

ArtWorks Unit: The Art of World Landmarks

SAMPLE LESSON 1

The Bolshoi Theater and *Swan Lake*

Background Information for Teachers

These lessons take students from the great museums and churches of the world and the visual arts that they house to the great theaters of the world and the performing arts that they house. This unit will explore two notable theaters—the grand old Bolshoi Theater in Moscow and the innovative modern Sydney Opera House in Australia. Both are works of architectural art in their own right, and both present the best in music, ballet, and opera.

Students will see excerpts of a production (on DVD) of the ballet *Swan Lake*, filmed at the Bolshoi Theater in 1957 and starring one of the Bolshoi Ballet's greatest stars of the 20th century. The film has wonderful shots of the theatre itself—outside and inside (lobby, auditorium, and backstage).

In the lesson that follows these, students will enjoy the book *Swine Lake*, a parody of the ballet, which is clever and funny.

Topics for Discussion

1. Tell students that the Bolshoi Theater is located in Moscow, Russia. Have students locate Russia on a world map and Moscow on a map of Russia. Tell or remind students that Moscow is the **capital** of Russia like Washington, D.C., is our capital. Show students the size of Russia. Note that the country is located partly in Europe and partly in Asia, with the Ural Mountains as a kind of dividing line. Point out that the Urals run from the Arctic Ocean to the Caspian Sea.
2. Tell students that the Bolshoi Theater is the home of the world-famous Bolshoi Ballet, Bolshoi Opera, and Bolshoi Orchestra. Tell students that the word *bolshoi* in Russian means “big.” For many, many years, these performing arts groups have attracted the finest talent in Russia.

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3. The theater itself is a landmark of Moscow and one of its most recognizable buildings. You may want to show students a photograph (many are available on the Internet, although students will see both the outside and inside of the theater on the DVD).

Give students a thumbnail sketch of the building. Tell students that, after three fires from 1805 to 1853, the building was almost completely rebuilt in 1856. Tell students that the architect who did the work in 1856, Albert Kavos, was an expert in **acoustics** (the study of sound and how it is produced and transmitted). Why was it important that the architect be an expert in *acoustics*? (because music was a part of all of the productions in the theater and it was important for the audience to be able to hear the orchestra and the singers clearly) Have you ever been in an auditorium with “bad *acoustics*”—maybe a school auditorium or gym? What is the result? (It is very hard to hear what is being said or sung by the people on stage.)

The Bolshoi Theater has a recognizable **portico** (a covered entrance to a building, often with columns), with its eight stately columns. On top of it is the horse-drawn chariot of Apollo, the god of the arts.

The auditorium is an old-fashioned vision in red velvet, with gold decoration. It is impressively tall, with five tiers of seats and an elaborately decorated *royal box* at the center in the back for the government’s leaders (originally for the czars, who were like emperors). It has surprisingly uncomfortable regular seats for over 2,000 people.

Its stage is one of the biggest in the world (students will see excellent shots of the full stage, taken from high up in the auditorium, on the DVD). The stage is **raked**—that is, slanted slightly down toward the audience so that the back of the stage is a bit higher, thus giving the audience a better view of what is happening at the back of the stage. This was more commonly done in older theaters than it is now. Most stages in the U.S. are not *raked*. Dancers need to get accustomed to dancing on a stage like that because they feel as if they are falling forward while they are dancing. Do you think it would be easy or hard to dance on a stage like that?

4. Talk with students about the fact that the theater has been in operation for about 150 years. What do you think would happen to a building that old? What do you think the dressing

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rooms would be like? What would the machinery used to move sets on the stage be like?

Tell students that backstage there are staircases that are used by performers to get from floor to floor—such as to dressing rooms above the stage level and to practice studios. There is also a very old elevator. Can you imagine dancers trying to run up flights of stairs to change costumes and run back down in time to get back on the stage?

Tell students that, perhaps not surprisingly, the Bolshoi Theater is now undergoing **renovations**—that is, it is being modernized so that things work better and are safer. Cracks were beginning to appear in its outside walls, indicating that the building needed work so that it would not collapse. The theater closed in July, 2005, for what is supposed to be a three-year *renovation*.

5. Ask students what they think will happen to all of the ballet, orchestra, and opera performances while the theater is closed. After they have guessed, tell them that a new, smaller theater was built to hold the performances and that it is right next door to the Bolshoi. Built in 2002, the new theater is also beautiful, though much smaller. Instead of a red and gold color scheme, its auditorium is cream, pale green, and gold. It seats only about half as many people in the audience—though it still has a fabulous *royal box* for government officials and visiting guests of honor, which is decorated entirely in gold. Its stage is also much smaller than the huge Bolshoi stage so ballets that were staged for the Bolshoi Theater have to be restaged for the new theater. The Bolshoi Ballet dancers have to learn to move in new patterns in the smaller space. Still, the new theater is a way to keep the very popular ballet, opera, and orchestra performances going on during the long renovation period of the Bolshoi.
6. Tell students that *Swan Lake* had its **premiere** (first performance) at the Bolshoi Theater in 1877. The music was written by the famous Russian composer Pyotr (Russian for “Peter”) Tchaikovsky. (Students who studied the *Fairy Tales* unit for grades 2–3 or *The Four Seasons* unit for grades K–1 in this series should be quite familiar with Tchaikovsky and his work.) Tchaikovsky composed the music for three of the most popular ballets of all time—*The Nutcracker*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*. His music is arguably the most beautiful ballet music ever written.

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Like *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake* is a “story ballet”—that is, the ballet tells a story just as a play does. Also like the stories of *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, the story of *Swan Lake* has magical or fairy tale elements.

Tell students that they will see only excerpts from the ballet, but they will need to know the whole story in order to understand them. Read them this synopsis of the story (remind students that some ballets, like some plays, are divided into **acts**):

Act I: The ballet opens with Prince Siegfried and his friends at the palace. They are all dancing and enjoying themselves. His mother, the Queen, arrives and reminds her son that it is time for him to be married and that he will need to choose a wife at his upcoming birthday celebration. He receives a crossbow as a birthday gift and leaves to go hunting with it.

Act II: The Prince arrives at a nearby lake and sees beautiful swans. One particular human-like swan-like figure—Odette, the White Swan Queen—catches his eye. He tries to dance with her, but she is terrified of him. He notices that she is also terrified of an awful-looking human-like creature with big wings. As he learns, this creature is Rothbart, an evil magician, who has turned Odette and other young women into swans. They must remain swans until a man pledges his love to Odette and never betrays her. At the end of Act II, the Prince does swear his love to Odette as the evil Rothbart looks on.

Act III: Back at the palace, the birthday celebration begins. Many people are there. Dances from various parts of the world are performed for the entertainment of the guests. The Prince dances with several eligible princesses, but he can think only of Odette. Suddenly, Rothbart and his daughter, Odile, arrive. The evil magician has cleverly made his evil daughter look just like Odette, except that Odile is dressed in black. The Prince dances with Odile and, tricked by Rothbart into thinking that she is Odette, swears his love to her. He tells his mother that he wants to marry Odile, thus unknowingly breaking his pledge to Odette. When the Prince realizes what he has done, it is too late. Rothbart and Odile leave the court, triumphantly laughing at the distraught Prince. The Prince leaves to find Odette.

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Act IV: Back at the lake, the Prince looks among all the white swans for Odette. He finds her and explains what has happened. They are both very sad. When Rothbart appears, he and the Prince fight. The Prince succeeds in killing Rothbart, and the swans are freed from their terrible spell. The Prince and Odette can live happily ever after.

7. Go to the DVD. Remind students that this ballet was filmed in 1957, so the hairstyles and clothing styles of the people at the theater—mostly Russians—might look different to them. Note also that many of the audience members do look distinctively Russian. Show the following chapters, using these discussion points and questions after each chapter:

- **Chapter 1**—Point out the **Cyrillic alphabet** used in the title credits. Tell students that the letters look similar to Greek letters and not at all like ours. The alphabet is named for St. Cyril, a Greek monk who created a Greek-based alphabet in the 800s while serving as a missionary among the Slavic peoples. In about 900, St. Cyril's alphabet was changed somewhat to become the Cyrillic alphabet. The Cyrillic alphabet was spread by Christian missionaries to Russia. The current Russian alphabet has 33 letters—11 vowels (far more than our 5), 20 consonants, and 2 letters that do not have their own sound, but give the word a slightly different pronunciation. Talk with students about what it would be like to visit Russia when you would be unable to read or even sound out any word you saw on a street sign, in a newspaper, on a menu, in a store, and so on.

Tell students that the first portrait is Tchaikovsky and that the piano was his. The music that they hear in the background is, of course, from *Swan Lake*. They will also see some of his original **score** (written music) for the ballet.

Note the excellent exterior shots of the Bolshoi Theater, which is so well known in Russia and among ballet lovers everywhere. The black-and-white lobby and the red velvet and gold auditorium looked exactly the way you see it in the film before they closed the theater for renovations. Note the “royal box” in the center at the back of the auditorium.

- **Chapters 2–3**—This segment starts with a good shot of the huge **orchestra pit** and then pulls back to show the

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curtain opening on one of the biggest stages in the world. This shot will give students a clear idea of just how big the stage is. Help students compare the size of the Bolshoi stage to a stage at your school or in a community theater nearby.

The Prince enters, and he proceeds to drink and dance with his friends. This **waltz** shows off the Bolshoi's famous **corps de ballet**—the many men and women who dance behind the **principals** (lead roles) and soloists. The great strength of this ballet company is its **corps de ballet**, whose members dance in almost perfect coordination with each other and who would be considered good enough to be soloists in any other company in the world. The faraway shots will give students a good understanding of how the **corps** dances in various groupings and various patterns. Point out to students that the men and women of the **corps** are not wearing ballet slippers or **pointe** (toe) shoes. Rather they are wearing **character shoes**, which are used to dance the traditional **waltzes** and **folk dances** of various countries that are usually a part of classical story ballets.

The Queen enters, and two ballerinas bring her flowers. She **mimes** (communicates through facial expression and gestures only) to her son that they are very attractive and that he might want to consider a girl like that for his future wife. He does not seem interested.

The **jester** (in red) reappears and does a typical jester solo, full of acrobatic jumps and turns.

Skip Chapters 4 and 5. Tell students that later in this act the Prince will receive the crossbow as a birthday gift and will head out to do some hunting.

- **Chapter 6**—This is intermission in the lobby, with people looking at an exhibition of old photographs and playbills from previous productions. The background music is from *Swan Lake* (the White Swan *pas de deux*).

Students might notice in the old photographs or from the ballerinas on stage in this 1957 production that ballerinas were not as thin then as most of them are now. It causes many to wonder whether 21st century ballerinas—and young girls trying to become ballerinas—are becoming unhealthily and even unattractively thin. It is of particular concern when

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young girls develop life-threatening eating disorders as they try to stay thin enough to dance. This topic is worth a discussion, especially if you have students with early signs of eating disorders.

- **Chapter 7**—The curtain opens at the lake where the Prince has gone to hunt. There are good shots of the **house** (the seats in the auditorium) from the stage, looking out over the **footlights**. Many people think that this opening music is one of the most beautiful melodies that Tchaikovsky ever wrote.

Point out the swans gliding by in the background just before the entrance of the evil, bird-like Rothbart. Note his extreme stage make-up. Then comes the entrance of six swan maidens, around whom Rothbart lurks menacingly.

- **Chapter 8**—The Prince enters with his crossbow and is suddenly taken aback by the white swan maidens who encircle him. Then comes the entrance of Maya Plisetskaya (pronounced MY a ple SETS kye a) as Odette, the White Swan Queen. Note that the audience applauds her entrance because she is the star and very well known to Russian audiences. Tell students that applauding the entrance of the star is customary in ballets. Read aloud Plisetskaya's biography from the liner notes (on the back of the Chapter Selections page). Tell students that Plisetskaya had to overcome a lot of obstacles put in place by the Communist government of what was then the Soviet Union. The Communist officials, who ruthlessly controlled many aspects of Russian life, did not like Plisetskaya and, consequently, did not let her have as many roles in ballets as she deserved and often did not let her travel out of the country when the Bolshoi went on tour. It might be hard for students in the U.S. to understand that the national government would have anything to say about who danced a role in a ballet, but the Soviet government did. The government preferred to give starring roles to dancers who went along with the Communist Party and who were not very outspoken. Plisetskaya was not like that. In spite of these difficult circumstances, she became one of the most admired ballerinas of the 20th century.

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In this segment, Odette dances with the Prince—of whom she is first terrified—and then with Rothbart, who scares off the Prince.

Note the way Plisetskaya moves her arms as if they were beautiful, graceful wings. She is known for the way she uses her arms in *Swan Lake*. Point out that, as the **prima ballerina**, she is dancing on *pointe*.

- **Chapters 9–11**—This *waltz* is a perfect chance to see the well-trained *corps* moving in various groupings and patterns.

The Prince returns, looking for Odette, who reappears. They dance the famous White Swan *pas de deux* (literally, a dance for two people). This music also is some of Tchaikovsky’s best known and most lyrical. The *pas de deux* starts with the slow part, known as the **adagio**. It is sometimes played as a violin solo. The work of the *corps* behind the couple is also beautiful.

Note the woman looking through **opera glasses**. Why would she be doing that? (to get a better view of something on the stage because she is seated rather far away)

The shots taken from the back of the stage—through the dancers and out over the *footlights*—are especially interesting. They give students a feel for what it might be like to be on that stage and what the dancers would be seeing as they look out.

- **Chapter 12**—This is the well-known “Dance of the Cygnets” (or little swans). It is famous for the precision with which the six ballerinas dance together. This version is well executed. The music is quite recognizable to ballet fans.
- **Chapters 13–14**—This segment begins with Odette’s **variation**—a solo that is often part of a *pas de deux*. It then moves on to the finale, with the whole *corps* of swans dancing and the reappearance of Odette and the Prince together. Plisetskaya’s formidable technical skills are shown off in this section, where she moves quickly and seemingly effortlessly, with lovely arabesques and great turns.

The last pairing of Odette and the Prince is to the **reprise** of the haunting melody that began this act, when the Prince arrived at the lake. His lift of her

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overhead, with her wonderfully arched back, is a spectacular position. After that, he swears his love to her (when he raises his arm in the air at the front of the stage). Odette knows that this gesture could mean her freedom, if he manages not to betray her. Her *bouffées* (tiny steps to the side on *pointe*) into the *wings*, with her amazing fluid arm movements that look as if she is floating through the air, are legendary.

- **Chapter 15**—This intermission gives students another chance to see the *house*, the *royal box*, the *conductor* taking a bow in the *orchestra pit*, and some very Russian faces in the crowd.

Summarize Chapters 16–21 by saying that the Prince’s birthday celebration begins Act III and that various dances are performed by the guests and by the Prince himself, who dances with several eligible princesses. But he is not interested in any of them.

- **Chapter 22**—The mime that takes place between the Prince and the Queen shows the Queen asking her son which of the princesses he would be willing to marry. He tells her none of them. She is not happy.

Then comes the arrival of the evil Rothbart, now looking like an invited guest, and his daughter Odile, who has been made to look just like Odette, except that she is dressed in black. What do the White Swan Queen (Odette) and the Black Swan (Odile) symbolize? (good and evil) What do you think will happen? Will the Prince dance with Odile? Will he fall in love with her? If he does, what will happen to Odette? (She will have to remain a swan forever.)

- **Chapter 23**—This Spanish dance is one of the best known of the *character dances* (*folk dances*) from *Swan Lake*. The music is fast and melodic, and the dancers’ backbends are memorable. Note the fans that the women dance with, which are typical of Spanish dancing. The women again are in *character shoes* rather than *pointe shoes*.
- **Chapters 24–28** —These chapters make up the Black Swan *pas de deux* and the finale of Act III. The Black Swan *pas de deux* is one of the most famous in all of ballet, and it is considered one of Plisetskaya’s greatest roles. Have students get ready to compare and contrast

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her dancing and personality as the White Swan (Odette) and the Black Swan (Odile). Her technical skill is much more evident in the Black Swan *pas de deux*, and her fiery, confident personality is characteristic of the Black Swan role. Ask students whether they think Plisetskaya does a better job as the White Swan or the Black Swan.

After Odile and the Prince dance together, you will see each of them do their *variations*. Explain to students that the steps done in this *pas de deux* and in the *variations* are largely the same from dancer to dancer. There are set steps that were **choreographed** 100 years ago, and most dancers do a fair number of them, though there are sometimes changes to suit a particular dancer's strengths.

Point out the Odette image dancing in the background trying to warn the Prince and the way Odile imitates the White Swan movements right after that to make the Prince think she is his White Swan.

At the end of the act, it becomes evident that the Prince has been tricked into swearing his love to Odile, thus condemning Odette forever. Why do Rothbart and Odile laugh at the end?

- **Chapter 29**—This segment gives you a glimpse of Plisetskaya's dressing room backstage and of the stage itself as it is being converted from the palace setting to the lake setting. You will also see dancers warming up so that they will be in shape to dance after the intermission and a stagehand spreading **rosin** dust on the stage, which helps make the stage less slippery.
- **Chapter 32**—Tell students that Act IV opens with the swan maidens dancing by the lake. Odette enters and dances with the threatening Rothbart. The Prince enters and looks for her.

When he finds her, he picks her up, and they begin another *pas de deux*, which has impressive back-up work by the *corps*. Much of this dance is shot from high up so that you have a good view of the patterns that the *corps* makes. Tell students that some ballet fans prefer to sit high up in the **balconies** so that they have this view of the whole stage. Other fans prefer to sit up in the first rows of the **orchestra** (the seats on the floor of the auditorium) so that they can see the dancers close up. Which view do you prefer?

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- **Chapter 33**—Ask students whether they recognize this music from earlier in the ballet. What do you think of the fight between the Prince and Rothbart? What do you think of Rothbart’s death scene, especially the way he leaps about with one arm held close to his side to represent the wing that has been pulled off by the Prince?

What does the ending mean? (that the swans have all turned back into humans and that the Prince and Odette will live happily ever after) Tell students that there are actually two endings to *Swan Lake*, which different ballet companies dance—(1) the happy ending, which they just saw; and (2) the sadder ending, in which the Prince and Odette throw themselves into the lake and, through their sacrifice, the remaining swans are freed from Rothbart’s evil power. Which ending do you prefer? Why?

Explain to students that it is not uncommon for the stars of a ballet to come out in front of the curtain during the curtain calls. They sometimes do that several times, depending on the length of the applause.

- **Bonus Feature**—The bonus feature on this DVD presents Plisetskaya dancing one of her signature roles, “The Dying Swan,” with choreography by Michel Fokine (originally for Anna Pavlova) and music by Camille Saint-Saëns. This very famous, very short ballet solo is part of the *Animals in the Arts* unit for grades K–1 in this series. If your students did not have the opportunity to see it then, show it to them now.

Explain that this solo is NOT part of *Swan Lake*. It is rather a stand-alone solo that is not part of any ballet. It shows the final moments of a swan as she is dying. The hauntingly beautiful and melodic cello music (“The Swan”) by Saint-Saëns is part of his well-known *Carnival of the Animals*.

Have students watch for the fluid movement of Plisetskaya’s arms. Are they similar to the arm movements she used in *Swan Lake*? Ask students to consider how a solo this short could have become so famous that every ballet fan knows it and every ballerina wants to dance it. Which do you like better—the dancing or the music? Why? Whose music did you like better—Tchaikovsky or Saint-Saëns? Why?

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Language Arts Activities

Students may choose—or you may choose for them—one or more of these language arts activities to complete in class or for homework, individually or in small groups, as time permits:

1. List 10 adjectives you would use to describe Odette, the White Swan Queen. List 10 adjectives you would use to describe Odile, the Black Swan.
2. Write a letter to Pyotr Tchaikovsky telling him what you think of his *Swan Lake* music. Be as specific as you can.
3. Discuss the contribution that the *corps de ballet* of white swans makes to *Swan Lake*. Write two paragraphs describing, first, what the *corps* does and, second, whether you think their dancing is important either to the story of the ballet or to the beauty of the ballet.
4. Compare and contrast the dancing of Prince Siegfried and the evil magician Rothbart. Whose dancing did you like better? Why?
5. If *Swan Lake* were a book, what would its theme be? Write the point or message of the story in one paragraph.
6. If you have ever been to a theater to see a ballet or a play or a concert, compare that theater to the Bolshoi Theater. How were they the same and how were they different? Write a paragraph that describes them and then tell which you liked better and why.
7. Pretend that you just saw a performance at the Bolshoi Theater. Write a journal entry that describes what you saw and what you thought about sitting on the red velvet chairs and looking at the gold decoration everywhere.

SAMPLE LESSON 2

Swine Lake—A Parody

Topics for Discussion

1. Tell or remind students what a **parody** is: a work, which is usually humorous, that imitates another work, which is usually serious. Another word for *parody* is **spoof**. Students who studied the *Artists Celebrating Their Heritages* unit for grades 4–5 in this series read a number of *parodies* of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem *The Song of Hiawatha* and saw a number of parodies of Grant Wood’s famous painting *American Gothic*. Talk with students about the fact that *parodies* are a sophisticated form of humor. If the reader/viewer does not understand the original work, then it is impossible to tell what is funny about the *parody*. Explain to students that it was, therefore, important for them to see *Swan Lake* before studying *Swine Lake*. Admittedly, young children can hear the story of *Swine Lake* and think it is funny, even if they do not know the ballet. They will just miss many of the “inside jokes” that your students will now appreciate.
2. Read aloud to students the biographical sketches on the inside back flap of the book. Many students will be familiar with one or both of these well-known children’s book authors/illustrators and their work: James Marshall and Maurice Sendak. Point out that Sendak won both the Caldecott Medal (which has been discussed in earlier units in this series) and the Hans Christian Andersen Medal (students who studied the *Animals in the Arts* unit for grades K–1 in this series learned about Andersen).
3. You might want to read the book aloud straight through so that students can simply enjoy it rather than get bogged down in analyzing it. But you will then want to go back and point out some of the finer, funnier points in the story and illustrations. Here are some points to make:
 - Look at the illustration on the cover and on the title page. Then look at the illustration opposite the copyright page. Look at the headlines in the newspaper that the wolf is reading as well as the one in the trash can. Why is it called the Boarshoi Ballet? (It is a spoof of *Bolshoi*,

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and a *boar* is a kind of wild pig.) What is funny about pigs being ballet dancers? (Pigs are usually fat and certainly not graceful animals.)

- Look at the name on the marquee: Odette Sowskaya. Tell students that a *sow* is a female pig and that *-skaya* is a common ending of Russian names (for example, Plisetskaya). Why is her first name Odette? (from the White Swan)
- Note the line, above the box office, from a review by *The New York Times*: “Pigs do fly!” What is that referring to? (the common expression “when pigs fly” to refer to something that will never happen)
- How do you think the wolf could have fit in “inconspicuously” among all the pigs?
- How does the story of the ballet in the book differ from the real *Swan Lake*? (Nobody is getting married at the beginning of *Swan Lake*.) Who is the monster who carries off the bride supposed to be like? (the evil magician Rothbart) When the bridegroom, dressed as an old woman, arrives to save his bride, does the story seem more like a different fairy tale?
- Is it possible that the wolf could be so captivated by watching the story of the ballet unfold that he forgot to go after the pigs to eat them? Could art be that powerful?
- Did you ever see a play or movie that you wanted to see all over again the very next day? What does this say about the wolf’s feelings toward the ballet?
- What is funny about the comment by an audience member at the end of the ballet: “Such an interesting interpretation!”?
- Why does the wolf decide to dance with the pig ballerina instead of eat her? Make sure you read students the review of *Swine Lake* in the newspaper at the end of the book.

Language Arts Activities

Students may choose—or you may choose for them—one or more of these language arts activities to complete in class or for homework, individually or in small groups, as time permits:

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1. Do you think the wolf's life was changed by going to see the ballet *Swine Lake*? Tell why or why not in a paragraph.
2. Write a story about what happens to the wolf next after the book *Swine Lake* ends.
3. List 10 adjectives to describe the wolf. List 10 adjectives to describe the pig dancers.
4. Discuss the contribution that Maurice Sendak's illustrations made to the book *Swine Lake*. How important were they? Give your opinion in a paragraph.
5. What other animal could you use to make a parody of *Swan Lake*? Choose another animal and make a new title for the ballet.
6. Write a short parody of something you have seen performed on the stage or something you have read. It might have been a ballet or a play or a fairy tale.