

## ACTIVITIES

### Plot

#### DISCUSS

Throughout Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* we journey in and out of reality; as we travel between the Prince's actual experiences and those in his mind. Discuss at what stages during the show you notice the Prince losing his grasp on reality. Also, try and identify what techniques (i.e. choreography, lighting, design) are used to help you distinguish between those altered states?

#### RESEARCH

Compare the narrative and plot structure of *Swan Lake* with other works by Bourne (for example *Cinderella*, *Red Shoes*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker!* or *The Car Man*).

Are there any similarities or differences in the way that:

- the story is structured
- the characters are portrayed
- the era and/or setting is used to reinterpret a well-known story for a modern audience

### Themes

#### DISCUSS

'Jealousy' is a key theme throughout Bourne's *Swan Lake*. Firstly, discuss all the characters whom you feel exhibit signs of jealousy within the story, and identify the things that you feel they are jealous of and why. Then discuss, how this is communicated to the audience and by what means. Think about this in terms of the action and choreography, as well as via the set and lighting design.

#### PRACTICAL TASKS

##### ACTIVITY A

Royal duty is exhibited as a heavy burden by most of the main characters' in Bourne's *Swan Lake* (most notably, of course, by the Prince, the Queen and the Private Secretary). Choose one of these characters and create a short solo by developing some of the core motifs you notice them using to exemplify their position within society and the 'pressure' this creates for them during their day to day life. For example, the way the Queen waves robotically, or the way the Prince repeatedly reaches towards the Queen in the hope of encouraging her affection.

##### ACTIVITY B

During Act One Scene 3, a mock ballet is staged that the Queen and her male escort, the Prince, the Private Secretary and the Unsuitable Girlfriend, all watch during their visit to an Opera House. Referred to as the 'Moth Ballet', this 'dance within a dance' is a parody of clichéd aspects of classical ballet performances. It is pantomime-like in its delivery with the characters all purposefully exaggerating their part.

Choose a well-known section from any classical ballet (such as *Giselle*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Don Quixote* or *Romeo & Juliet*) and create a parody of it. You might want to reimagine this excerpt using a different dance style such as:

- musical theatre
- hip-hop
- contemporary



## Characters

### PRACTICAL TASKS



#### ACTIVITY A

In Act Three Scene 2 a number of Princesses from different countries arrive at the ball with their male escorts. The guests then take part in a succession of social dances, many of which are inspired by one of the Princesses and her heritage.

Choose one of the following countries and learn a short excerpt from one of their traditional dances. You may need to watch some examples on YouTube, and may also find some useful information via the following links:

- [Hungary](#)
- [Germany](#)
- [Romania](#)
- [Spain](#)
- [Italy](#)

#### ACTIVITY B

The way the Swans move is incredibly convincing – for example, the way they tuck their head under their arms (like they are wings), the way they ‘preen’ themselves, the way they glide as though moving on water and the way they flap their ‘wings’ and leap as though taking off into flight. Pick a different animal (not a bird) and develop a series of movement gestures, that you feel encapsulate the look, feel and character of that creature.

### WRITTEN TASKS



#### ACTIVITY A

Research both personification and anthropomorphism in relation to the characters of the Swans; and identify which you feel most closely describes their role within Bourne’s *Swan Lake*. Make a list of what categorises both of these terms; and set out a strong case for why you believe one term more accurately identifies them and their behaviour. Give clear examples, from the choreography and the storyline, to back up your decision.

#### ACTIVITY B

Focusing on the role of the Unsuitable Girlfriend, create a back-story which provides more information about this character. Where does she live? What does she do for a living? How has she come to be at the palace? What has stimulated her interest in the Prince? You might also like to draw inspiration from a real or fictional character. If so, explain who your inspiration is and why?

### RESEARCH



Bourne’s *Swan Lake* explores the impact that public service and royal duty has upon those who are born into these roles. Through the main characters, we witness the effects that repression, conformity, expectation and a lack of freedom of expression, has upon them. The Queen is unable to express love for her son, the Private Secretary carries out a series of underhand acts to discredit the Prince, that he feels are incumbent on him to protect the royal family. It is the Prince however, who finds his role as the son of the ruling monarch a particularly heavy burden.

Research other stories (whether they be told through film, dance, or other mediums) where the confines of duty - royal or otherwise - have a negative impact on the main characters. Look for common threads between these narratives, and identify some of the key emotions that the characters from these stories exhibit.



MATTHEW BOURNE'S  
**SWAN  
LAKE**

**DISCUSS** 

Parallels have often been drawn between the Unsuitable Girlfriend and Fergie (Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York). Whilst Fergie was not a direct inspiration behind the character of the Prince's ill-fated love interest, comparisons were naturally made since the Duchess had been in the limelight in the years preceding the premier of *Swan Lake*. The pink puffball dress also reminded many audience members of something that Sarah Ferguson might wear.

Here in 2019, with two more recent marriages by Princes William and Harry, to Kate and Meghan respectively, the Royal Family looks and feels – and certainly promotes itself – as much more open and forward-thinking establishment. And it is certainly possible that had the show first been performed today, rather than in 1995, less analogies to the British Royal family, would have been drawn.

Discuss who you feel would be a good subject as a character study for the Unsuitable Girlfriend today. You might like to think about other Royal Families, global celebrities or fictional characters from book, stage, film or TV. Discuss in what way they might be identified as 'unsuitable' for a modern Prince; and why.

**Production Elements**

**WRITTEN TASK** 

Choose a favourite image of the *Swan Lake* from the website, that includes at least two characters on stage. Think about what the costume design tells the viewer about those characters? Write down all the various elements that convey a message about who they are – such as what the fabric choice tells us, what the era of the outfit tells us and also what we can determine from the way the costume is worn. If they are sumptuously dressed what might that indicate about their status or wealth, for example?

**DISCUSS** 

**ACTIVITY A**

If you were to redesign a costume for one of the principal roles, such as the Prince, the Queen, the Swan, the Private Secretary or the Unsuitable Girlfriend, what changes would you make and why? Think about aspects such as fabrics, cut/style, accessories (i.e. wigs) and colour choices. Also, discuss how this new design might impact the viewer's impression of the character.

**ACTIVITY B**

The design of the Swans' costumes has become the single most iconic image from Bourne's *Swan Lake*. Discuss why you think these costumes made such an impact and have become so well-known and loved. Also, explain what they make you think about and/or feel when you look at them; and why? What do they symbolise to you?

**RESEARCH** 

The way *Swan Lake* is lit by the lighting designer, helps the viewer to understand and interpret the emotion and the storyline and is a vitally important aspect of the show. Compare and contrast the lighting design from productions of *Swan Lake* by other companies. Identify any key similarities and differences between them.



MATTHEW BOURNE'S  
**SWAN  
LAKE**

## DESIGN TASK

Choose a favourite scene from the show and create an alternative set-design for that section.

Think about your design choices carefully and back them up by explaining what your set involves and how the performers may interact with it; and what its design signifies to the viewer.

For example, the Prince's bed is a recurrent piece of set, that we see both in Acts One and Four, that not only helps the audience understand where the scene is set, but also offers different levels for the performers to dance on, therefore adding visual interest. It's huge size also gives the impression of the Prince being very small when he is in it, which suggests to those watching the show that he is child-like and vulnerable.

If you prefer you may wish to make a 3-D model rather than a 2-D drawing.

## The Choreographer

### WRITTEN TASK

Use the internet to research as much as you can about three of Bourne's other major works. These might include:

- *Nutcracker!*
- *Red Shoes*
- *Cinderella*
- *Highland Fling*
- *The Car Man*
- *Lord of the Flies*
- *Edward Scissorhands*

For each show that you choose, find out what his major influences were, what era the show was set in, who the main characters were, who was the set and costume designer, the lighting designer and the sound designer; and also find at least one newspaper review for each. You might like to create a Pinterest board, as part of your visual research.

### RESEARCH

Bourne credits a number of other sources, including other dance works, plays and films, as having influenced his version of *Swan Lake*. Choose 3 from the following list and look for elements from these that you feel may have inspired him. You might like to look at various aspects such as the structure of the storyline, the choreography, the set and costume design, or the characters. Research these works online and watch excerpts if you can. You may also be able to find dance and film reviews online; which will also give you an idea about these performances.

- *Swan Lake* by Mats Ek
- *Swan Lake* by The Royal Ballet, staged by Norman Morrice
- *Swan Lake* by Scottish Ballet, choreographed by Peter Darrell
- *Equus*, a 1977 film directed by Sidney Lumet and written by Peter Shaffer
- *The Birds*, a 1963 film directed by Alfred Hitchcock and loosely based on the 1952 novel of the same name, written by Daphne Du Maurier



MATTHEW BOURNE'S  
**SWAN  
LAKE**

- *Hamlet*, by the English Touring Company at the Donmar Warehouse, with Alan Cumming in the title role

## DISCUSS

Whilst the intention behind Bourne's use of two male central characters in *Swan Lake*, was to portray the differing constructs of the Prince's known and imagined self, the show was dubbed by some as 'The Gay Swan Lake' following its 1995 premier.

Though not intentional, the fact that *Swan Lake* became meaningful for LGBTQ+ audiences, is something that the company have always celebrated; and in particular, in relation to what that message of acceptance and celebration offers to young people in the audience.

Matthew always encourages audience members to reach their own conclusions about the meaning behind his shows, and the ambiguity with which the relationship between the Prince and the Swan can be interpreted is certainly evident.

Discuss your view on the relationship between the Prince and the Swan, and what it means to you. Also discuss what if any differences there might be in the way the show would have been received, had it premiered in 2019, rather than 1995.

