

The Guangdong Acrobatic Troupe's Swan Lake will thrill audiences and anger purists

By Jessica Duchon

Tuesday, 9 August 2011

Seeing is usually believing. But sometimes it isn't – and the Guangdong Acrobatic Troupe of China's Swan Lake is a case in point. It is a reinterpretation of the world's favourite ballet, complete with music by Tchaikovsky, that mingles classical choreography with phenomenal acrobatics. The idea originated in one move, originally described as "Oriental Swan Ballet On Top of Head", which won its performers first prize in the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival in 2002. The ballerina Wu Zhengdan turns and balances on one pointe on the top of the head of her partner (and husband), Wei Baohua. More than a million Youtube hits later, it is still incredible to witness, and there will be a chance to see it live this week, when the company brings the show to London for a run at the Coliseum.

Though the top-of-head move is the ultimate, this is an evening of extravagant physical thrills. Seen a traditional Swan Lake lead ballerina bourréeing backwards, her arms suggesting the sensuous flight of a swan? Now imagine her making that same motion with her legs instead, balancing upside down on her hands while her partner hoists her high above the stage. Several times he holds her aloft on one toe, with one hand, and she poises on that toe atop his shoulder muscle, her free leg tucked vertically behind her ear. Even Rudolf Nureyev might turn in his grave.

It is amazing, yes, but is it art? Not everyone was convinced when the production first visited London, three years ago. The Independent's critic remarked that it was "phenomenal and cheesy, sometimes both in the same breath". With traditional western ballet on one side and acrobatics on the other, is this Swan Lake, metaphorically, doing the splits? Or is this a recasting of the work for a new century, not just entertaining but emblematic? After all, here is a company from China, the rising superpower, transforming a much-loved ballet into something entirely its own. To stake out Swan Lake is to annex the very heartland of traditional western culture.

The Chinese staging – which originated in a collaboration between the Guangdong Military Academy Troupe and the Shanghai City Dance Company – has travelled some distance, not only from classical dance but also from the acrobatics that have been a part of Chinese culture for centuries. When the Peking Opera visited London in the 1980s, it captivated British audiences with a mixture of dazzling gymnastics, traditional music, lavish costumes and folk legend. It was breathtaking to behold and it exerted extra appeal through what to us seemed sheer exoticism.

Since then, China has turned towards the west in no uncertain terms. Since leaving behind the Cultural Revolution's devastating attempt to excise non-Chinese influences from the country, younger generations have embraced the western arts. Their passion, ambition and work ethic – to say nothing, perhaps, of "tiger parenting" – have resulted in astronomically high standards of performance. Perhaps this Swan Lake is to ballet what the pianist Lang Lang is to classical music: it can draw new audiences to a traditional art by invigorating it with Olympian-level skill, savvy showmanship and even a sense of humour.

It's no secret that Chinese arts companies are eager to branch out, make money and seek new and global audiences. The Guangdong Acrobatic Troupe of China was formed in 1951 – it is officially part of the People's Liberation Army – and though at first political issues limited its scope today, after six decades, it has performed in some 55 different countries.

Many of its more than 200 performers are in their teens; they come to the city of Guangzhou from all over China to be trained, entering an arduous schedule with an attitude towards hard graft that might cause some British teenage jaws to drop floorwards. The star couple, Wu and Wei, who have worked together since their schooldays, apparently created the moments that wow the crowds by spending 10 hours a day for six months working out the shoulder balances, then another three months working to extend this to the top of the head.

Lilian Hochhauser, the impresario behind the London run, has a long-practised eye for the sure seller. She decided to bring the Guangdong Swan Lake to London in 2006, when she spotted a feature about the show in The New York Times. She was well aware of the potential of working with Chinese companies: in the 1970s she and her husband, Victor Hochhauser, brought traditional Chinese acrobats to the UK for their first visits after the Cultural Revolution and toured British companies such as the London Festival Ballet and the BBC Symphony Orchestra to China, where they were rapturously received.

Hearing that the Guangdong troupe were to perform Swan Lake in Moscow, Hochhauser went to see it. "There was a packed hall of 6,000 people, all going berserk with excitement," she says. And the show spoke for itself: a winning formula of western story, Russian music and unique Chinese interpretation. "It's not quite what [the original choreographer] Petipa had in mind," says Hochhauser. "But it works."

She points out, too, that acrobatics and ballet are not as distant as the purists might like: "A similar physical elasticity is necessary to both." Wu Zhengdan is not the only ballerina who started out as an acrobatic performer; the French star Sylvie Guillem trained in acrobatics as a child and the Bolshoi Ballet's Natalia Osipova wanted to be a gymnast before starting ballet in response to a back problem. In combination, each skill at its best can push the other to new heights: ballet gains new extremities of control while acrobatics gain grace, musicality and expressiveness.

Hochhauser points to two significant developments in the Swan Lake troupe. First, there is a rising star to watch out for in the form of Tang Xiaouy, who performs a spinning disc act and is just 15 years old. And offstage, in the years between London appearances, Wu and Wei have added to their achievements by becoming parents.

Whether this Swan Lake could work without its star pair is another matter. One vital force underpins the performance: trust. That absolute physical harmony and understanding between them is what makes their feats possible. It is touching to know that the whole phenomenon is, in a way, a manifestation of love.

The Guangdong Acrobatic Troupe of China in 'Swan Lake', London Coliseum (0871 911 0200) tonight to 14 August; Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff (029 2063 6464) 18-20 August; Birmingham Hippodrome (0844 338 5000) 23-27 August