



## Sara Mearns Soars in New York City Ballet's Bumpy *Swan Lake*

By [Carla Escoda](#), 23 September 2015

For what seems like an eternity but is in reality only about 40 minutes, the first act of [Peter Martins' \*Swan Lake\*](#) limps and sputters along to the gorgeous Tchaikovsky score – like a Bugatti running on the wrong kind of fuel. Not even the bravura antics of the indefatigable Daniel Ulbricht in the pointless role of Court Jester can make up for the soporific, classroom-exercise quality of the choreography. Or the atrocious costuming in garish colors that clash with the terracotta exterior of Prince Siegfried's palace – which looks, unaccountably, like a pueblo home of the American Southwest.



Sara Mearns as Odette in Peter Martins' *Swan Lake*

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Suddenly, a northerly blows in, depositing the winged, fearsome [Sara Mearns](#) centerstage. Bewitched by this mysterious creature, [Tyler Angle](#), the bored and miserable prince, roars to life. As does the ballet.

It remains in high gear through the magnificent dénouement, in which the swan princess forgives the faithless prince. This demonstration of the power of love surrounds the dastardly Von Rotbart with an invisible force field, killing him.

The spell that turned Odette and her fellow maidens into swans remains unbroken, however, and Odette retreats, sorrowfully, into a receding phalanx of swans. Against Per Kirkeby's imposing, icy backdrop, superbly lit by Mark Stanley, the dignity and heartbreak of this scene far surpasses

that of the alternative endings to *Swan Lake* routinely foisted on the ballet-going public: the *deus ex machina*; the double suicide; the psychiatric institutionalization.

Martins' choreography is at its most powerful in the endlessly morphing swan formations that capture the restiveness of these trapped bird-maidens. The ensemble moves with such daring speed and precision that we can forgive the haphazard swan "wings" – arms that range from slightly rounded to stiffly hyperextended. We can overlook the cocked hips in arabesque, tailored to meet the demands of Balanchine's oeuvre but which distort the classical line in *Swan Lake* and make them look more like auks than swans. For these creatures are powered by jet packs under their prosaic layers of tulle. They fly across the stage in the famous *arabesques voyagées* – no stiff little birdlike hops for these graduates of the School of American Ballet.

Outstanding on opening night were corps members Jacqueline Bologna, Baily Jones, Alexa Maxwell and Claire Von Enck as the Four Small Swans, their urgent caffeinated style utterly enthralling. They alone had the nerve to signal the conductor to dial down the bat-out-of-hell tempi that prevailed for much of the evening, so that we could admire the clarity and elevation of their traveling *pas de chats*.

Riveting Act II divertissements include a *pas de quatre* in which [Ana Sophia Scheller](#), [Tiler Peck](#) and [Megan Fairchild](#) out-Bolshoi'd the Bolshoi with their enormous jumps, lightning-fast changes in direction, and supersonic unison turns. The mischievous Fairchild repeatedly landed huge *assemblées* on pointe, making them look like child's play. By contrast, [Joaquin de Luz](#) flailed unmusically in his *manège* of turning jumps, echoing the grim determination on the faces of all the men in this company, who pull off the standard bag of male ballet tricks while telegraphing question marks ("Why am I here?" "What does this step mean?").

Among the men, only Craig Hall – partnering the fiery Georgina Pazcoguin in the Hungarian Dance – and Amar Ramasar – partnering Ziegfeld Follies girl Rebecca Krohn in the fascinating Russian Dance (with strong overtones of *Balanchine's Stravinsky Violin Concerto*) – conveyed authority and absolute belief in the seriousness of their roles. (This despite the fatuity of Ramasar's outfit, which even a National Football League cheerleader would disdain.)



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In this seriousness of purpose, they are led by Mearns, both a force of nature and flesh-and-blood royalty, whose fear of the evil sorcerer Von Rotbart is matched by the recklessness of her newfound passion. As Odette, she embarks on every step of her solo variations as if she is encountering them for the first time; she is curious, hungry to plumb the mysteries of love. By contrast her Odile is restrained, simmering with

a passion that is patently phony to us, if not to the dimwitted Siegfried. Every glance – at him, at the courtiers, at her “father” (Von Rotbart, who is impertinently trying to seduce the Queen Mother), at the audience – is calculated: this is not a woman who improvises, who surrenders to passion. She feigns Odette’s postures without Odette's depth of feeling. We are on to her, but the Prince is entirely taken in – like many men, who judge a magazine by its sexy cover.

Mearns conveys emotional truth in the sweeping, folding and unfolding, crystallizing and melting lines of her body. She so brilliantly channels her natural glamour into the captive swan princess and her malefic doppelgänger that it barely registers when her exit strategy from those confounded 32 *fouettés* fails her. (Which only cements my view that this circus trick – inserted in 1895 at the insistence of Italian virtuosa Pierina Legnani – has worn out its welcome, and that choreographers should be required to exert their imagination.)

Purists may raise their eyebrows at the intimate nuzzling in the coup de foudre *pas de deux* (Act I) and in the forgiveness scene (Act II) – at one point, Mearns draws Angle’s hand daringly to her breast. But Mearns makes us believe.