

Hold Me

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It's the arms that punch me in the gut. His arms.

They move. They move me.

One of them juts sternly forward, wrist quietly pointing away, while the other hovers calmly above his head. A black stroke cuts from the swan's head to the nose, his brooding eyes staring forward, his armpit hair an unruly mass. But it's the arms.

They move. They move me.

They wave behind the swan; they are wings. They lift the partner; they are arms. And when they extend from a pulsating time bomb of pure masculinity, they are purveyors of power and terrible domination. And dominate they do as soon as the prince (his lover? his competition? both?) enters the pond. The swan grabs the prince and pulls him in with devastating mastery, and after the two have swashed across the stage with a quiet aggression and pent-up ardor, the swan picks up the prince, curling him in the fetal position. It is a haunting image, one of great sadness, pain, and beauty.

Such is the world choreographer Matthew Bourne created in his much-praised reimagination of the Tchaikovsky ballet *Swan Lake*. Originally staged in 1996 in London and subsequently produced on Broadway and around the world, Bourne's *Swan Lake* created a barrage of attention for its homosexual overtones and brilliant staging. Bourne lifted *Swan Lake* from its classic heterosexual strictures and reinvigorated it; the clearest evidence of this elevation can be seen in the homoeroticism of the central relationship. Two male lovers in the middle of *Swan Lake* give the piece a dangerous tilt, an exciting edge of zing.

In his most intriguing works, Bourne is interested in movement and touch. Sometimes gentle, often surprising, and always arresting, the slight grazes or assertive grabs communicate story and character while both unsettling and thrilling an audience. When the swan holds the prince, when Edward Scissorhands maneuvers his hands around his lover, when the Nutcracker pierces the sky holding Clara, we as an audience gasp with quiet

exhilaration. Something primal has been tapped: we watch the dancers perform and crave the clutch or the fondle they feel. We may not register it physically or even understand it intellectually, but we do receive those fondles and clutches—the drop of a stomach or the short gasp we utter proves as much. Watching a touch onstage, the performers touch us, and we touch back. It is an unspoken, sensual, and deeply aesthetic communion. We are stirred.

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Bourne grew up an outsider. Mocked by fellow schoolchildren for his love of singing and theater, as a boy he would retreat from his home in Walthamstow, England, to frequent the stage doors of London theaters. Something of an anomaly, he choreographed small dances with siblings and friends. In a funny foreshadowing of his work on *Swan Lake*, he even staged a cross-gender neighborhood production of *Cinderella* (Macaulay 4). His later work is informed by this past—almost every piece revolves around some kind of ‘fitting in.’ Characters may be estranged from the world by choice, by nature, by custom, or by upbringing, but the aching need to *belong* is always present. Even *Mary Poppins* (2004), a gargantuan musical that successfully inhibits the inventiveness and beauty Bourne’s work can have, revolves around this tension: original supernanny Mary Poppins sits comfortably above the family she administers, shoving sugar down throats and streaking via umbrella into the sky. Her touches are quick slaps, momentary shots of judgment. The result? We *like* Mary, we have a *fondness* for her, but she isn’t *beloved*. Instead of using touch as a profound moment of connection, Bourne here shows us how touch can betray intimacy.

Bourne acknowledges in his work that we are all outsiders, that when we don’t fit in, the pounding of our hearts makes us more alive, more open. And in this openness and vulnerability, the brief brush we have with a beloved or an enemy is all the more erotic and frightening—the touch pierces. For Bourne, the *pas de deux* (a dance duet) represents the least adulterated, most thrilling and penetrating instant of touch. Bourne’s *pas de deux* are almost always played out on a nearly bare stage, superfluous parts of the storyline literally retreating into the wings. Nothing but the intersection of bodies is of any importance. The offbeat ballet *Edward Scissorhands* (2005), a stage adaptation of Tim Burton’s 1990 film of the same name, beautifully illustrates this aesthetic along with Bourne’s fascination with the moment when two people move alone in harmony.

Edward Scissorhands understands full well the vulnerability that comes with being an outsider. Patched together in a Frankenstein-like manner, Edward has scissors in place of fingers. He waves them, and they glisten threateningly in the sunlight. He looks at them perplexedly: “Are those things really affixed to my body?” he seems to ask. When Edward finally gets his first moment alone with his love interest Kim, it’s more than a little bit dangerous. Dancing through the falling snow around an ice sculpture, the lovers must navigate a very real physical impediment that has the potential to jab Kim right through the heart.

Of course that doesn’t happen, and what follows is a marvelously sweet sequence. Edward and Kim gently brush and run from each other, darting and spinning around the central block of ice. They bolt apart to either end of the stage, then come together for a delicate lift, Edward nervously raising Kim to the jet blue winter sky. Once they finish their tumbling spins and childish scampers, they breathe a sigh of relief: no one is hurt.

Or are they? They both know *something* has happened. Yes, the lovers are physically intact, but something inside has clearly been broken. For a brief, brilliant moment Edward and Kim belonged, really wholly belonged—to each other, to their world, and to us. In their instant, the walls of defense came cracking down to expose a warm, quiet, hidden spirit. An act of touch, it seems, is also an act of destruction. It hurts. Being together onstage has *cost* the couple something. That flash when separate entities rub together kills a little piece of each party. No longer can Edward and Kim claim innocence; no more can they languish in a place of inertia. They are pushed forward to some kind of consequence . . . and know it. A new *now* is in place.

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Edward and Kim are transgressing in this moment of connection, standing up to a world that forbids their communion because they are different. But it’s the forbidden part of the relationship that makes it so exciting and ultimately moving. Isn’t this always the case? We pine for the unreachable; the pit of our gut aches with desire, anger, and jealousy for what we are denied. Jeanette Winterson says as much in “The Semiotics of Sex” when she tells us that “complex emotion is pivoted around the forbidden. When I feel the complexities of a situation I am feeling the many-sidedness of it, not the obvious smooth shape, grasped at once and easily forgotten” (357). Winterson’s language is metaphorical, but it might as well apply on a literal level to a physical touch. When sheltered, little Clara is first exposed to the

almost stupefying beauty of the mysterious and terrifying title character of *Nutcracker!* (1992), another Bourne reinterpretation; she quakes with excitement and fear. Shirtless and flexing, Nutcracker is the forbidden fruit now within her grasp, the sensual feast she has quietly lusted after. He stirs within her the first glimmer of sexual awakening, and it is almost too much for her to bear; she quivers nearly to the point of collapsing. When Clara finally touches Nutcracker's toned physique, she quite literally feels the "many-sidedness" Winterson mentions; she physically assesses the "complexities of a situation" by running her hands round his torso. Finally getting the touch she has wanted, the barrage of confusing responses startles and surprises Clara. "Complex emotion" is almost too mild a term for the child: the wave of fright, ecstasy, petrification, and bliss, all from a single touch, is more like paralyzing pandemonium. She has bitten the apple.

So too has Bourne. Winterson says any artist must do as much: "The artist imagines the forbidden because to her it is not forbidden" (358). Being a creator, it seems, allows the unimaginable to be realized and the prohibited to be permissible. This forbidden operates on several levels for Bourne. His *characters* engage in off-limits behavior (homosexuality, acceptance of outcasts), and his *ballets* both violate the preconceived scenarios of classic dances *and* appeal to the general, non-dance-minded public. T. S. Eliot, however, reminds us where this rebelliousness must be grounded: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of this relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (619). Eliot mandates that merely going for the forbidden isn't enough; an artist must understand what is *behind* him so that he might go forward. Eliot complements and balances Winterson in this claim, and Bourne's forward *and* backward focuses show him to be fully conscious of both lines of thinking. Bourne is always aware and respectful of his dance tradition—rarely does he greatly deviate from established ballet motions—but he uses those motions in surprising, compelling, and, yes, unusual ways. He employs his heritage to find the kernel hidden so deep within a work so as to be considered untouchable . . . and he touches it.

This audacity, one that would go so far as to question the sexuality of *Swan Lake*'s prince, is partially enabled by Bourne's own sensibility and biography. A gay man, Bourne has said, "I don't need to have gone through things in my life to put them on the stage. But at [the time of *Swan Lake*'s production], yes, this did seem a more personally 'felt' piece in some respects. When I was making it, I had had a lot of rejections; and I hadn't been in a relation-

ship for a while—before which I’d gone through a difficult ending to a long-term relationship” (Macaulay 192). Bourne was emboldened and equipped by his own background to infuse a sense of tragic specificity into his work. But Winterson reminds us that “the most powerful written work [for our purposes, dance] masquerades as autobiography. It offers itself as raw when in fact it is sophisticated. It presents itself as a kind of diary when really it is an oration” (353). More is happening onstage than simple biographical metaphor. Almost paradoxically, Bourne’s particular personal experience is the entry point for reaching a very broad audience. The biographical touch moves the audience.

They move. They move me.

A fan of movie musicals and theater, Bourne says that the defining moment of his young life came when, as a nineteen-year-old, he attended a daylong marathon of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers’s dance films: “From that day onwards, I was absolutely convinced that [dance] was what I wanted to do. I was surprised that this was what I wanted to do. I was so surprised at the variety and the seriousness of the work in the films. It was so rich” (qtd. in Macaulay 9). The subtlety and unexpectedness of Astaire’s work was a revelation, prompting Bourne to forgo traditional higher education for odd jobs in London. He was soon accepted at Laban Dance Center, where he received his first formal dance training. At Laban, Bourne studied a broad spectrum of styles instead of one particular tradition. Of the training Bourne says, “We never got to be great at one particular technique; but at least we learnt to be adaptable and versatile. So, when you left the Center, you could choose the technique that you knew felt best for you” (31). While a number of these techniques interested Bourne, it is ballet that has most heavily influenced his professional work.

The touches in ballet are specific, strong, and graceful. There is nothing casual about the lifts and spins that were born in Renaissance Italy and the court of French King Louis XIV. No, dancers must train constantly to build up the stamina needed to achieve the precision demanded by their technique. It is a technique that has valued discipline since its beginnings in L’Académie royale de danse (The Royal Academy of Dance), founded by Louis XIV in 1661 (Au). The discipline and strength built in this and subsequent schools imbues movements with a tense, rock-solid power. The kind of eroticism that comes from such a touch is, quite logically, very precise. There are no light grazes or ambiguous brushes, only carefully planned collisions of force. Such

touches lack some of the youthful energy of other styles, but make up for this with a very adult sensibility—the relationships look more mature. This adult understanding is also on display in Bourne’s original inspirations, Astaire and Rogers. Their movements brought together the age-old power found in ballet with a contrasting flair. Their dance is sensual, engaging, and fun . . . but watch a number of their combinations and note how infrequently they touch. Their passion is one that needs no entangled bodies or groping limbs. A defined no-man’s land between them makes their lack of touch surprising, different, distinctive. Just as any touch of ballet is carefully calculated, so too is the Astaire/Rogers *lack* of touch meticulously maintained.

But who touches whom *where*? The rush of a caress, the sting of a slap, the strength of a lift—these all need a venue. For Bourne that venue has been (mostly) the capitalist sphere of commercial theater. His shows have played on the West End, on Broadway, and in large touring spaces around the globe. In a world where artists often feel they must choose between art and commerce, Bourne has coolly chosen both. *Swan Lake*, for example, got rave reviews upon opening and still produces a steady cash flow from touring companies, some eleven years after it opened. That a nineteenth-century ballet with homoerotic undertones could attract such a following is remarkable. Clearly, Bourne knows something about moving an audience, about touching them in a visceral way. Clearly, Bourne knows what combinations attract large audiences.

Dance has always been a curious combination of the populist and the elite. From ballets to cornfield square dances and everything in between, its appeal is broad. Bourne understands this, and wants to access that part of each of us that wants to sway to a beat and tap to a tune. He goes for populism in its purest and most noble form, reaching as many people as possible. He says as much in interviews: “I’m interested in what draws a big audience” (qtd. in Macaulay 285). Perhaps this is the lingering influence of Astaire and Rogers. Just as they presented dance to the masses in popular movie musicals, so too does Bourne introduce his ballets in popular venues to unsuspecting audiences. He knows his shows are for *them*. He makes the deeply moving *pas de deux* in *Swan Lake* accessible by broadening its scope: he lets us into that beautiful moment by reminding us that it is *forbidden* love we are witnessing, not just a homosexual experience some might find off-putting. In a recent *New Yorker* article, Bourne reveals the importance of intermissions: “At the interval, [audience members will] talk to each other and say, ‘What do you think?’ and ‘I think I quite like it.’ Then they go back, and in the second half they’re always more demonstrative, because they’ve talked to their friends

and decided that it's O.K. to enjoy it" (Acocella 40). Bourne doesn't look down on his patrons; he leads them through a new world, all the while thanking them for the risk they have taken in coming to an innovative art form. In that same article Bourne recalls sitting with an audience during one of his shows. As the people around him silently leaned forward at the climactic moment, he "realized that that was a big part of why people came to the theatre—to have this gut-wrenching emotion. And I saw that I could give it to them. I could move people, and I wanted to" (Acocella 40). Bourne watches us as we watch his work. And not from the back of the theater, not from a distant monitor, but among us. And *that* is how he can move us . . . by sitting in the adjacent seat, pulling at our hearts and punching us in the gut, by opening us to the possibilities of unrealized dreams, by pulling us close.

That is, of course, what all dance is inevitably about. Getting close for a moment of touch where we aren't alone. Dying a little inside, but somehow coming out more alive. Exhilarated and confused, teetering and about to fall at any moment. Maneuvering our own scissors, confronting our own swans, and trying briefly to escape the inevitable loneliness that comes along with being an individual. We may choose to live as half a pair, touching more frequently on physical and emotional levels, but, when push comes to shove, a furtive 'see you in the morning' betrays our highest ideals. So, that fleeting moment in the theater is of cosmic importance—for two to three hours we touch a thousand others. We brush against each other, we feel the performers, and we are touched.

The swan is still pulling the prince in, mothering, defeating, and loving him. Arms clutching the swan's neck, the prince is drowning in the grasp of his partner. He needs him; he fears him. It makes my breath tremble.

They move. They move me.

No, that's not right—those around me are trembling, too.

They move *us*.

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