

Symbols of the Soviet Empire: Dying Swan

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One of the best-known symbols of the former Soviet epoch is its classical ballet. Although classical ballet was a heritage of pre-Revolutionary Russia, it was later accepted by the new system. Thanks to the great support of the imperial government, which spent an enormous amount of money for its development and invited the best European ballet teachers to Russia, a special trend in ballet was formed, which was later called the Russian School. This Russian School of classic dance developed further during the time of the Soviet Union. Similar to what occurred in the imperial epoch, this sphere of culture has become one of the most advanced here and also very well known abroad. In my paper I will try to explain the reasons behind such a preference.

Following Yuri Lotman (1998), who compared the 19th-century Russian military parade to ballet, we can try to establish a certain similarity between the Soviet ballet and the Soviet Army. In his article 'Theatre and Theatricality in the Order of Early Nineteenth Century Culture' (*Театр и театральность в строе культуры начала XIX века*), Yuri Lotman says that the 19th-century military parade in Russia was oriented toward *corps de ballet*, where the Emperor played the role of the director and the army was like a huge ballet troupe. Every parade was considered a grandiose performance which expressed the idea of autocracy on a daily basis (Lotman 1998: 631). Yuri Lotman noticed that some Russian tsars were balletophiles, and Boris Eifman caught this idea from Paul I and choreographed the piece *Russian Hamlet* (*Русский Гамлет*, 1999), which is devoted to the course of the Emperor's life.

Both the army parade and the ballet performance are examples of the highest discipline and regularisation. And this is relevant both to the monarchy and Communist dictatorships. What is particularly important is that both above-mentioned dictatorships were actually stratocracies. The Soviet state from its very beginning was a highly militarised society. Order and discipline were constantly

worshipped, although not always followed. The military model was also applied in the sphere of child-rearing, finding its climax in *Zarnitsa*-like militarised games and militarised summer camps, such as Artek. In every school, and especially in the ballet schools, there was strict regimentation and a uniform timetable, and the whole system worked just like in the army. Such ideas as ‘all as one’, and ‘don’t try to differ, be like all the others’ became the principal slogans of socialist life. Although it sounds paradoxical, all these features belong to the structural basis of classical ballet.

The main principle of the visual structure in both the parade and the mass scenes of ballet is the visual similarity of performers. This was achieved with the help of organised and regulated masses of people, wearing the same clothes (uniform/costumes), appearing identical to each other and doing the same movements in the same rhythm. Thus, for example, the *corps de ballet* presents a rigidly regulated mass of identical male or female dancers, moving on the stage in rigid lines, rows or columns, dancing in a circle, square, rectangle and so on. And we all know the columns of the military parade, which march in front of our eyes in a very strict order. We can also mention that the military parade was very often followed by a procession of athletes, forming different patterns and colourful figures. Sometimes even special mobile decorations were involved, clearly reminiscent of the Late Medieval and Early Renaissance dance processions and masquerades. In this context even military equipment – rockets and tanks – were a part of the decoration.

Théophile Gautier, the author of the libretto to the famous romantic ballet *Giselle*, wrote about Russian ballet dancers that there was no other *corps de ballet* which could be compared to the Russian one in speed, unity and accuracy of movements. He was pleased to see ideally straight rows and clear groups, which split only at the required moment to re-form another figure. He wrote: ‘Those small beating time legs, those choreographic battalions never make mistakes in their manoeuvres! They do not exchange a word or a smile with one another, do not send a wink to the proscenium or orchestra. This is a real world of pantomime, where the word is absent; the action does not leave the established frames.’ (Quoted in Timofeyeva 1993: 163–164.¹) Here we notice how often this famous ballet librettist uses military terms while describing the *corps de ballet* dances.

¹ All translations by the author of the article.

There is also a distinct structure of the show – a scenario. There is no freedom for performers, no improvisation is allowed, and any error or deviation is considered aesthetically ugly. The idea of beauty amounts to following the rules. Each person is just a small screw in the huge mechanism (Lotman 1998: 630–632).

Also, if we turn to the method of ballet teaching and everyday ballet training – an exercise – we can see that it is based on unity and equality. Every day dancers come to the class and at first they all stand near the barre practising concrete movements together, under the instruction of a pedagogue. Because of such training, the body of the dancer evolves into a regular body, subservient to a general law, just as in the army.

So, the army and ballet became a kind of ‘façade’ of the Soviet Union. When it was necessary to demonstrate to important foreign guests the strength and power of the country, they were invited to a military parade or a ballet performance (Vladimir Vysotsky — a very popular Soviet actor and singer wrote these ironic words in his song: *даже в области балета мы впереди планеты всей* – ‘even in the sphere of ballet we are leading the whole world’).

Swan Lake (*Лебединое озеро*) became the most popular ballet at that time. In a way, it was the emblem of the Soviet Union and one of the exemplary export goods. And it was considered to be loved by all the Soviet people as well. It was usually shown to all kinds of eminent foreign guests and during all international tours. I would like to mention the creative work of Maya Plisetskaya, one of the most famous ballet dancers of Soviet times. In her memoirs she writes that she danced *Swan Lake* for 30 years (1947–1977) and performed it nearly 800 times all over the world (Plisetskaya 1996: 114). Maya Plisetskaya mentions some of the important guests who attended her performances at the Bolshoi Theatre, among them Marshal Josip Broz Tito, Jawaharlal Nehru (in 1955 he visited Artek as well), Indira Gandhi, the Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the American general George Marshall, the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President of Afghanistan Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan and others. One such guest was Mao Zedong. When he arrived and it was proposed that he visit a Bolshoi Theatre ballet performance, he chose *Swan Lake* (Plisetskaya 1996: 118).

It is also interesting that parades were mostly a part of celebrations and holidays – such as Victory Day (May 9) and Labour Day (May 1) – and here we should mention that almost all major holidays of the Soviet time were somehow

marked with the idea of a fight, the battlefield of good and evil, and life-sacrifice, especially Victory Day and the October Revolution celebration. This was even expressed in popular songs accompanying these celebrations (*Вставай, проклятием заклейменный!* – ‘Arise, ye prisoners of starvation!’, *Смело, товарищи в ногу!* – ‘Courageously, comrades, walk apace!’, *Это праздник со слезами на глазах* – ‘It’s a celebration with tears in the eyes’, – the last one is perhaps the most precise formula); ballet performances used to be broadcast on television on days of official mourning and funerals, and, what is very important, among those usually broadcast was *Swan Lake*. At the very beginning of its long history, we can find an example of its strange but cogent interaction with death. Seventeen years after its premiere, in 1894, Lev Ivanov’s restaged choreography for the second act of *Swan Lake* was first seen at a memorial concert devoted to the death of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Although all the previous productions were unsuccessful, this one, which was later made into a full evening by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, remains the basis for all other reconstructions.

During the Soviet era, *Swan Lake* accompanied Leonid Breznev’s funeral on TV as well as the funerals of all his successors. The day of the death of any dictator was supposed to be a national tragedy. Every single citizen of the USSR had to experience it personally, according to Soviet ideology. *Swan Lake* was best suited to express the sorrow because its original libretto contained the concept of the lake of tears, where the main character – the White Swan – was hidden (Gayevsky 2000: 116). It is also important to consider the semiotic sense of a lake as a kind of border between two different worlds.

Swan Lake was shown during the putsch, on the last day of the USSR, August 19, 1991. This demonstrates one very remarkable connotation of the meaning of this ballet during Soviet times: it served as a cloak, with the television screen masking reality. This fact was reflected by the film-makers of *Caucasian Prisoner* (*Кавказская пленница*²) in 1966. During the staging of the vendetta of the two heroes on the villain, *Swan Lake* is being broadcast on television and the whole scene is accompanied by the music of *Swan Lake: Мы пришли, чтобы судить тебя по закону гор! В морге тебя переоденут!* (‘We have come to judge you under the law of the mountains! They will change your clothes in the morgue!’)

² Кавказская пленница, или новые приключения Шурика, dir. Leonid Gaidai, Mosfilm, 1966.

As a pure romantic ballet, *Swan Lake* deals with a fantastic world; it is a fairy tale about unreal creatures – ladies who were bewitched by a cruel magician and transformed into swans. This piece shows very clearly the opposition of good and evil (Odette versus von Rothbart), black and white (Odette, the white swan versus Odile, the black swan), love and betrayal (Odette versus Siegfried) and, what is most important, the performance itself, as well as its theoretical interpretations, is closely connected to the concept of death. For example, Vadim Gayevsky, in his analysis of this performance, mentions that during the final act black swans appear among the white ones in the corps de ballet and this is how choreographers show the hidden attraction of swans to death (Gayevsky 2000: 128). The story of *Swan Lake* – as in many other famous ballets (such as *Giselle*, *La Sylphide*, *La Bayadere*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*) – is based on the contradiction between two worlds, reality and fantasy. Even if this fantastic world is not death but, for example, a dream, every semi-otician would say that dream is actually a cultural equivalent of death. As a rule of composition, there is a transition from one state to another in the culmination of a piece: for example, the transition from a body into spirit, from a girl into a Wili (*Giselle*), from a toy into a Prince (*The Nutcracker*), from a puppet into a girl (*Coppélia*) and so on. This is one more essential feature uniting the military and classical ballet: both deal with the problems of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘heroes’ and ‘enemies’, life and death, with ideals and the readiness to sacrifice one’s own life for them.

This is how the Soviet myth of the Dying Swan was born and established. The white swan became a symbol of Soviet ballet, and Michel Fokine’s miniature, *Dying Swan* (*Умирающий лебедь*, 1907), was a logical and unavoidable continuation in the evolution of this myth. *Swan Lake* and *Dying Swan* were closely connected to each other and for some people they were even inseparable. Here the whole mythology of the swan finds its reflection: it is a bird that plays the role of the mediator between two worlds – the world of life and the world of death. The swan is a symbol of a soul flying away. There was also a song written about the soldiers who died during the Second World War (*Мне кажется порою, что солдаты ... превратились в белых журавлей* – ‘Sometimes it seems to me that the soldiers ... have turned into white cranes’). This song says that white birds are bearing the soldiers’ souls. This was a living motif of the mass consciousness of the time, again connecting war and myth.

Since the swan is a swimming bird, it also belongs to two primary elements – air and water. The border between those two elements is mirror-like, so here we can say that, according to human culture, the other world is a mirror-like projection of the real one. Although the swan is often considered a symbol of life, its most common myth is connected to its death (the ‘swan song’). The scheme of the movement in *Dying Swan* is constructed on the leitmotif of small and frequent steps *en pointe* (legs together – *pas suivi*) and hands stretched to the sides, imitating the movements of wings. The image of the ballet dancer here could be compared to the cross. The cross is a powerful mythological sign, the main idea of which consists of separating internal and external space, and stressing the idea of the centre and the main directions leading from the centre (from the inside to the outside) (Tokarev 1997: 12–13). The cross, or a crossroad, is presented in the dance of the dying swan as a choice between life and death. In the case of showing the process of passing away, the art of ballet strongly influences the spectator. The fact of death inevitably has a very personal appeal; it touches the very deep strands of the human soul and is reminiscent of the caduceus of existence. According to Aristotle’s theory of Catharsis, the soul of the spectator becomes clean and receives a sense of relief through an aesthetic empathy and fear. Thus *Dying Swan* became a natural emblem of the period when the Soviet leaders died after short reigns.

It can be said that ballet provided the totalitarian power with symbolic content and its regular form provided the most desired ideological structure. This wordless art was best suited to the dictatorship whose main enemies were words. Ballet, the army and sports were worshipped and were developed to a high level. They were samples of the Soviet society: speechless, organised masses of people regulated by the director (commander or coach). Collectivism as a social model was represented here in its highest form and it demanded the empathy of the whole country.

In conclusion, as the best illustration of my words, I would like to mention Sasha Pepelyaev’s contemporary dance performance *Swan Lake*, which was choreographed in 2003 in Tallinn, Estonia. This performance works as the best argument, the best link to the stereotype of the Soviet epoch through the prism of *Swan Lake*. In his interview on Estonian Television, the author says that in this performance he decided not to stage the well-known story, but to show the people who have always been told this story. Those people are not normal, they

have some physical or moral lapses, but they have always been told a fairy tale about harmony and absolute beauty. The action occurs on a submarine which has no connections with the world outside. The only thing they have there is a video-cassette of the ballet *Swan Lake*. And this is their Bible, their textbook, their mathematics, music, poetry and so on. Here, there are a number of metaphors of such aspects of Soviet life as fear, the Iron Curtain, tears, the military form for everyone, Soviet leaders and dictators, the dying swan, and the ballet school as a military institution. Pepelyaev's performance shows the birth, life and death of the great empire of the USSR.

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