *Swan Lake* stretches back to its days as a fledgling company. Tchaikovsky's 1876 classic featured in the then New Zealand Ballet's first season in 1953.

It's appeared in the repertoire in most of the decades since, most recently in 2013, when Russell Kerr's production toured the country as part of the RNZB's 60th-birthday celebrations.

Now, though, the feathered headpieces and fairy-tale love story have been tossed aside for *Black Swan*, *White Swan*, a contemporary, psychologically powered reinterpretation that sprang from its Czech choreographer's facing his mortality.

Mário Radačovský spent six months in hospital in the Netherlands having cancer treatment in his mid-twenties. Black swans graced the pond outside the

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hospital window.

"I had this idea that, if I survived, I would do a ballet about swans, or my own version of *Swan Lake*," the 47-year-old tells the *Listener* from the Czech Republic where he is artistic director of ballet for the National Theatre Brno. "Often in the classical story, everything is about the woman, the female. It's how I see *Swan Lake*. This version is about Siegfried, the prince, and, specifically, his life and my life: what changed when I was ill."

RNZB artistic director Patricia Barker originally commissioned Radačovský's work in her previous role at the Grand Rapids Ballet in the US. She says it's a "*Swan Lake* for the 21st century".

That means traditional ballet fans looking for the opulent costumes and dazzling sets of Kerr's *Swan Lake* will have to adjust. Gone are the white flouncy tutus, elaborate courtier costumes and those bonnets. Instead, the female dancers wear white leotards and shorts and the men wear suits – the costumes were designed by Barker – and the set is minimalist.

Radačovský's production is set to Tchaikovsky's original score. But a difference from the original is that the story follows Siegfried's journey rather than that of the swans. Caught between two women, the Black Swan and the White – no longer called Odette and Odile – he struggles with ideal love, pure evil, temptation and, most of all, himself. Siegfried's tormentor, Baron von Rothbart, is no longer a wizard figure but his alter ego, which makes for a psychological battle between the two lead male dancers.

The production combines Radačovský's deep love of classical ballet with the stripped-down neo-classical aesthetic that defined his many years dancing with the Nederlands Dans Theater under world-renowned choreographer Jiří Kylián.



ROSS BROWN
Creativity and intelligence: Royal New Zealand Ballet dancers Nadia Yanowsky and Katharine Precourt in their *Black Swan*, *White Swan* costumes. Right, Joseph Skelton and Marie Varlet in rehearsal.

STEPHEN ACQUART

"It's very much the story of Mário's personal life and his struggle with cancer," says RNZB ballet master Nicholas Schultz, who danced the role of Siegfried at the world premiere in 2012 with the Grand Rapids Ballet, where he was a principal dancer. "The ballet starts with Siegfried meeting White Swan, who is in a white doctor's jacket. It debilitates him.

"Siegfried goes out for his birthday and the Black Swan is his wife. He falls down and hallucinates this whole delusion, which is what the ballet becomes,



Facing his mortality: Mário Radačovský.

as von Rothbart becomes sickness and darkness. White is an anchor for his sanity, but at the end he doesn't know who is white and who is black. He's very confused."

Schultz's wife, Laura McQueen Schultz, who is also a RNZB ballet master, danced the White Swan role in the 2012 production. The couple are teaching 24 dancers in the Wellington-based company their roles. The season will use four casts, with the star roles – Siegfried, von Rothbart and the two swans – to be decided by the choreographer when he arrives later this month.

"The role of Siegfried is huge," says Schultz. "It's physically and emotionally exhausting to dance. But it is one of those pieces where you feel you have

taken yourself on a journey with the ballet."

Radačovský created the first duet, "White Swan", after he was discharged from hospital and became principal dancer at Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. More than a decade later, he devised the "Black Swan" duet while working with Balet Bratislava in Slovakia.

When Barker commissioned a full-length work, he included both duets, building additional scenes around them. The ballet may sound as if it's in similar territory to 2010 psychological thriller *Black Swan*, starring Natalie Portman, but Barker says they aren't connected.

"The ballet was already in the planning stages by the time the movie hit

"The role of Siegfried is huge – physically and emotionally. But it is one of those pieces where you feel you have taken yourself on a journey."

cinemas. It was a nice coincidence for our marketing team because the public had *Swan Lake* on their minds."

This is the second time Barker has brought out a Czech choreographer, after commissioning Jiří Bubeníček for the RNZB's *The Piano* last year. Asked if she is recycling ideas from her previous job, she says, "I am dedicated to bringing the very best of dance to our audiences, and proven works are a key balance to commissioned works."

Effectively, *Black Swan*, *White Swan* is attempting to mix the classic and contemporary. "I choose ballets that show the range of talent within our company," says Barker, "works that inspire and display our creativity and intelligence." ■

Black Swan, *White Swan* is at the Opera House, Wellington, May 31-June 2; Bruce Mason Centre, Auckland, June 7-8; Regent, Palmerston North, June 12; Baycourt Theatre, Tauranga, June 15-16; ASB Theatre, Auckland, June 20-22; Isaac Theatre Royal, Christchurch, June 27-29; and Regent, Dunedin, July 3.

Tribulations without trials

Belfast lawyer Steve Cavanagh has been called "the new Grisham", but he leaves the courtroom behind for his latest blockbuster thriller.

by CRAIG SISTERTON

Two women and a witness: there's always myriad factors that go into any success story, but it's safe to say that Belfast lawyer and crime writer Steve Cavanagh wouldn't have been racking up bestseller sales and accolades in recent years if it weren't for three people.

There's his wife and muse, Tracy, who's been by his side through the lows and highs, and provided both the inspiration and confidence for Cavanagh to try something quite different with his new novel, *Twisted*.

Then there's his late mother, who nudged him to chase dreams he thought impossible. "I grew up in a working-class family, I didn't know anyone with my background who'd written a book, and I certainly didn't think I could do it," Cavanagh tells the *Listener* in the lead-up to his appearance at Noireland, Belfast's international crime-fiction festival.

From the outside, the success as a writer seems meteoric. Four years ago, Cavanagh was a raw debutant; now he's among the leading lights of a new "emerald age" of quality crime storytelling from both sides of the Irish border.

The Liar, the third in his series of courtroom thrillers starring New York defence attorney Eddie Flynn, scooped the prestigious CWA Gold Dagger last year,