

Sean Laughead  
Qualifying Process Paper #2  
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**Final Video:**

<https://youtu.be/qICq9oVAxw>

**Initial Processing Webpage:**

[STBDancing.com/sean-lake](http://STBDancing.com/sean-lake)

## Sean Lake

My spring independent project took on the form of a solo dance film. In this study, I delved deep into the characterization of *Swan Lake*'s Odette in historical documentation, scholarly articles, related works, and my own archive. Drawing connections between *Swan Lake* and derivative works including *The Dying Swan* (an excerpt of Michel Fokine's ballet), *Black Swan* (the Darren Aronofsky film), and *Perfect Blue* (the Satoshi Kon anime), the creation of *Sean Lake* adds my own voice to Odette's storied legacy. How can I perform the iconic role of Odette, and what qualities and characterizations of hers are already imbued into my movements? In much of my work, I seek to embody high femme starlets - How does my emulation of Odette fit this pattern and how has her legacy built a template from which to build and worship the two-dimensional celebrity? Choreographed, performed, filmed, and edited on my own, I collaborated on a new musical score with percussionist and composer Dr. Andy Thierauf to accompany the final submitted [video](#). *Swan Lake* is its own tale that we can all come back to, and my role in this project is to find my own *Sean Lake*.

My process began with a heavy focus on the many depictions of Odette's character in various forms of media. Drawing inspiration from these sources, I began to eventually implicate my own body and movement into Odette's legacy. Seen on the [webpage](#) linked at the top of this document, I collected clips of the sourced media and recorded short, movement-driven solo

studies that provided a palette from which to work. Looking first at the primary text that is *Swan Lake*, I identified the character of Odette as a blueprint or template for much of my understanding of ballet and what constitutes a prima ballerina. This swan exemplified grace, modesty, and celebrity. How does Odette operate as a swan, as a role, and as an impetus for creation (of self, of choreography)?

Turning now to the crafting of my own solo, I wanted to reflect upon the tragedy of Odette, her legacy's immortal shelf life, and my own relation to her characterization. Odette is a figure stuck in time, unable to age into adult life events and is cemented into her own gestures - the unending swan port de bras, the winged foot in arabesque attitude derriere, the grooming and preening postures of her head, neck, and arms. Unchanging until death, her character development is locked away without the appearance of her evil twin Odile or the consummation of her and Prince Siegfried's brief relationship. Odette is depicted as consistent and without the capability of transition, caged in her unstained tutu.

Performing as my own Odette, I brought in my favorite stagings of *Swan Lake* and transposed their prima ballerina choreographies onto my own body, specifically drawing attention to scenes that featured Odette as a sole focus, without the partnership of Prince Siegfried or studying Odile's brief appearances. Mixing this balletic vocabulary with my own aesthetics of improvisatory, release-heavy movements, I sought to dance my own interpretations of Odette's characterization alongside her future as a Dying Swan. Embodying tried-and-true balletic qualities of "outwardness, verticality, skill, clarity, objectivity, [and] grace," this solo begins to challenge the perception of where and how Odette's story is ingrained and reconstructed (Cohen, 133). The fashionable traits of yesteryear have been codified into the traditional choreography of *Swan Lake*, and the ballet can be seen as a living, dancing document

of Odette's popular characterization. Who performs as Odette, who wants to see Odette dance, and what does she tell us of culturally-contrived, attractive attributes? Generally young, slim, white women still climbing the ranks of a ballet company's roster take on this role. *Swan Lake* is a coming of age tale for Odette and a milestone for her ballerina. The arguably-derivative work of *The Dying Swan* continues in this role. If we project Odette onto the soloist here, we see her at "a moment [Fokine's] predecessors had chosen to leave unchoreographed," and this metaphorical death dance occasionally even celebrates its performer's retirement and final performance (Scholl, 37, 57).

If my goal was to produce my own swan song (which Odette and *The Dying Swan* prove is the most important part of a swan's life), I also put forth my own internal interest in Odette's story: I love a good story about a young woman beginning to navigate in this chaotic world. I hate to propagate these predictable narratives, but they give me an inlet toward pop culture as a queer person. In expressing this adoration as my own work, I'm finding communion through performance. This outward "fandom," Stonely makes mention of, "is a series of devotional exercises that allow us to enter into the diva's or prima's magic circle of power and desire" (Stonely, 127). By emulating her final plight/flight in my own swansong, I reach toward Odette's two-dimensional character role - the soft, timid, and pure pale bird.

The swans of *Swan Lake* are ethereal creatures initially discovered through a royal hunting expedition. Among this gaggle, Odette is the most beautiful animal. She is shy and demure. She is a starlet in the sea (lake) of other like creatures. Timid at first, she isn't even aware of the grace that she displays in her meek movements (Cohen, 48). Odette's love for Prince Siegfried becomes the ballet's crux, as only moments later he later falls for her saucier foil. "Good and evil, obedience and rebellion, fidelity, [and] responsibility" all figure into the

shallow plotline of this work, but Odette's opportunity for a first tryst remains unseen (Cohen, 101). Swan Lake's storyline pits Odette against her alter ego (or twin in some versions) of Odile, and rather than allowing Odette pleasure, we see Odile's character as the sexualized adult in order to not "sully the otherwise perfect image" of Odette's virginal youth (Midgelow, 174). What happens when I dance this swan's dance, and there is no love interest, alter ego, or theatrical drama?

Unbefitting of the wild swan, *Sean Lake* takes place in my fenced-in backyard. I'm far from a prima ballerina and, unlike Odette, I am not "sacred and mythical," but rather mundane and out-of-shape (Stonely, 133). There is no scenic lake with fog and a painted backdrop, but I have procured a kiddie pool. This *Swan Lake* is self-produced and a little tongue-in-cheek. I play in my own pandemic-built reality: if the CDC guidance tells us to stay home and practice social-distancing, I am forced to make due and pick up my dog's poop before prancing around in the grass. In brainstorming and searching for a setting for this work, I was challenged with its specificity: a proscenium stage or black box theater allows work to live in a land of imagined reality and suspended belief. My *Sean Lake* and its backyard location feel impromptu and low-budget. The grandeur afforded to staged productions is out of reach for this Odette, but at least she doesn't have to wear a mask or be near people.

Set on my own body, the solo takes on its own queered reality. My skinny AMAB self as "intermediary," the choreography of the White Swan is inherently "rethought, reshaped, reinterpreted" through its transformation in my performance (Cohen, 7). This transgendering of already mutated choreography plays into my continued development of improvisational practices in queer worldbuilding. My work often evolves (devolves?) into performance structures where the audience, my swoopy dancing, and some heckling of cross-dressing live in the same reality.

LGBTQIA+ individuals, facing little-to-no outward representation through history, flock to find the smallest hints of potential empowerment in established cultural properties. Rather than falling into my usual Sean tropes, I build my own swan by appropriating the traditions found in this ballet legend's simple choreographies. I've danced as Prince Siegfried, but have never been given the opportunity to try my hand (wing) at his tragedy-bound lover. Taking on the historical entity that is Odette, I too yearn for the "spectacle" and "escapist pleasures" that the codified ballet world cannot provide (Stonely, 126). If it's not available to me, I must make it myself! The meek figure of the White Swan is fertile ground on which to project my own sensibilities: A flat, static character on her own, I see an opportunity in which I can find depth and mine for myself inside her role. Even in *The Dying Swan*, Fokine's work plays into the "artistic decadence" of the time by summarizing the swan's place in the canon with a short, feathery solo (Scholl, 37). (A keen ear can hear a stylized rendition of the Camille Saint-Saëns score played by Dr. Thierauf in one of our previous cabaret performances.) There's no need to watch all the trials and tribulations of *Swan Lake* if you can see the same outcome unfolding here. Similarly, *Sean Lake* seeks to summarize Odette's brief anthropomorphization in its own way.

Continuing to distance myself and my dancing from my body (not unlike other queer diva worshippers), I am prone to "adopt female stars, to see [myself] as the other and through the other" (Stonely, 127). In some of my other cited source materials, I scoured for narrative responses in more recent cinematic adaptations of Odette's story through Darren Aronofsky's 2010 film *Black Swan* and Satoshi Kon's 1997 animated venture into celebrity, *Perfect Blue*. Both works adapt the white swan into their own lakes. Natalie Portman's virginal Odette is haunted by her classical counterpart: she repeats history by dancing the tragic choreography of the past Odette. *Perfect Blue*'s Mima also follows tropes built by the White Swan in order to

embody the integral, prized qualities set before her: grace, purity, and celebrity. This template of ideal, perfection-centric characterization doesn't allow their growth. In these emulations of the two-dimensional Odette, these starlets forget to account for their own agency, and cannot dance past the adversities that eventually transform them.

The Odette of *Sean Lake* is no different. I dance the same old dance, continuing to play toward the ideals of fluidity, mild manners, and the line-oriented aesthetic that ballet nurtures and our culture prizes. My rendition is performed as a solo with no audience: my suburban southeastern Iowa City backyard is fenced-in, and no Siegfrieds can find me. My evil twin Odile has yet to be magicked into reality (but my twin brother Ian is far-off in his Des Moines backyard.) I dip my feet into my own lake, but my pink kiddie pool does not transform me - I am alone and at home since March 2020.

The final passage of my submitted dance film involves costuming myself in a glittery white dress. Flowy in its construction, the donning of this dress is an acceptance of my place in Odette's world. I feel comfortable in it - it fits my slender frame and no one is near enough to hate-crime me. There are no feathers (I don't need or want to be too literal), but I am content in getting dressed up and dancing around. Until some unforeseen lover or foe arrives on stage to change my trajectory, I'll continue in this manner. I could flail my arms about for days on end and never tire of implicating myself in the inheritance of the famous swan character in popular culture. Of these historical narratives, Peter Stonely writes, "The story might not give us a sustained version of ourselves, but it might, whether inadvertently or not, give us glimpses upon which we can build" (Stonely, 126).

Within the scope of this project, I perhaps did not add new knowledge to the trove of repetitive reconstructions and reinterpretations of the timeless classic of *Swan Lake*. My dancing

and the videos I produced will only be seen by the faculty panel and those that scroll endlessly around my website. *Sean Lake* is another one of my attempts at finding my place in the dance field when no one is watching, yet still being evaluated. Caught in this limbo of a pandemic, my Odette twirls, skips, stretches, and lingers around the backyard, forever waiting for an outside force to change her.

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