

# Study Guide to

## THE ICONIC CLASSICAL BALLET SWAN LAKE Ballet NEBRASKA



## Ballet Nebraska's Swan Lake

*Swan Lake* is often considered to be the most iconic, or most recognizable, ballet. When someone says ballet, usually either *Swan Lake* or *The Nutcracker* will pop into one's head. *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* share similar beginnings. Both of these ballets used music composed by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. In addition, both of these ballets were initially considered failures and today these are two of the most beloved ballets. Let's find out why and how *Swan Lake* came to be one of the most popular ballet's today.



Original sketch design for the ballet *Swan Lake* in 1877

### Swan Lake, A Brief History

There is some speculation involved about the origins of the ballet since we don't have many records from the first production of *Swan Lake*. What we do know is that the premiere of this ballet was in 1877 in Moscow, Russia. The ballet was choreographed by Julius Reisinger and performed by the Bolshoi Ballet which still exists today. As we discussed, the ballet was considered a failure. Critics didn't like the choreography and thought the music was too complex for ballet. The ballet was lost for some time afterwards until its revival in 1895.



Marius Petipa, Ballet  
Mater of the  
Imperial Ballet

In 1893, Tchaikovsky passed away and Lev Ivanov, second ballet master with the Imperial Ballet, decided to revive the second act of *Swan Lake* for his memorial concert. Ivanov reworked the choreography which was praised by all. The success of this performance led to a revival of the entire ballet in 1895. Ivanov collaborated, or worked together, with Marius Petipa to restage the ballet. Petipa at this time was first ballet master with the Imperial Ballet. Ivanov and Petipa decided to split the ballet with Ivanov choreographing acts II & IV and Petipa choreographing acts I & III. Their

version of the ballet premiered in 1895 and was met with great success. It is the version of *Swan Lake* that is most often performed today.



Julius Reisinger,  
original choreographer  
of the ballet *Swan  
Lake* in 1877

## A Ballet in Four Acts

Swan Lake is usually performed in four **acts**. An act is a scene of the ballet. In *Swan Lake* acts I & III take place at the castle and acts II & IV take place at the lake. Acts II & IV are often referred to as the “swan acts” as these are the parts of the ballet that incorporate the swan **corps de ballet**. Corps de ballet translates from French to English as “body of the ballet”. The corps de ballet are a large group of women who dance synchronized, or matching, movement together in perfect unison. In *Swan Lake* you will see 16 dancers move through many formations to mimic the movement of a flock of swans.

## A Choreographer’s Vision

Since ballets are often times based off of folklore, or old stories, they too change over time as they are passed from one generation to the next. *Swan Lake* is performed by hundreds of ballet companies not only in the United States but across the globe. Each company will have a different **choreographer** for the ballet. A choreographer is someone who creates the steps for the dancers to perform in the ballet. Since each company uses a different choreographer, every version of *Swan Lake* is just a little bit different as choreographers try to put their own twist on the ballet. Let’s take a look at Ballet Nebraska’s *Swan Lake*.

## The Story of Swan Lake



Matthew Carter, Ballet Master of Ballet Nebraska

Ballet Nebraska’s *Swan Lake* was choreographed by ballet master, Matthew Carter. In many versions of

*Swan Lake* Odette and Odile are portrayed by the same ballerina. In our version, they are portrayed by different ballerinas. This adds a new level of dramatics to the ballet.

### Act I

Members of the royal court have gone on an outdoor excursion near the castle including Prince Siegfried and his girlfriend, Odette, one of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting. The Queen herself arrives and presents Siegfried with the gift of a crossbow and asks about his intentions with Odette. Siegfried confirms that he plans to marry Odette and the party moves to the

castle while Siegfried and Odette stay behind to share a dance. They don’t realize that Duke Von Rothbart, a sinister but long-standing member of the royal court, lurks in the background and has his eye on Odette. Thinking that Rothbart is Siegfried, Odette is tricked into playing a game with a blindfold. When the mask is removed, Odette finds herself confronted by the real Von Rothbart - a powerful sorcerer in the form of an owl. Odette tries to thwart his advances but only succeeds in angering him. As punishment, he transforms her into a swan and casts her off into the forest.

### Act II

Siegfried unaware of what has happened to Odette decides to go hunting with his friends so he can use his new crossbow. Siegfried sees a swan near the lake and hides to establish a better shot. He soon realizes that it is not a swan, but his beloved Odette instead. She explains the spell that Rothbart has cast, and that only a public proclamation of true love for her can break the





curse. They are soon joined by her entire flock of beautiful swans. Rothbart breaks up their meeting and Siegfried escapes vowing to come up with a plan to break the spell. Rothbart angered by this uses his magic to disguise his daughter, Odile, into the image of Odette. He sends Odile down to the castle to trick the Prince.

### Act III

The next day, the Queen hosts a celebration at the castle ballroom for the annual Courting Ceremony, in which members of the royal court announce their engagement. Visitors from Spain and Italy perform in the Queen’s honor. The time comes for Siegfried to announce his engagement with Odette. Just then, Duke von Rothbart arrives with his daughter, Odile. Though she looks much like Odette, Siegfried is suspicious. After much convincing, Siegfried professes his love for Odile to the entire court. Suddenly, a vision of Odette appears in the ballroom. Siegfried realizes the

deception and all hopes are lost of breaking the spell. He rushes towards the lake to find Odette.

### Act IV

Odette is distraught, and her swans grow restless as they learn that there is little hope for any of them. Siegfried arrives and begs for Odette's forgiveness, but Odette insists that it's not Siegfried's fault. He was tricked and punished just like the rest of them. The flock of swans band together to overtake Von Rothbart, and an image of Odette and Siegfried appears in the sky - a symbol of everlasting love.



## Themes Explored - Opposites

- ❖ night vs. day
- ❖ dark vs. light
- ❖ good vs. evil
- ❖ humans vs. animals



- ❖ freedom vs. imprisonment
- ❖ love vs. betrayal
- ❖ the natural world of the lake vs. the human world inside the castle

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## WHAT YOU'LL SEE IN THE THEATER

*The performance you'll see with your school group has been planned especially for students, and you'll have your teachers and assistants to help you know where to sit and when things are happening. When you go to a public performance, things may look a bit different. A ballet performance has its own customs and traditions that help make your visit to the theater special. Although each production may handle things slightly differently, here's a general guide to what you can expect:*

Before the show, people come in, find their seats, and get settled. This is a good time to read the program book, which tells you the order of the performance, lists which dancer performs each role, and gives information about the ballet and the people who made it.

The seating area of a theater is traditionally called the *house*, and the lights that let you see as you come in are called the *house lights*. When the house lights dim, it means the performance is about to begin. The curtain will not go up right away; instead, you'll hear music called the *overture*. It's a preview of the music that will be heard during the performance. It helps viewers forget about their outside distractions and get into the mood to enjoy the ballet. Once the overture ends, the curtain will rise and the dancers will begin the performance.

In addition to the dancing, changes in the music and the lighting help you follow along in the ballet. You'll notice how the music changes to match what's going on in each scene, and how the lighting changes from one scene to the next, helping to create a mood that matches the action.

Ballet performances usually have *pauses* and *intermissions*. A pause is a short break of a minute or two between two sections. The house lights will stay dim, and you should just relax and stay in your seat, because the performance will resume right away. Intermissions are longer breaks – usually 20 minutes – in which the house lights come up and the viewers can walk out into the lobby to stretch their legs and talk about the performance with their friends. The program book will tell you which breaks are pauses and which are intermissions.

You'll know the ballet is over when the music finishes and the lights fade out on the stage. But there's still one more important moment to come. The lights on the stage will come up again and the dancers will face the audience, step forward, and bow to thank the audience for attending. Often the dancers who had the most prominent roles will bow separately, and finally the whole company will bow together. After the final bow, the curtain falls and the house lights come up, signaling that it's time to leave – until your next visit to the ballet!

*While you're waiting for your next chance to attend a ballet performance, visit [balletnebraska.org](http://balletnebraska.org) to learn more about ballet, about our performers, and about our future productions.*

## IN THE KNOW...

Ballet was invented to entertain kings and queens, princes and princesses. Today, of course, everyone is welcome! But it's fun to be "in the know" about its customs and etiquette:

**Do** make sure you are ready to sit and enjoy the show in plenty of time before it starts. Try to take care of getting a drink, a tissue, bathroom breaks, etc., before you come to the theater.

**Don't** chew gum, or bring food or drinks of any kind to the theater. Also, texting, taking pictures, or using cell phones isn't allowed during the show.

**Don't** leave your seat during the show. The theater will be dark, and it's hard to get around. If it's an emergency and you absolutely have to get up, check with your teacher or chaperone.

**Do** laugh if the dancers do something funny. They like to know they're entertaining you!

**Don't** talk during the show. There's a lot happening onstage, and you don't want to miss something important!

**Do** applaud (clap) if you want to show the dancers you liked what you saw. If you've been to a stage play or to the symphony, you may have been told that you should applaud only at the end. But ballet is different: it's perfectly okay to applaud any time you see something you think is really, really good!