

# The flight of *Swan Lake*

Full houses, awards, critical acclaim; Aurélien Scannella knew, following the opening of *Dracula* in 2018, that West Australian Ballet had reached a new level. The creative team including the world's most prolific and revered ballet choreographer Krzysztof Pastor, along with the exceptional design team of Phil R. Daniels and Charles Cusick Smith, had produced a ballet that would travel the world. *Dracula* has since been staged from Queensland to Poland and Latvia, with more locations to come.

After this success, Aurélien knew the Company was ready for the pinnacle of ballet, the technically challenging, colossal and iconic *Swan Lake*.

"Since I came to West Australian Ballet in 2013 our audiences, our supporters, everyone had been asking for a *Swan Lake* for the Company. Of course, I too had wanted one, but I had always said we would create one when it was the right time; when we had enough dancers and when the ballet was suitable for the Company we had. I finally felt we had reached that point!" Aurélien explained.

But in his always ambitious, always creative planning, Aurélien didn't just want a 'normal' *Swan Lake*. He knew that this was an opportunity to build the identity of West Australian Ballet, and create a work that would be uniquely for the people of Western Australia.

It was in meeting Ballardong, Whadjuk, Noongar leader and artist Barry McGuire in 2018 that the two creatives started to talk about the potential of a uniquely Western Australian work.

"I started planning *Swan Lake* set in and around Western Australia, but there was something missing," said Aurélien.

He reached out to Barry with the concept for the ballet in search of fostering a collaboration between Noongar artists and West Australian Ballet.

As they chatted, Barry revealed there was actually a traditional Noongar dance relating to the McGuire family totem and Western Australia's icon, the black swan. This song, dance and story hadn't been performed publically since 1901, after Elders were forced to perform for royalty, despite still being shunned from society in Western Australia.

As generations passed, Barry's family handed this down privately, and, after consultation with Barry's family Elders, they generously felt the time and this project was right for the story to be shared outside the family once again as part of West Australian Ballet's *Swan Lake*.

The story of the black swan totem is woven throughout the work, creating the foundation of the synopsis. An addition to the traditional *Swan Lake* story is the character of Mowadji, an Elder from Noongar Beeliiar who befriends Sebastian (traditionally Prince Siegfried), and mentors the young son of a businessman. Although Sebastian and Mowadji are close, there is still animosity between other colonists who frown on the relationship.

It was this unique story, interweaving a historic ballet with timeless Noongar story, dance and song, that peaked Krzysztof Pastor's interest in returning to Perth.

"As I pitched Krzysztof my idea for a new *Swan Lake* like no other, a truly Western Australian story, he leant forward in his chair with interest."

The concept for *Swan Lake* was still a classical ballet, with an updated storyline and the beautiful introduction of Mowadji and Gya

Ngoop Keeninyarra and their significant story. The production would include all the favourite classical pas de deux, dance of the cygnets and the swans as usual, but the story line would be transported into a colonial Australian context set in the Fremantle Ports and the banks of the Swan River.

"I wasn't sure Krzysztof would even be interested as he had just choreographed a version of *Swan Lake* in Warsaw for his own Company. But as I pitched the idea, he saw a new opportunity," Aurélien explained.

In January 2020, when Krzysztof was in Perth to stage *In Light and Shadow for Ballet at the Quarry*, he met with Barry and discussed how the ballet's storyline could incorporate an Aboriginal story of colonisation in Perth, the black swan dance and the Noongar story of how the black swan got its feathers.

They also agreed to bring Noongar artists into the ballet to perform alongside Barry, to act, to dance and to sing these historic songs. Significantly, choosing to open the ballet with only Noongar artists on stage, grounding the setting for the rest of the work. The other changes to the libretto have been to spread out the divertissements usually within Act III.

"We decided to spread the divertissement throughout the ballet to add to the flow of the story and avoid repetition," explained Aurélien.

"We made the important decision to split the role of Odette and Odile because we felt the two roles were very different and required very different strengths from the dancer. It also allowed more of our dancers the chance to play such iconic roles." Aurélien explained.

When it came to the ballet's score, much of the traditional music will

be used, with small arrangement edits to suit the libretto. A keystone of this creative process has been collaboration. While the pandemic kept the team spread across the world, the power of Zoom ensured that *Swan Lake* was developed by all.

When speaking to Barry, it became clear that while we are from different nations, we are all the same and need to walk alongside one another. While the technical skill of Phil R. Daniels and Charles Cusick Smith led the designs of the production, it was key input and insight from all that built it, with many elements adapted for a Western Australian context.

"I wanted the Black Swan to clearly show the red beak." Aurélien explained. "So you'll see the red incorporated within the costume of our Black Swan."

The tutus of the swans will also be softer in frame than most traditional *Swan Lake* productions. "We wanted the tutus to be more rounded to mimic the real shape of a swan's body." Aurélien explained.

The Eagle character is inspired by the Australian native wedge-tailed eagle and will be dressed in an elaborate feathered costume. "We were very careful to incorporate Krzysztof, Barry, Phil and Charles, as well as our Wardrobe team, to create the costume for the Eagle. We of course wanted it to be extravagant but not caricature. And of course it also needed to be practical with the choreography," explained Aurélien.

When it came to incorporating the Noongar story of how the swan got its black feathers, there needed to be a place for the black swan to interact with the white swan.

"The story goes that the swan was burnt in a fire and lost all its



feathers so a black swan came along and plucked out its own feathers, gifting them to the white swan. And the swan's red nose comes from blood from the swan's burns." Barry explained.

Phil worked with Krzysztof to design how the black swan would work in the scene and decided to create a large tree stump within the Swan River, where the black swan lands.

Another identifiable Perth feature is the set outside Government House. Initially the concept was for Act III to be set within Government House Ballroom, but Phil Daniels' extensive research revealed that the Ballroom had not been constructed at the time, so the scene was moved to the garden with the well-known Perth landmark in the background.

As the season opens and Western Australia shares in this new, unique *Swan Lake*, Aurélien leaves a simple message;

"This is a *Swan Lake* for Western Australia, a creation that keeps with our ballet traditions yet is incredibly relevant and special in our world today. No matter what your background is, the colour of your skin, or the language you speak, this is a ballet for you."

Oscar Valdés as Sebastian and Kiki Saito as Odette. [Centre]

Barry McGuire as Boodja Wiirrn (Spirit of the Land). [Top]

Gya Ngoop Keeninyarra's Jeemarra McGuire, Kyle Morrison as Mowadji and Kiki Saito as Odette. [Bottom]