

DANCE

Some of These Performers Are Really Typecast

By AMY SERAFIN

ARCHIGNY, France

THE ramshackle barn a couple of hundred miles from Paris had black curtains on the walls and a bucket of food pellets in one corner: an atypical dance studio for an uncommon rehearsal. On the floor a dancer sat between a pair of year-old male swans. As she raised her hands above her head they followed with their beaks, stretching their necks elastically in a mirror image of her arms. Suddenly one of the birds brought his head level with hers and nibbled. "Aïe, Pollux!" she scolded in French. "Not my ear!"

Chances are that Pollux will still be perfecting his stage manners when "Swan" opens at the Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris on June 6. Presented by the French choreographer Luc Petton and his company Le Guetteur, this is not just another twist on "Swan Lake" but an original dance bringing together humans and swans.

Mr. Petton, 55, has always gravitated toward the unconventional, having studied with Alvin Nikolais in the 1980s before starting his own company in France in 1994. It has toured in Europe but never in the United States; he said he hopes to produce "Swan" there in the future, using locally bred swans.

He attributes his fascination with birds to his childhood on the Brittany seaside. "They convey the poetry of life, a certain insouciance," he said at a cafe in Paris. "For me the dancer is the cousin of the bird."

After choreographing numerous works around flight, he decided eight years ago to work with real birds. An amateur ornithologist, he used a natural process developed in the 1950s by the Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz called imprinting to establish a relationship between humans and the birds.

"Birds, and especially anatidae — like ducks — will develop an attachment to the first beings they come across in their earliest days of life," explained Michel Saint Jalme, the director of the zoo at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. "Normally there's an attachment to the mother, but if we take the eggs and incubate them artificially, they will bond to the first person they come in contact with, and the attachment can be very strong."

Mr. Petton scouted falcon shows for bird experts and hired performers willing to take part in this uncommon adventure. In 2005 he presented "La Confiance des Oiseaux," in which birds like crows and starlings interacted with dancers. The

birds, which were imprinted, were free to go where they wanted onstage, and they consistently returned to their human partners. The show continues to tour. Following the success of "La Confiance des Oiseaux" Mr. Petton decided to apply his method to swans, one of the most enduring symbols in dance. He obtained swan eggs from zoos, and once the cygnets hatched, he transported them to a farm, where his small staff of bird experts watched over them.

Throughout the summer of 2010 six professional female dancers took turns spending weeks in the barn with the birds. They talked to them, fed them, rolled around the ground with them, while the swans nipped their ears and noses, climbed on their



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALICE DISON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Marie Sinnaeve of Le Guetteur dance troupe rehearsing with Lida, top, and with Lida, Pollux and Castor, left, in preparation for Luc Petton's "Swan."

is backward; now when she performs it she pumps her arms from back to front.

Mr. Petton's "Swan" makes a nod to the Tchaikovsky ballet but is quite different. In the first half black swans appear in a river onstage meant to represent the Styx, and a dancer floats by like a cadaver. White swans come out in the second half; their clumsiness is surprising as they walk onto the stage with their spatulalike feet. The original score is percussive and often improvised to match the action, and the dancers, dressed in skintight costumes with their limbs exposed, move like primal beasts — undulating, beating their arms, twitching their feet — they have clearly absorbed some of the swans' motions.

When the swans are onstage, the rhythm slows, the dance developing into a series of strange tableaux. Dominique Hervieu, who first invited Mr. Petton's company to perform at the Chaillot theater while she was director there, was amazed at the originality of the images that she saw in rehearsals.

"At times you would see a swan behind a dancer, just the neck sticking out, as though they were fused," she said. "These images take us into the realm of surrealism, hybridization, something nearly medieval."

"Swan" has been a risky venture for Mr. Petton. Aside from the typical challenges of creating a new production, he is dealing with various other complications. Two birds died of natural causes. The males in the first batch became aggressive at the age of 2 and had to retire from the show. Backstage the handlers must keep the black and white swans apart so they don't tear each other to pieces.

Undeterred, Mr. Petton is already planning his next work, with bats. "Now that's rich in meaning," he said, grinning. "That's really loaded."

A French choreographer uses real swans in a production that opens this week.

Marie-Agnès Gillot, a principal dancer at the Paris Opera Ballet who had danced Odile-Odette in "Swan Lake," and invited her to work with the swans. Though she will not perform with Mr. Petton's company, Ms. Gillot frequently visited the farm and said dancing with the animals felt like a true dialogue: "It's like the kind of partnership you have with great artists, where with simply a breath you know what the other will do." From this experience, she said, she also realized that a classic arm gesture for flapping wings in "Swan Lake"

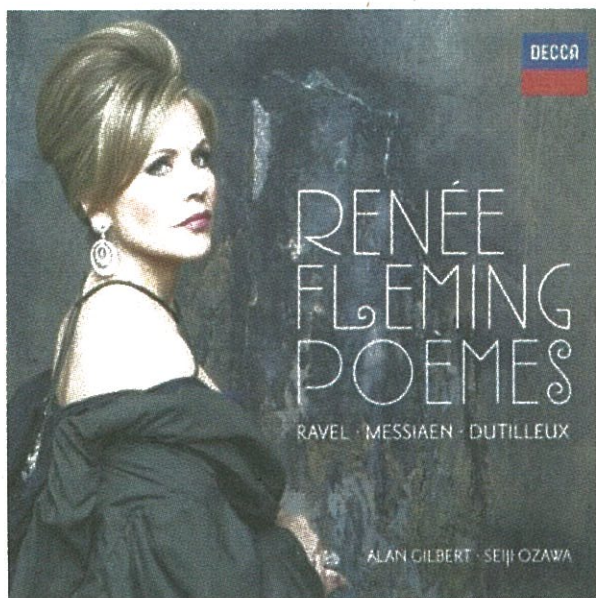
backs and left a road map of scratch marks when they slipped off.

As the birds started getting bigger, the women experimented with movement. One of the dancers, Katia Petrowick, explained, "We wanted them to get used to our bodies right away, so that ultimately they could dance with us and not be frightened when we lifted a leg."

Sitting on the sidelines Mr. Petton gave the dancers suggestions, slowly building his show from the images he saw. Like "La Confiance" the final work would be a combination of set choreography and improvisation, the dancers continually observing and anticipating the birds' movements, leading or reacting.

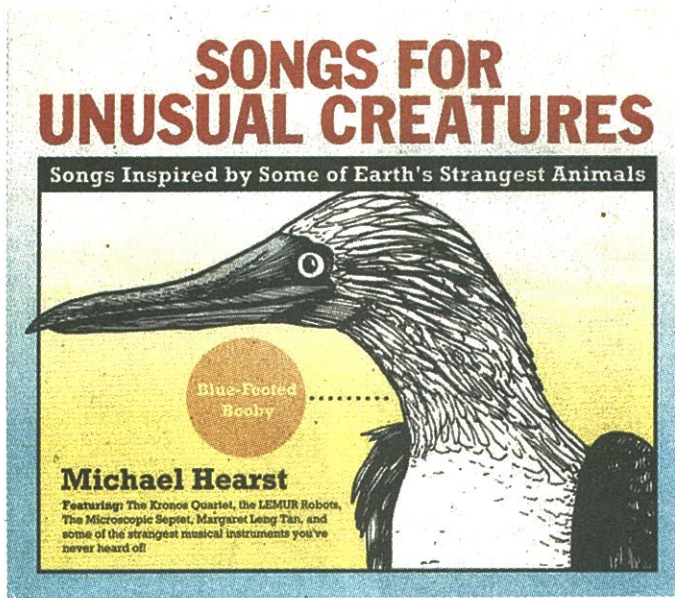
Early in the process Mr. Petton wrote to

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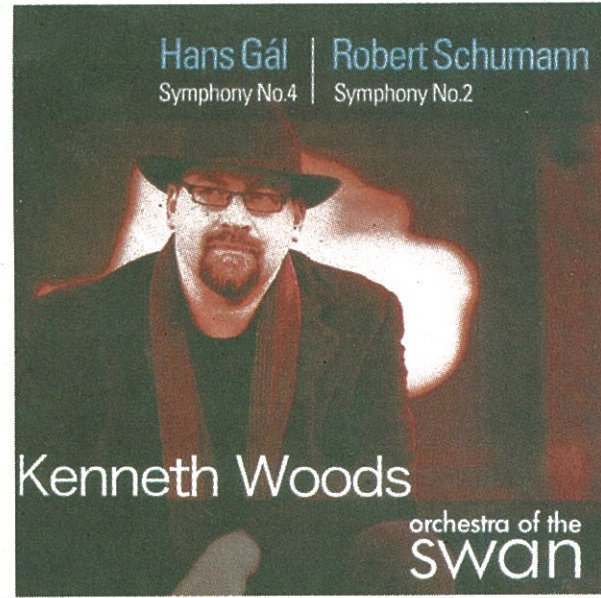
Renée Fleming: 'Poèmes'

New York Philharmonic in 2009. Messiaen wrote this 30-minute



Michael Hearst: 'Songs

work's title notwithstanding, there are no texts. But Mr.



Gál: Symphony No. 4;

started with the two Thirds. Gál, revered during his life-