



The much-loved ballet *Swan Lake* will now be performed with a chilling new twist, **Jacqueline Williams** writes

Tony Mercer, one of the world's leading theatre-on-ice directors and choreographers, has over 15 years experience in creating ice shows, but he still considers himself a Sunday skater.

In a small dressing room in Auckland during a famous New Zealand downpour, Mercer is a long way from home. The once familiar surroundings of Moscow have been replaced by the bright lights of theatre stages across the globe and he often feels he's somewhat trapped inside the ice.

An expert packer, Mercer's family is comprised of 26 World, European and National Championship skaters, who hold between them more than 250 competition medals. And although they're not blood related, The Imperial Ice Stars move regularly with Mercer from place to place because they say their talents are in demand. Returning to Australia with the production *Swan Lake on Ice*, they're taking contemporary ice dance to a new level, with bold and refined feats in the intimate setting of a frozen Canberra Theatre Centre stage.

"I always enjoyed sport and I was always fascinated by ice-skating because it's so beautiful and lyrical," Mercer says.

What he most enjoyed was witnessing skaters racing around ice rinks at up 40km an hour.

"It's dangerous and it's frightening."

Like many, Mercer was fixated by a pair of British ice dancers, Torvill and Dean, who at the 1984 Winter Olympics became the highest scoring figure skaters of all time.

He was engrossed by their "incredibly technical but incredibly beautiful" ice dance *Boléro*, which told a story.

It tweaked his interest but it wasn't until a few years later, when he watched them perform live, that he thought he could move ice skating to the theatre stage.

"I was so upset, because I'd gone to watch them in a huge ice arena and I was at the end of the ice arena in this horrible plastic seat and I couldn't see what they were doing," he says.

"Still, it was done nicely and lit beautifully, but coming from theatre I thought, what a shame,

wouldn't it be nice if you could go from here and move it to a stage?"

So that's what he tried to do, but it wasn't without obstacles.

"I had to find people who could perform in a theatre stage space and everybody said it couldn't be done and wouldn't work."

Mercer stayed true to his vision and approached the person he believed to be the world's best ice choreographer, Tatiana Tarasova, who he says has coached more Olympic champions than any other skating coach.

"When I watched people getting ready for a jump in a competition, they'd take 20 to 25m in preparation," Mercer says.

"But the jump would only ever take place over 4m.

"So along comes he, who knows nothing about ice skating, asking the world's best, what would happen if we cut that bit off, could we do this and do it in a small space?"

Tarasova thought Mercer was crazy, but over time he proved himself right.

The Imperial Ice Stars were formed in 2004 by Mercer, live entertainment producer James Cundall and former speed skater Vladislav Olenin, and today they are the leading theatrical ice skating company, taking ice choreography to new limits. The Imperial Ice Stars have performed in many of Mercer's "theatre on ice" productions, such as *The Sleeping Beauty on Ice*, *Cinderella on Ice* and *Swan Lake on Ice*.

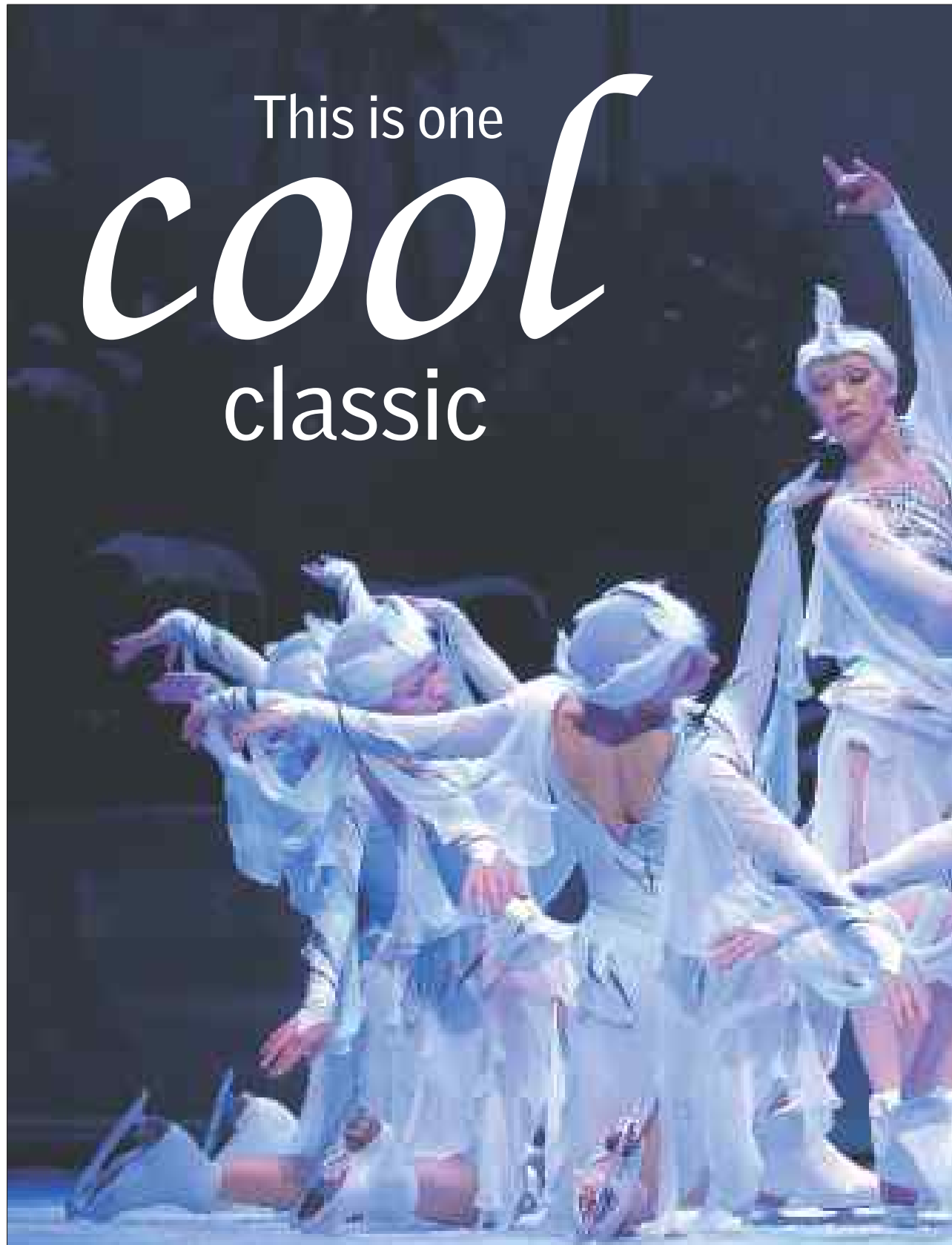
The ice stars have performed to almost three million people across five continents at venues like London's Royal Albert Hall, Singapore's Esplanade Theatre and Montreal's Place des Arts.

Back in the small dressing room in Auckland, Mercer eagerly awaited the opening night's performance of their award-winning masterpiece *Swan Lake on Ice*, which is part of an international tour.

From the lake scenes to the royal palace interior, *Swan Lake on Ice* is performed against backdrops created by Australian set designer Eamon D'Arcy.

Swan Lake on Ice tells the tale of a swan maiden, doomed to live as half swan, half human forever until true love sets her free.

Mercer says The Imperial Ice



Stars first performed *Swan Lake on Ice* in 2006 and their return this year brings with it a dynamic new interpretation filled with new choreography, effects and costume designs by renowned costumier Albina Gabueva of Moscow's Stanislavsky Theatre.

The choreography in this production, which premiered in New Zealand and is touring Perth, Sydney and Canberra over the next month, has been significantly re-worked.

"Competition ice skating has a rule book and I never thought ice skating was meant to do that," Mercer says.

"I always thought ice skating came first with its beauty and how people move on ice and thereafter the rules have been placed upon it to contain it to make it a sport.

"I don't think it should be a sport, it's meant to be here on stage."

He says in rehearsals competitive skaters look at The Imperial Ice stars and say they wish they could do what the imperial skaters do.

"But the rules say you can't do that . . . imagine any other art form in reality having to follow a set of rules."

Mercer's choreography, based on competition ice skating moves,

is integral to the production's story line. *Swan Lake on Ice* has elements of classical ballet but ultimately aims to retain the fairytale magic of the story through contemporary ice dance.

"I've incorporated even more contemporary skating manoeuvres and challenged our skaters to reach for new heights again. When we created it the first time around, we didn't know the effect it was going to have on us and all the people that were watching it."

For the past two years Mercer has known that *Swan Lake on Ice* was going to hit the ice stage again, because there had been so much clamour for it.

"There were details I missed the first time and the performers are more experienced so I can now add layers to the characters," he says.

As artistic director, Mercer was inspired by his research into Pyotr Tchaikovsky's original score and Tchaikovsky's intentions for the story. He wanted to create a more realistic interpretation of the tale and transpose it on ice.

"I always felt it was a natural fit, to have swans gliding on ice," he says.

Mercer says there are over three hours of music written by

Tchaikovsky for *Swan Lake*, including all his re-writes and additions to the score after it was first presented in 1877.

"The task of arranging this into a musical score which tells the story of *Swan Lake* over two acts and in a time frame which would be audience-comfortable, was a challenge," Mercer says.

Mercer says *Swan Lake* has gone through the washing machine many times before, with various adaptations premiering around the world.

He was shocked by critics' reactions when he separated the characters of Odile and Odette in *Swan Lake on Ice*.

"Tchaikovsky had originally set out to write the parts of Odette and Odile as two separate roles, but then under instruction he merged them to be performed by one dancer," Mercer says.

Seven performers in *Swan Lake on Ice* have changed since the first adaptation in 2006. Olga Sharutenko still plays Odette and Olena Pyatash still plays Odile. Andrey Penkin, who now performs Prince Siegfried, originally played Benno.

"Andrey had people climbing at the stage door for him, everybody loved the way he performed Prince Siegfried."