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Cincinnati, Columbus team up for 'Swan Lake'

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Think "ballet" and you're likely to conjure up a world ruled by tranquility and order.

Not today. Not in the Cincinnati Ballet's main studio, at least.

That scene is more like an illustration from "Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?" Or a triptych by Hieronymus Bosch.

Dancers are everywhere. Some are in the middle of the floor, of course, rehearsing with Devon Carney, the Cincinnati Ballet's associate artistic director. But there are dozens more around the perimeter, stretching, snacking, chatting, reading, watching.

There are stage managers, too, and a production director or two. And extras - non-dancing performers - and a small group of artistic staff in front of the studio mirrors.

It looks like a train pulled up to the front door of the company's Central Parkway headquarters and let off a rush-hour load of people.

Welcome to the world of "Swan Lake."

"Swan Lake" is arguably the world's best-known ballet. Nearly every company strives to stage it. It's as technically challenging as it is dramatically rewarding. But "Swan Lake" is big. Really, really big.

In an age where tight budgets have forced ballet companies to shrink the number of dancers on its roster - the Cincinnati Ballet Web site lists just 21 active dancers and six trainees - getting a successful production of "Swan Lake" on the stage is a challenge.

You could just go out and hire a bunch of extra dancers. But that's expensive. So for the third time in the past decade, Cincinnati Ballet and BalletMet Columbus have joined forces to supersize the companies to bring something to the stage that neither could do independently. They're performing the ballet in Columbus this weekend, then bringing it to the Aronoff in Cincinnati, where it opens Friday, with two performances Saturday and one next Sunday.

"There are lots of benefits to us working together," says Gerard Charles, BalletMet's artistic director. "It's a bigger and better production. And we both save money."

But it's not just a matter of rehearsing at home and then meeting in one another's theaters. How do you make one set work on two very different stages? And how about costumes? They have to look like they're all from the same production.

But nowhere does it get more complex than with the corps de ballet, that chorus of dancers some people callously - and incorrectly - refer to as "background."

When the companies worked together before, each group learned separate parts of a single ballet

and then brought the two halves together. It was challenging, but by not actually mixing the dancers together, it limited the difficulties.

With the corps of "Swan Lake," though, there is no way to do that. There are too many times when the choreography creates delightfully dizzying patterns where lines of dancers weave in and out among one another, completely meshing the two groups.

The issue isn't if the corps can do it. They're pros, after all - this is what they do. But if this production is to work successfully, these two disparate groups of dancers with different types of training have to work as a unit.

And after months of preparation, it's finally happening.

"It's complicated," says Danielle Bausinger, who is in her fourth year in the Cincinnati Ballet's corps. "When you dance in the corps, you have to be aware of what everyone around you is doing. Not just where they're moving, but how they're moving. It's hard when there are four of you, so you can imagine the concentration it takes when there are 24."

There are glitches, to be sure. Dancers racing across the stage nearly collide. But as the afternoon wears on, the stylistic differences between the two groups become less obvious.

They are becoming a single corps de ballet.

"Every time we rehearsed, we learned more about each other," says Emily Gotschall, who's in her fifth season with BalletMet. "But the more you rehearse together, the more you trust the people around you and the better it becomes."

Finally, all 24 swans are onstage together, and the dramatic impact is evident.

"Having 24 swans instead of 16 is like the difference between regular television and high-definition," says Carney. "So much of what they do is creating patterns on the stage, creating a super-heightened sense of drama. Without the corps, 'Swan Lake' just doesn't work."

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Additional Facts

If you go

What: "Swan Lake," performed by the Cincinnati Ballet and BalletMet Columbus

When: 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. next Sunday

Where: Aronoff Center, Procter & Gamble Hall, 650 Walnut St., downtown

Tickets: \$25-\$80

Information: 513-621-5282; www.cincinnati.com
