

‘Grey Swan’ Log

Early April

I receive a phone call from Camilla Spidsoe with a very strange invitation: to take part in a performance by retired dancers – “the older the better” on the theme of ‘Swan Lake’. Camilla enthusiastically suggests that I present Odette’s Act 2 variation: “You can just mark it, it will be beautiful!”. I asked for some time to ponder this odd request.

Eventually, out of sheer curiosity, I decide to accept – even though I cannot think of a good reason why anyone would be interested in watching an old lady mark through a ballet solo! I persuade myself that I could keep it as a secret for myself – my students would never know!

22nd April Day 1 Studio 10

Barre + mark through the solo to remember the steps. No music.

Even a simple, basic barre becomes too much by adage. No frappé because of the arthrosis in my right ankle.

I learned the part of Odette from the great ballerina Natalia Makarova for her ENB production in the 1980’s, what is left in my body from that experience? I quickly see that marking the turning diagonal in performance without the turns makes no sense (unless it is supposed to be a comic turn) I need to do the pirouettes for the sake of the audience, but they make me so dizzy that I can’t do more than a few! Will have to adapt somehow.

Pressing artistic questions: how much ‘princess’ contra ‘swan’? How much 60-year-old woman who retired 28 years ago?? Am I ‘real’ or am I trying to create an illusion? Is it even possible for me to create an illusion of youthfulness, or will it look ridiculous? The main technical problem I notice immediately is my lack of stability – a combination of a weak, untrained ‘centre’, my increased age and lack of habit. Can I train my sense of balance again, or is it too late? What have I got myself into?

23rd April Studio 6

Barre + continue mapping out the solo.

I use my phone camera to analyse and correct the use of my weak ‘centre’ and to set the wing beats. How should I finish the solo? I am so dizzy from the turns! An uncontrolled collapse is my only option so far.

24th April Studio 10

Barre + solo in a long skirt after meeting the costume designer Ellen Ystehede.

I had already said firmly to Camilla that I would not be appearing in a tutu. My idea is to try and link ‘Odette the Swan’ with ‘Odette the medieval maiden’ by dancing an adapted version of the solo in a long, medieval-style dress. The meeting with Ellen was inspiring as she showed me a sample of white silk chiffon for the dress: “YESSSSS!!!” white silk chiffon is PERFECT! It will move beautifully and help me to give the impression of flying and floating as if I were the ghost of Odette haunting the shores of the lake. My imagination fired up, I choose again not to work with music today but simply sing the music in my mind and work out the transitions at my own pace. I am so self-conscious that I rehearse in a studio not usually used by the classical BA line to make sure my ballet students and colleagues don’t see my efforts.

25th April Studio 10

Barre + finally try with music.

Now I realise how slowly I am moving! The music (normal tempo for a young Odette) requires me to move with enormous energy even in the lyrical first parts. Shall I slow it down? I decide that I must speed up! I am still unsure how to finish it. What story am I telling?

Even as the questions and difficulties mount, I notice that I am walking faster and more decisively between 'takes' and my general, daily energy level is up. I suppose I am doing this project for myself, which is just as well, because it is still hard to see why anyone would want to buy tickets to see 60-year-old me 'half-dance'. How can I justify this selfishness? By keeping this log, I can at least call it 'research'!

Technical notes: I see from the video that I must 'drum' the *bourées* to express fear, anger, defiance with my whole body and not just my head and arms! As I dance to the music, the double *rond de jambes* happen 'by themselves' by force of habit (from thirty years ago!), I decide to keep them, even though it is harder to control my balance.

My ankle is sore and swollen but the dreaded muscle pains from pushing untrained muscles have not appeared. I put this down to my conscious (and loud) use of breathing during the barre and during the solo: I have never experienced so little muscle pain when coming back to dancing previously, which is a strange but very welcome turn of events.

29th April Studio 6

Barre + continued work.

As I get deeper into the solo, I need to clarify some transitional moments between sections as Odette soliloquizes about her love for Siegfried, her fear of Rothbart and her longing for love and freedom. When the music starts, my arms take on a life of their own and I do not always manage to do what I had worked out beforehand. I need to listen to these instincts as I see from the videos that there is not only one 'right' way. However, I still feel that I am improvising too much and that I need to be clearer and more in control of my movements when I go onstage.

31st April Studio 4

Barre + solo in a big studio.

Today was a shock! Dancing in the big space of Studio 4 makes much heavier demands on my stamina and I find myself unequal to the task. I need to stay later in the day every day to ensure that I can work in a big space from now on. I start to feel the handicap of my right ankle, which affects my ability to balance, *plié* and go on half *pointe*.

But generally, I feel more alert and energetic. This has been a good experience to push myself and see what I can do.

2nd May Studio 2

Barre + tick-tock sounds at beginning and end of the solo.

I went to Petter Wiik, our KHiO music technician and asked him to add sounds of a ticking clock to the beginning and end of the solo. My Princess Odette is trying to stop Time/Rothbart from destroying her. This is the only way I can make sense of appearing in front of an audience at the age of 60. I need to reconcile the incongruity of being old and

trying to appear young. I try different endings collapsing/stiffening/shrivelling showing Time/Old Age taking me over – except that I look more like 90 than 60!
I see that the concept could work well dramatically for me with more fine-tuning. It is beginning to come together.

4th May Home

Sent the new music file to Camilla and producer Yakob. They don't accept my changes and tell me to 'keep it simple'. It's a shame, but as I haven't had any meeting with Camilla since the project was broached, I have no idea what anyone else is doing! Apparently, Camilla, Ole Willy, Yoel and Yolanda have everything worked out but haven't yet communicated it to me. Oh well, even without the clock sounds I can still have them in my mind and use the idea to make my interpretation stronger. I am not disposed to argue as I am not yet clear what the context is, and it is not my project. I'll just go with the flow but I am a little disheartened.

5th May Studio 2

Barre + no tick-tocks.

Ankle was sore today, despite taking the weekend off.

Worked out a little curving walk to get into the solo from upstage centre. Settled on a self-protective pose at the end, which will not be over-dramatic (collapse) or unrealistic to achieve ('flying relevé arabesque, as per some current Swan Queens). Asked my orthopedic surgeon for more ankle pills: I need them this week as the ankle has given some nasty, sharp pains when I accidentally twist it while teaching. While I am dancing, it is simply sore and stiff. If my ankle were healthy, I could do a lot more with the solo as I would be able to *plié*, *relevé* and generally be more stable.

6th May Studio 3

Barre + invited Tim Almaas (husband and dancing partner) to give me some feedback.
2nd fitting during lunchtime with Ellen.

My mind goes to the Pre-Raphaelite paintings I have always loved, and one in particular: 'Ophelia' by J.W. Waterhouse. This lovely painting shows a soulful maiden in a medieval gown with oversleeves that are turned back to hang down by the elbow. I show it to Ellen and to the maker, Carina who skillfully mocks up the idea with some spare silk. If we can get them right, these sleeves will give the impression of wings gently floating behind me as I dance.

I try rehearsing in the 'RAD teacher-style' shoes in beige that will give me a little more height and a little more *plié* because of the 1cm heels. As they are higher than my usual rundown jazz shoes, these threw my fragile sense of balance for a while, but I became used to them.

Tim's tips:

- Hair should be UP
- Put weight entirely over the front leg before brushing for *rond de jambes* (suddenly, my legs went higher!)
- Do soft *arabesques á terre* instead of attempting *piqué arabesque*
- Use more *épaulement* and walk between sections
- Instead of *piqués*, GENTLY jump the *sissonnes* (jump...on this ankle?)
- Wings slightly behind the body when walking

- Hold my back when in deep *tombés* and turn the shoulders more to achieve a longer line
 - Smoother *tour piqués dehors* (I STILL hate that step)
 - Stop bouréeing and HOLD the big wing beat with my back to the audience
 - Use low arms for the final turning *bourées*
 - Slightly change the final pose
 - Rethink the mood of the dance: allow myself to dream and be ecstatically carried away by my memories of dancing (“an old lady in her armchair, remembering”) rather than flap in defiance at an imaginary Rothbart.
- I have yet to see the videos from the rehearsal, but it was lighter and easier to dance that way. Isn't that sentimental and indulgent, though? Shouldn't I still try to give the audience something more substantial than wafting around pleasing myself?

Collected the fresh medicine this evening and hope that it will help the arthrosis pain. Now I have looked at the films and see a lot of improvement with Tim's coaching. A teaser has appeared on Instagram, and the students are asking questions. Oh dear.

8th May Studio 1

Barre + brief rehearsal to practice Tim's suggestions and make transitions easier between the sections to help my stamina and save my ankle. Decided on the ending of the solo, which will be two gestures: 'maiden dreaming, swan flying'.

I rested the ankle yesterday, and then did only a brief, light barre and a short rehearsal today to ensure that I keep the inflammation at bay. Tim's changes felt good, including the *sissonnes*. I have always loved to jump and find that I can manage pairs of light, bouncy jumps, if I time them well with the music. I found a more comfortable way to join the two jumping diagonals together inspired by Irina, who had asked me to look at her own choreography for 'Rothbart's Shadow'. I found that her beautiful and powerful movements helped me to try something different and land on more natural solutions for myself. A chat with Camilla at lunchtime also confirmed that I can continue with my idea of Maiden/Swan to help link the Prologue with the strongly swanlike movements of Yolanda, Irina and Camilla in the two *pas de deux*. Maybe it will turn out OK, after all? Camilla talks about us all being 'ghosts' of the various characters, which is a poetic and inspiring thought and links perfectly with Tim's suggestion that I take a more dreamy and romantic approach and my idea of the ghost of Odette haunting the lakeside. This suits my dancing style, and I am happy to develop this idea.

Looking at the films, I am surprised in good and bad ways: I see certain movements that look light, graceful and flowing, I see others that look vague and where the intention is unclear. My hands are sometimes expressive and sometimes only spikey. My *sissonnes* are low, considering the amount of effort going into them! My runs are careful and rather stiff, and my waistline looks thicker than it feels. It's hard to connect the old, wrinkly face talking to camera with myself but I am strangely unbothered by these hard truths. I suppose I have simply accepted my imperfections because I am too lazy/busy with other things to do anything about them! I am, after all spending most of my time teaching and coaching (and selling our house).

I must remember that the dress will help greatly with creating the illusion of lightness and 'ghostliness' and I must simply work with it and not trip over it during the few minutes of dancing.

9th May Studio 3

Light barre + run through solo.

Extra attention to my 'favourite step (NOT)': *tour piqué dehors*. After a good deal of analysis, I discover that I need to 'float' the step without a deep *plié* but rather use my feet intensively to make it smooth and swift. This is because I am not picking up the feet very high and need to make the sequence seamless. This saves me a lot of energy, which is very good news because I was barely able to get through it today! I REALLY notice when I have eaten too little for lunch. Nowadays, I have no reserves of energy or strength in the muscles – when I'm running on empty, then I have no 'push'. I am getting more ambitious and more critical too, as the body becomes used to the basic pattern of the movements and I am not dizzy from the turns -although I STILL make mistakes because I keep making small changes and improvements. Mental rehearsal used to work more efficiently than it does now!

I'm still rather unsure how 'beautiful' I should be: Tim's advice to ecstatically reminisce over my dancing experience might be at odds with the 'story' of the other sections. I guess I will get notes on that on Sunday when we get together for the first and only rehearsal before stage.

How will it hold together as a performance? We haven't rehearsed together yet, so all we can do now is to follow our instincts, trust our professionalism and make the best of whatever happens in the moment. My main concerns are much more pressing: get through the solo without forgetting it/falling over the dress/expiring halfway through. Went shopping for pancake, eyelashes, bun ring, loose hair and other beauty products. No Lechner greasepaint sticks in Oslo! Tried the bun ring, expecting it to be very unwieldy but it worked very well.

10th May Studio 3

Light barre + two run throughs.

I have landed on the final version; the ankle is holding up OK, if I don't repeat too many times and accept that I can't fully point it in the warm-up. Stamina is still 'on the edge of possible' but I'm trusting that adrenalin will give me enough boost to do it well once, when it counts. I am using my 'centre' better and finding that I can more deeply feel and control technical subtleties by the day - I am experiencing the learning curve that many of my Year 1 students go through, and this is valuable for me as a teacher.

I notice that I have a little lazy voice in my head that says, "Do less" and "Rehearse less" but once I get going, then I manage to do what is necessary. However, this does help me not to overwork because my body is weak, and I cannot push myself relentlessly the way I used to thirty years ago when I would work privately on Sundays and in holidays. I need to get over the guilt of not pushing myself to the edge every day! When I manage a run through and remember everything, I begin to feel the ecstasy of moving, jumping and travelling within the sound world of Tchaikovsky's magnificent score; I feel myself 'inside' the music, breathing the magical air of his Romantic masterpiece. The final gestures of the solo have now morphed into: "*I am a swan*".

11th May Studio 3

Light barre + General Rehearsal at the KHiO studios with the full cast (except for Karin who will join us on Monday), in costume.

The first time I have seen what they are doing, and vice versa. We learned the sequence we will all perform at curtain up and which will tie the performance together. I launched into the solo and the white silk chiffon did its job helping the solo to gain lightness and a floating quality. My colleagues applauded and Camilla was in tears, much to my astonishment. During the first run, I nearly expired with nerves and breathlessness but when we did the second run through, I finally managed to pace it better. Exhaustion is very effective in removing unnecessary tension and helping relaxation and breathing. I am happy that linking Maiden/Swan in this variation seems to help the piece to hang together, and that the medieval references in the costume (including hanging sleeves) are accepted. The train at the back is too long, however, and will be adjusted: the underwear question is still unsolved, and I need to have extra elastic support so that my feet don't slide around inside the shoes. Health-wise, the ankle has held up remarkably well, considering I did two run throughs full out (16 *sissonnes*!) the rest of my body is fine.

Producer, Yakob seems to be a kind and down-to-earth sort, bringing smoothies, nuts and fruit for us all. The cameraman, Christian, unobtrusively filmed us from various angles, which didn't bother me at all. I am surprisingly relaxed about the whole process, compared with my former, perfectionist, never-satisfied younger self. Perhaps this is because I no longer expect very much of my dancing self – hence my acceptance of my present limited abilities. Yakob sent us the film of the (second) run through, which I have downloaded and filed in the Project folder but which I have not looked at. I think that I will perhaps leave it that way until after the performance as I feel that I need to rely on my instincts onstage in the lights, mist effects etc.

I made sure that Yakob knows to check out the angles of the lights (not too much from the side, for the sake of my stability) and that he checks what kind of mist will be used: I told him to check with Operaen so that we don't get a slippery, oil-based type (cue, hilarious memories of a cascade of ENB Sylphs sliding on their rear ends in a memorable performance of 'La Sylphide' on tour).

Tried out make-up at home: Mac matt liquid pancake seems to be effective. Not sure yet whether to use some light eyelashes at the corners of my eyes or leave it at eyeliner. Irina and Yoel both commented that I should wear my hair in a bun "Always". Back to a bunhead after thirty-two years?!

Yolande and I will use body whitening pancake to enhance the illusion of our Swans. We agreed that the concept of transforming ourselves to create an illusion of ethereality is part of the delight of being a theatrical performer: to quote Shakespeare: for us, "*the play's the thing*".

12th May Studio 1

Light barre, run through + details.

The ankle is very sore today after Sunday, and I am rehearsing more out of a sense of duty rather than feeling that I can make much progress today. Rather than panicking as I

might have done years ago, I put this 'flat' feeling down to the familiar dip in energies that precedes a première. In this case, the première is also the farewell performance, although I see it only as a bonus chance to have a final performance because my retirement all those years ago was a painful withdrawal due to a serious groin injury. I resolve to take a double dose of my anti-inflammatory medicine to give myself a chance of performing decently tomorrow. I never dreamt of having a come-back, being completely absorbed in the business of teaching and coaching. I am curious to see what the students make of it all – they are apparently extremely excited.

13th May – Performance day

Taught morning class as usual, although I had to sing the accompaniment as no pianist was available. I prefer to do this rather than become a slave to taped music that might not support the intentions behind my exercises. In any case, I had no time to think about being nervous as I was fully taken up with keeping the rhythm for the dancers and trying to word individual corrections to fit with the 'song'! Class was then followed by the first studio run through of our Summer performance with all KHiO students involved. Again, there was plenty to keep me occupied.

Irina and I then made our way to Konserthuset to see for the first time the stage that we were to appear on in the evening. The wide and shallow stage was a good size with close contact with the wide and shallow auditorium – which looked festive with all the seats draped with goody bags. I was glad that I had pushed myself to rehearse in big studios during my preparations as I would need plenty of stamina to skim across the space as I had planned! We women did our hair and convened onstage for spacing. After this, costumes on for the lighting call. Lighting calls are often drawn-out affairs, with dancers standing around waiting for the technicians and this was no exception. We dancers kept our anxiety and frustration in check by cracking jokes and staying relaxed. Ellen was concerned that the lighting might make my flowing white silk chiffon dress too transparent – it was clear that Ellen was more concerned to protect my modesty than I was! Our 'dancer aesthetic' emphasises showing the body in movement, and I had to reassure her that it was fine for the audience to see the outline of my legs through the dress. We then semi-danced through the performance twice with two cameramen moving around onstage with us. This was a surreal experience for me, and I am not sure how they managed to be so close to me without us all tripping over one another! As my ankle was going from bad to worse, I saved the jumps in the solo for the actual performance, praying that I could just make it through, somehow. By this time, we had only 60 minutes after the lighting call to eat, rest/warm up and put on makeup. I realized that, for the first time, I would have to dance the solo without my customary, 25-minute warm up making do with sporadic *tendus* and stretches wherever there was space. Even with this, I was calm and wondering when or if I would get an attack of nerves? I stood in the wings, hearing the audience filing in, feeling my tired and 'empty' legs and my aching ankle. But then, finally, as the cellist began to play, I felt the familiar pounding of my heart and crackle of adrenalin through my body. Instead of feeling afraid and trying to push it away, I welcomed the arrival of my 'superpower': THIS would carry my tired legs through the few minutes of dancing that I had in front of me! The curtain went up. As I began the solo, I arrived in that welcome state of extreme alertness and serenity in which I could 'create' my performance in the moment, connecting music, emotion and muscles exactly as I chose, varying the dynamics and expression in a natural flow.

This state of 'flow' had been so very hard to achieve as dancer in my prime so I savoured every moment of it. This was the reward for a long life onstage squeezed into three, short weeks of preparation, guided by instinct and experience.

The performance went well. The theatre was full: 1500 people came to see our 'experiment' and their warmth and support was tangible from the beginning. The whole cast gave that 'little bit extra' and we received an extremely enthusiastic response, which was even more welcome for its unexpectedness.

Afterwards, our students crowded backstage, many were highly emotional and moved to tears. I was surprised and touched.

Pictures of Irina, Yoel and me afterwards show our huge, relieved smiles – we managed it and in the end nobody died.

Afterword

The day after was class as usual. I took some time to ask my Year 1 students for their thoughts and encouraged them to ask questions. We talked about 'putting yourself into your dancing', artistic aims, performance nerves, using imagination in your dancing, acknowledging personal limitations and being creative within them, my childhood fascination with fairytales and folklore, and more.

Thank you, Camilla Spidsoe for inviting me to take part in the experiment and for your loving support. Thank you, Nycoplus for taking the bold decision to show older dancers onstage. I am grateful that I have had a chance to express my abiding passion for dancing one last time.