

GO ARTS

At an almost-deserted sports arena built on a former military air base on Moscow's outskirts, there's a revolution in the air. But this revolution doesn't need to draw its firepower from the Tupolev jets rusting quietly in a field nearby. There's a different weapon in the arsenal – the power of a man with an idea and a cast of dedicated, skilled skaters who share his vision and his passion.

Thanks to the Imperial Ice Stars, Pyotr Tchaikovsky's masterpiece *Swan Lake* will never be the same.

Tony Mercer – an imposing, gregarious Mancunian, full of bonhomie – seems an unlikely radical. Yet he has almost-single-handedly altered ice dance.

Mercer, the founder and driving force behind the Imperial Ice Stars, has rejected soulless thousand-seater arenas, creating a new home for the art in smaller, intimate spaces.

Mercer and his team have married the rich traditions of the theatre with ice dance, tempering top-flight skating's technical precision with a fiery, unrelenting passion.

The Imperial Ice Stars' secret weapon, though, relies on alchemy. While skill, talent and showmanship – all of which the cast has in spades – are vital, the crucial ingredient is the audience.

By bringing the audience close, so close that punters in the front rows can hear the ice cry as the skates carve through it, Mercer has revolutionised the art form, drawing his audiences into the magic on stage, reinventing and redefining the line between performance, artist and public.

Mercer can recall precisely when his interest in ice dance was first piqued. Like many who marvelled at Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean's gold medal-winning performance to Ravel's *Bolero* at Sarajevo in 1984, Mercer was captivated.

When he had the chance to see the pair perform in the United Kingdom some years later, Mercer leapt at the chance.

"I remember going to see Torvill and Dean in 1992 or 1994," he says, keeping half an eye on the performers painstakingly rehearsing elements of the upcoming production of *Swan Lake* on the rink in front of us.

"All I could see were two tiny specks way down below me. I couldn't see a thing. Yet on TV, you could see their faces, you could see what they were doing, you were involved," he says.

The disappointment stung, but gave Mercer, who had already built up an impressive CV in theatre and musicals, the germ of an idea.

And what an idea. Ten years ago, you could perhaps have been excused for thinking Mercer was mad for wanting to bring the greatest stories from theatre and ballet to the ice rink – and a scaled down one at that. Jayne Torvill, for one, told him it couldn't be done.

Luckily, Mercer took no notice of the naysayers. "I threw away the rule book," he laughs. "I just went with the ideas and ignored convention."

Mercer, who readily admits he's no skater, asks his dancers – all of whom have all come to ice dance

from top-level competitive skating – to do the same.

"I have no concept of what can and can't be done," he says. "I just tell them what I want them to do . . . and they do it!"

He is full of praise for the dancers, adding that the Imperial Ice Stars' success is due in no small part to their commitment to their craft and the strict discipline necessary to compete at skating's elite level.

That commitment has paid off. Mercer's productions – *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Phantom of the Opera* and, of course, *Swan Lake*, all performed on ice – have proved to be artistic and commercial tours de force, winning over audiences from New Zealand to Japan, the UK to South Africa.

Rather than being content with that achievement alone, Mercer's now set his sights on reclaiming *Swan Lake*.

The Imperial Ice Stars have turned their backs on tradition. Rather than play safe by adapting the well-loved ballet, Mercer has created a production that draws its inspiration from the source – Tchaikovsky's original story board and score.

Purists may sniff, but cast aside any preconceived notions of what *Swan Lake* should be. The ballet traditionalists hold dear – a faithful rendition of Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov's heavily revised and reinterpreted 1895 revival of the ballet – bears little resemblance to the work conceived by the Russian composer. Mercer's dancers tell a story that reflects not only Tchaikovsky's original creation, but the sometimes complicated tangle of modern relationships as well.

As Tchaikovsky wanted, the roles of Odette – who, thanks to the evil sorcerer von Rothbart's curse, must take the form of a swan during daylight and will be freed only if she finds a true and faithful lover – and von Rothbart's daughter, Odile, are played by two different dancers. Siegfried is caught between two women and must make a choice. He deliberately chooses to betray Odette with Odile, condemning Odette to remain a swan.

In Petipa's version, Siegfried is confused into thinking Odile is Odette wearing a different dress.

"I always felt like screaming when Siegfried mistakes Odile for Odette,"

Reporting from Moscow, ANTHEA PITT discovers how the Imperial Ice Stars have brought Tchaikovsky's masterpiece *Swan Lake*

Out of the cold



Turning back on tradition: Tchaikovsky on ice.

Mercer says. "I'm not on stage, but I can see it's the same girl. It's not as if he's been drinking. Why do it that way?"

Mercer's *Swan Lake* also gives the audience something a revolution rarely does – a happy ending.

It's justified, he says, based on Tchaikovsky's score. "If I listen to that music I don't hear a sad ending. I hear a celebration of love."

He has a further break with tradition up his sleeve.

"It's simple. In Act I, the males dominate. In Act II? The females

decide everything. Nothing could be truer to life," he says with a wry grin.

As he talks, the two male leads, Andrei Penkine and Vadim Yarkov, glide past, heading to one of the four stage-sized areas coned off on the rink. They pick up rapiers and Mercer cues the music.

As the opening bars ring out across the ice, Yarkov – who plays von Rothbart – becomes cruel and menacing, circling Penkine's Siegfried, taunting him with his rapier. Siegfried chokes back his fear and attempts to fight back.

It's a rehearsal, but for an instant the mundane surroundings fade away – the men are locked in a brutal battle, their every gesture and glance charged with desperation.

Mercer glances sideways and nods. He doesn't need to say a word.

❑ The Imperial Ice Stars' *Swan Lake on Ice* plays at the Isaac Theatre Royal, Christchurch from June 30 to July 4.

❑ Anthea Pitt is a Norway-based writer