

TACOMA CITY BALLET LIBRARY



# THE BALLET BLANCS



WRITTEN BY  
ERIN M. CERAGIOLI



# *The Ballet Blancs*



The Ballet Blancs or “White Ballets” were christened so because the Ballerina and the Corps de Ballet all wore white tutus, either Romantic or Classical, and so the name of the genre is derived from the white tutu. The Ballet Blancs incorporated the Romantic Style of Classical Ballet from the nineteenth century, whose plot was populated by dryads, enchanted maidens, fairies, ghosts, naiads, shades, shadows or other supernatural creatures and spirits..



# *The Ballet Blancs*

## THE BALLET OF THE NUNS



The Ballet of the Nuns  
Set Design By Pierre Ciceri

## **“THE BALLET OF NUNS”**

**“By the hundred they rise from the graveyard and drift into the cloister.  
They seem not to touch the earth.  
Like vaporous images, they glide past one another...  
Suddenly their shrouds fall to the ground.  
They stand in all their voluptuous nakedness, and there begins a bacchanal.”  
~Hans Christian Andersen~**

After the *July Revolution* of 1830, a Constitutional Monarchy was established in France under the Reigning Monarch, Louis-Philippe I. Now ruling the nation, French Parliament decided to remove the Paris Opera from the Royal Household and completely withdrew the enormous state subsidy that had been granted the Paris Opera since 1669. In 1831, Dr. Louis Vernon became the Director of the Paris Opera, now a commercial theater that required self-sustenance. First a physician, who had given up the practice of medicine after he was unable to find the right vein to bleed a patient, Dr. Vernon became a strong-willed impresario who turned the financially abandoned Paris Opera into a profit-making institution in four brief years.

In the 19th century, the Romantic Era sparked an intense preoccupation with the supernatural. The appearance of ghostly beings on the stage became very fashionable, and the influence of the mystical began to be depicted in the theatrical arts. After almost 100 years of rational thought, audiences were clamoring for the mysterious, the supernatural, and the vague. Being solely interested in productions that proved lucrative at the Box Office, Dr. Vernon tapped into the desires of the populace of his time who required and demanded escapist entertainment. Dr. Vernon quickly discovered, through *Robert le Diable*, that the inception of the Ballet Blanc provided the perfect instrument to fulfill his audiences' demand for escapism. *Robert le Diable* caused a huge sensation, not because it was a grand opera, but rather because of the Ballet Blanc it contained in the third act.

*The Ballet of Nuns* was the first Ballet Blanc and the first Romantic Ballet in ballet history. Premiering on November 22, 1831 at the Paris Opera, *The Ballet of Nuns* was but a short episode in Act 3 of *Robert le Diable* (*Robert The Devil*), a grand opera by Giacomo Meyerbeer. Written by Eugene Scribes, the Libretto for *The Ballet of Nuns* was based on

*Quarante Miracles dits de Notre-Dame* a medieval tale from a 14th century anthology that lent itself perfectly to an ethereal creation. The original choreography by Filippo Taglioni has long since been lost, but critical reviews described one of the pinnacle moments in which the ghostly nuns caused the stone floor to undulate as they sprang to life. Marie Taglioni, Filippo's daughter, danced the leading role of Abbess Helena, but gave up her role after only six performances. Realizing that her non-singing role was crucial to the success of the opera, Meyerbeer protested her decision to withdraw. While *Robert le Diable* was given 593 performances at the Paris Opera from 1831 to 1876, Romantic Ballet historians have offered several reasons for Taglioni's disinclination to continue her appearances. Primarily, it was noted that the ballerina had previously suffered a foot injury. However, the premiere was marred by several serious accidents on the stage, which was most likely the turning point. Julie Dorus, the soprano, was nearly struck by a falling gaslight, and the tenor, Adolphe Nourrit, accidentally fell through a stage trap door that would not close, and Taglioni herself narrowly escaped from her tomb where she was lying when a falling scrim descended onto the stage. The curtain was momentarily brought down until the ballerina assured everyone she was unharmed, and could continue her performance. Although staging was troublesome, the scenery and new stage effects were extraordinary. Pierre Cicéri, Chief Scenery Designer, was inspired by the architecture of both the Saint-Trophime Cloister in Arles and the Cemetery and Cloister of Monfort-l'Amaury near Paris, in creating the ballet's moonlit setting. Demonstrating the Paris Opera's recently installed gaslights, whose reflectors produced a stronger and more precisely directed light than ever before, Henri Duponchel, Stage Director of the Paris Opera, was able to create a sensational scene for *The Ballet of Nuns* that audiences had never before seen.

*The Ballet of Nuns* tells the story of Robert, Duke of Normandy, who arrives in Sicily to seek the hand of Princess Isabella. Robert is the son of a mortal mother and the Devil. Satan, who has taken the name of Bertram, convinces his son, Robert, that he must enter the ancient ruins of the Cloister and steal the talisman, a holy branch, from the tomb of the dead Saint Rosalie in order to win Princess Isabella's hand. As Robert steps foot upon the sacred grounds, Bertram summons the ghosts of the deceased nuns. Having been unfaithful to their sacred vows in life, the nun's ghosts are subject to the powers of Satan in death. They are summoned from their graves to tempt Robert with dancing, drinking, gambling,

and lovemaking. The Abbess Helena appears and lures Robert towards the tomb, as all the ghostly nuns, clad in white, waltz through the ruins. As Robert seizes the holy branch and flees, the tombs open and the nuns sink back into the earth. The stone slabs slide into place and cover the unholy dead once again. Then...The Choir of Demons is heard.



*The Ballet Blancs*  
LA SYLPHIDE



1845. Marie Taglioni in La Sylphide. Coloured lithograph by Alfred Edward Chalon.

## La Sylphide

Paracelsus, born Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, was a Swiss physician, alchemist, and astrologer of the German Renaissance. Paracelsus, who is credited as the Father of Toxicology, was a pioneer and prognosticator of the *Medical Revolution of the Renaissance*. His theories, presented in scholarly writings, had a substantial impact on the medical practices that flourished until the late 17th century. The name Theophrastus von Hohenheim was used for his medical publications, while the name Paracelsus was used for his non-medical publications. It is Paracelsus, who in his 16th century non-medical writings, first defines and uses the word Sylph. He described a Sylph to be a mythological female spirit that inhabits the air, and is an invisible being of the air.

*La Sylphide* was loosely based on the stories of Charles Nodier, a French author and librarian who introduced the Romantics to gothic literature and vampire tales, in which an unlucky hero is forever chasing a supernatural force, and in the end, is always met with great tragedy. *La Sylphide* was choreographed by Filippo Taglioni in 1832, and again by August Bournonville in 1836. Bournonville only ever intended to present *La Sylphide* as a restaging of Taglioni's original choreography. However, while in preparation with the Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen, Bournonville was told that the Paris Opera had demanded too high a price for Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffter's score. Bournonville immediately decided to mount his own production based on the original Libretto, but with a new musical score composed by Herman Severin Lovenskiold, a Norwegian composer. On November 28, 1836, starring Lucile Grahm and Bournonville himself in the principal roles, the Royal Danish Ballet premiered *La Sylphide*. Bournonville's *La Sylphide* is one of the world's oldest surviving choreographies, and has been danced in its original form by the Royal Danish Ballet ever since its creation, remaining one of their most celebrated ballets to this day.

Debuted in 1832, *La Sylphide* was considered revolutionary for two very significant reasons: It was the first Ballet Blanc to be a complete stand-alone ballet production without being inserted into or paired with an opera; and Marie Taglioni transformed ballet forever by becoming the first ballerina to dance an entire ballet en pointe with a shortened skirt. Designed by Eugène Lami, Taglioni requested that her white costume be mid-calf length so that her pointe work could be seen. Lami's design became the Romantic Tutu, the signature



costume of the Romantic Era. Historians consider *La Sylphide* to be the first fully-fledged Ballet Blanc at the beginning of the Romantic Period.

Depicting how man's inherent obsession and lust for the forbidden leads him into danger more often than not, *La Sylphide* tells the story of an impossible love between a human and a spirit. James Ruben, a young Scotsman, sleeps in a chair by the fireside in his Scottish farmhouse on the morning of his wedding day. A beautiful Sylph floats through the open window and gazes lovingly upon him. She dances about his chair, kisses the sleeping boy, and then vanishes. James arises from his slumber and discusses this incident with Gurn, his devoted friend. Gurn reminds him that such a creature does not exist and that before the day's end, James is to be married to Effie.

Soon, Effie arrives with her mother and bridesmaids to find Madge the Old Witch sitting by the fireside to warm herself. Effie begs Madge to tell their fortunes, and the Old Witch gladly abides her request. Gleefully, Madge informs Effie that James loves another and that she will marry Gurn and not James. Effie becomes distraught at Madge's prediction, and James furiously throws the Old Witch out of his house. Satisfied that James truly loves her, Effie hurries off to prepare for the wedding.

James, who is left alone, gazes out the window and ponders about how his life will be changed in a matter of a few short hours. Suddenly, a beautiful Sylph materializes before him and confesses her love. At first James resists her, but soon he is captivated by her ethereal beauty and kisses her tenderly. Gurn, who was hiding in the shadows, spies this very moment and hastens off to tell Effie that Madge's prediction has come true. As Gurn makes his announcement of James' betrayal, the wedding guests laugh at his tale assuming that he is simply jealous. Now it is time for the wedding and as the bridal procession forms, James gazes upon the ring he is to place on Effie's finger silently questioning the upcoming ceremony. Unexpectedly, the Sylph appears again and snatches the ring from him. She places it on her own finger and rushes into the forest. James, completely ignoring the bridal party, rushes after the Sylph. Effie is heartbroken and falls into her mother's arms sobbing inconsolably.

Deep in the fog-shrouded forest, the Old Witch and Witches of the Forest dance about a cauldron. Madge reaches into the cauldron and pulls a magic scarf from its murky depths. As the fog lifts, Madge and the Witches of the Forest disappear and a lovely glade is revealed. The Sylph leads James into this charming woodland realm where she summons the other Sylphs who perform airy dances in which the delighted young Scotsman joins. Meanwhile, the wedding party who has been searching for James finally arrives. Madge greets Gurn and reveals that James has fallen in love with the Sylph, and that he should quickly propose to Effie. Gurn follows her advice, and Effie accepts. The wedding party, with a new couple to celebrate, leaves the glade.

After their departure, Madge finds James and tosses him the magic scarf telling the young farmer that he could bind the Sylph with this scarf and she would not be able to fly away. The Old Witch instructs him to wrap the scarf tightly around the Sylph's shoulders and arms, and sends James off to catch the Sylph. The Sylph, who loves James, allows him to place the magic scarf around her trembling form, but as James passionately embraces her, her wings fall off and she dies in James' arms. Sorrowfully, the Sylphs appear and lift her lifeless form into the heavens. In the distance James can hear the joyful wedding procession led by Gurn and Effie as they cross through the glade. He directs his gaze heavenward and sees the beautiful dead Sylph borne aloft by the other Sylphs. Knowing that he is to blame for the poor creature's demise, he collapses and dies. Only the Old Witch is left to exult over his lifeless body for he has gotten his just desserts.



*The Ballet Blancs*  
GISELLE ACT II



Carla Fracci, Giselle Entrance, ABT 1969



*Giselle*  
*Carla Fracci*

## **"GISELLE"** **ACT II**

*Giselle* premiered in Paris on June 28, 1841 with Italian ballerina, Carlotta Grisi as Giselle. Librettists, Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-George and Theophile Gautier took their inspiration for the plot from a prose passage about the *Wilis in De l'Allemagne* by Heinrich Heine, and from a poem called *Fantomes* in *Les Orientales* by Victor Hugo. Adolphe Adam, the prolific opera and ballet composer, wrote the score to accompany the original choreography of Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot. Upon its premiere, *Giselle* was a triumph, and instantaneously became so vastly popular that it was staged repeatedly across Europe, Russia, and the United States. As Marius Petipa restaged *Giselle* for the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg, the original choreography he adapted has become the traditional choreography passed down through generations to the present day.



*Giselle* is set in the Rhineland of the Middle Ages during the Grape Harvest Festival. Albrecht, Duke of Silesia, has fallen in love with the beautiful peasant girl, Giselle, who has been declared the Harvest Queen. However, since he is already betrothed to Bathilde, the daughter of the Duke of Courland, Albrecht decides to disguise himself as a humble villager named Loys in order to deceive Giselle so that he might court her. He hides his fine attire, hunting horn, and sword in order to keep his true identity a secret.

Hilarion, a local gamekeeper, who is also in love with Giselle, tries to convince her that Loys is not to be trusted. Hilarion does not believe that Loys is a simple peasant. However, Giselle ignores his warnings and quickly gives her affection to Loys. Berthe, Giselle's mother, also discourages the relationship between Giselle and Loys, advising Giselle that Hilarion would be a far better husband. Berthe is very protective of Giselle for the fragile young girl has a weak heart.

Noblemen, who seek refreshment following a rigorous hunt, soon arrive in the village. Amongst them is Albrecht's betrothed, Bathilde, who is charmed by the demure and sweet Giselle, and offers her a beautiful necklace as a gift. Albrecht, knowing he would be recognized and greeted by Bathilde, flees. When the noblemen depart, Albrecht emerges from hiding to dance with Giselle who has been chosen as the Harvest Queen. Hilarion, having found Albrecht's hidden sword and accouterments of a nobleman, interrupts the merriment and exposes Albrecht to be a nobleman and not a peasant. He quickly sounds the hunting horn calling the noblemen back to the village. Albrecht has no time to hide and has no choice but to greet Bathilde as his betrothed. All are shocked, but none more than Giselle, who becomes inconsolable when faced with her lover's deception. She flies off into a mad fit of grief, and begins to dance wildly and erratically, until she finally stabs herself with Albrecht's sword. Her suicide explains why her body is laid to rest in the unhallowed ground of the forest where the Wilis have the power to summon her from the grave.

The Ballet Blanc in *Giselle* is found in Act II. Late that night Hilarion goes to mourn at Giselle's forest grave, but is frightened away by the arrival of the Wilis. These ghostly spirits of maidens, who were abandoned and betrayed on their wedding day by their lovers, all died of broken hearts. Led by their merciless Queen Myrtha, they haunt the forest at night exacting their revenge on any man they encounter, regardless of who he might be. These mystic supernatural women force their victims to dance until they die of exhaustion.

While he lays flowers upon Giselle's grave, Albrecht weeps with guilt over her death. Giselle, summoned from her grave, appears before him and Albrecht begs her forgiveness. Unlike the

vengeful Wilis, she forgives him and disappears. Meanwhile, the Wilis have forced Hilarion to dance until he was nearly dead and then drowned him in a nearby lake. Now, they turn on Albrecht who is left alone to face these otherworldly consequences. He pleads to Queen Myrtha for his life, but she refuses to spare him and he is forced to dance until sunrise.

Now, only the power of love can save Albrecht. Thankfully, Giselle's love for him is so great that his life is spared, for even the powerful magic of the Wilis cannot surpass true love. At daybreak, the Wilis return to their graves, but Giselle, who has broken the chains of hatred and vengeance, is released from their power over her and will haunt the forest no longer. After bidding Albrecht a tender farewell, Giselle returns to her grave to rest in peace.



# *The Ballet Blancs*

## LA BAYADÉRE ACT III



The Kingdom of the Shades in the 1900 revival: in the centre are Matilda Kschessinskaya as Nikiya and Pavel Gerdt as Solor. On the left are Vera Treflova, Varvara Rykhliakova and Anna Pavlova as the Three Shades.



**La Bayadère**  
**Act III-Scene ii The Kingdom of The Shades**  
**Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn**

**“LA BAYADÈRE”**  
**ACT III**

The fact that *La Bayadère* served as the link between the Romantic Era and the Classical Era of ballet was absolutely defined by the costumes worn by the Corps de Ballet, who for the first time wore short Classical Tutus rather than long Romantic Tutus. With the story created by dramatist Sergei Khudekov, a score composed by Ludwig Minkus, the Official Ballet Composer to the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatres from 1871 to 1886, and choreography by the great Ballet Master Marius Petipa, *La Bayadère* was christened to be a masterpiece.

Petipa staged *La Bayadère* or *The Temple Dancer* in Four Acts and Seven Tableaux, requiring that five set designers, Mikhail Bocharov, Matvei Shishkov, Ivan Andreyev, Heinrich Wagner, and Piotr Lambin be employed to create the lavish décor. Set in exotic Hindu India, *La Bayadère* was first premiered by the Imperial Ballet on February 4, 1877, and was hailed by the critics as one of Petipa’s supreme masterpieces. Act III-Scene ii, *The*

*Kingdom of The Shades*, was Petipa's Grand Vision Scene and it became the most celebrated and enduring passage of *La Bayadère*. His simple academic choreography, devoid of any dramatic action, became his most famous composition. When he revived *La Bayadère* in 1901, Petipa re-located *The Kingdom of The Shades* from the enchanted castle to the dark and rocky peaks of the Himalayas. He also increased the numbers of the Corps de Ballet from thirty-two to forty-eight to make the illusion of the descending spirits all the more effective. *The Kingdom of The Shades* became one of the most renowned choreographies in all of classical ballet history, and by the 20th century it was regularly extracted from the full-length ballet as an independent production.

Petipa spent nearly six months staging the ballet, as he had many obstacles to overcome. During rehearsals he clashed with Russian Prima Ballerina Ekaterina Vazem over choreography. This posed a problematic relationship between Petipa and the Prima Ballerina, as the premiere of *La Bayadère* had been especially commanded for her and the principal role of Nikiya created for her. He also had complications in dealing with five set designers who had each constructed differing acts and scenes to create the elaborate stage effects. As the Imperial Theatre's Director, Baron Karl, had increased the ticket prices to be far higher than those of the Italian Opera, Petipa was also worried that his new ballet would open to an empty theater.

*La Bayadère* begins as young warriors led by Solor, who have been hunting a tiger, arrive at the Temple where the beautiful Bayadère Nikiya is performing her sacred dances. The High Brahmin, forgetting his vow of celibacy, approaches Nikiya with whom he is in love, and promises to place at her feet all the riches of India if she would be his. Nikiya rejects his advances for she is in love with Solor.

That night Solor waits for the Bayadère Nikiya to meet him near the Temple and they vow eternal fidelity to one another over the sacred fire. The High Brahmin overhears the conversation between the two lovers and becomes infuriated. Rajah Dugmanta of Golconda had selected Solor to wed his daughter, Gamzatti, and so the High Brahmin plots to have Solor executed by reporting to the Rajah that Solor has already vowed his eternal love to Nikiya over a sacred fire. However, his plan does not work as he expected and the Rajah,

rather than becoming angry with Solor, decides that it is Nikiya who must die. The High Brahmin threatens the Rajah with punishments from the Gods for the Bayadère's death, but the Rajah is unrelenting.

Gamzatti, realizing that Nikiya is very beautiful and could be a dangerous rival, requests that she dance at the wedding feast. When Nikiya discovers that Solor and Gamzatti are to be wed, she tells Gamzatti that Solor does not love her because he made a vow of eternal fidelity to Nikiya. Gamzatti bribes Nikiya with priceless jewels to give up Solor, but Nikiya casts them away saying that nothing will make her part with her beloved. In a fit of anger Nikiya attempts to kill Gamzatti with her dagger, but is stopped by a servant. Nikiya flees in horror at what she had attempted to do, but now Gamzatti is so angry that she vows the Bayadère must die.

The next morning the Rajah sends for Solor, presents his beautiful daughter, and proclaims that they will become bride and groom. Solor is struck by Gamzatti's beauty and that brings confusion upon him. A sumptuous feast is prepared for the occasion of Solor and Gamzatti's betrothal, and Nikiya performs a somber dance with her veena for she cannot hide her grief. Afterward, she is given a beautiful basket of flowers, which she is led to believe came from Solor. She begins a joyous dance with the basket, but little does she know that the basket came from Gamzatti who had concealed a venomous snake beneath the flowers. Nikiya holds the basket too close and the serpent strikes her on the neck. The High Brahmin offers her an antidote to the poison and promises to save her life if she will love him, but Nikiya, faithful to her love for Solor, chooses to die. Before she dies, Nikiya realizes that Gamzatti had sent her the basket, not Solor, and so she dies happily. Solor flees the feast in deep despair.

In Act III, the Ballet Blanc, Solor who is inconsolable and gnawed by remorse begins to smoke opium to soothe the pain of his heart. In his dreamy euphoria, he has a vision of the Shades descending from the mountain peaks of the Himalayas in a long line, and he sees Nikiya's Shade amongst them. Solor has descended into a starlit Nirvana in *The Kingdom of The Shades*, and here the lovers reconcile. When Solor awakens from his dreams, he realizes that the preparations for his wedding feast have begun. He does not yet know that Nikiya's Shade will haunt him in the Temple where the wedding is to take place. As the



High Brahmin joins the couple's hands in marriage, the Gods take revenge for Bayadère Nikiya's murder and destroy the Temple and all within. In the Apotheosis, the Shades of Nikiya and Solor are reunited in death and eternal love.

# *The Ballet Blancs*

## SWAN LAKE ACTS II&IV



Photograph of Swan Lake in St Petersburg, Ballets Russes, The Associated Newspaper, 1910. Museum no. 131655



**Swan Lake**  
**Anna Pavlova and Nikolai Legat**

**“SWAN LAKE”**  
**ACT II & ACT IV**

From 1875 to 1876, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky worked diligently to produce *Swan Lake* the first ballet he was asked to compose by the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre. Czech Ballet Master of the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre, Julius Reisinger, was the ballet’s first choreographer, and regrettably, he and Tchaikovsky did not collaborate well together, which affected the entire production. Marked for failure, the first production of *Swan Lake* premiered on March 4, 1877 and was not well received. Unfortunately, Tchaikovsky’s beautiful score was lost to the debacle of the mediocre production. Most critics considered the score to be too complicated for the ballet and cited that it was too symphonic. The choreography was described as “unimaginative” and “unmemorable.” Critics virtually found fault with the dancers, the orchestra, and the décor, and ultimately, *Swan Lake* was declared a failure.

It would not be until twelve years later that *Swan Lake* would become the masterpiece that has survived to the present day. Marius Petipa, Ballet Master of the Imperial Mariinsky

Theatre, agreed to mount the ballet in collaboration with Lev Ivanov. Tchaikovsky was delighted at the prospect of his first ballet being restaged by Petipa, who was considered a great master choreographer. However, just as the plan to recreate *Swan Lake* was formulated, Tchaikovsky died on November 6, 1893, and Ricardo Drigo was tasked with revising the score.

On January 15, 1895, starring Pierina Legnani as Odette/Odile and Pavel Gerdt as Prince Siegfried, the Petipa/Ivanov recreation of *Swan Lake* premiered, and was an overwhelming success. In 1901, Petipa and Ivanov's *Swan Lake* was revived by Alexander Gorsky for the Imperial Bolshoi Ballet. By 1908, the ballet was toured by Anna Pavlova and Nikolai Legat across Scandinavia and Germany, and toured once again in 1910 by the Imperial Ballet, starring Olga Preobrajenska as Odette/Odile, in London at the Hippodrome Theatre.

The Grand Pas de Deux of Act II, also known as the *Black Swan Pas de Deux*, was never titled as such by Petipa. In fact, Odile was never characterized as the "Black Swan," but simply as Von Rothbart's daughter, the Evil Enchantress. Ballerinas performing the role of Odile did not wear a black tutu, but rather a royal blue costume covered with striking glittered designs. It was not until the Ballet Russe De Monte Carlo staged *Swan Lake Act II* in 1941 at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City that the tradition of Odile being characterized as the "Black Swan" was born. Tamara Toumanova's performance of Odile in a black tutu portraying a swan created "Odile the Black Swan."

One of the most iconic moments in classical ballet occurs during the *Black Swan Pas de Deux* in which the ballerina executes the famous 32 fouettés en tournant. Pierina Legnani was the first ballerina to perform these sensational turns, but they were not en dehors, as they are today, but en dedans or arabesque fouettés. Olga Preobrajenska detested the 32 fouettés considering them to be a "vulgar trick," and so whenever she danced the role of Odette/Odile she would substitute a series of en manège turns, which became an adopted practice for other ballerinas who could not execute the 32 fouettés.

Throughout the 20th century, the Petipa/Ivanov *Swan Lake* choreography had been staged countless times, but not in its exact form. The choreographic characteristic that varied most from the original was the use of different endings. Some productions employed



the tragic ending, where either Siegfried or Odette or both died, and some productions employed the happy ending where Von Rothbart was vanquished and Siegfried and Odette reunited in Paradise.

Act I begins with the Queen's arrival interrupting the great festivities in which the Prince is currently partaking. She announces to Prince Siegfried that the last day of his bachelorhood has begun, and that tomorrow at his Royal Ball Birthday Celebration he must choose a bride. The Prince is truly distraught at having to give up his bachelorhood and so he and his comrades, Benno and Wolfgang, plan to celebrate until it is time for the Royal Ball. As night is falling, a band of swans flies overhead, and the sight of them prompts the young men to end their frolicking with a hunt. Benno, knowing exactly where the swans will alight for the evening, leads the way to the forest.

In Act II, the first of the Ballet Blancs, Prince Siegfried, Benno, and Wolfgang arrive at the shore of the Lake of Tears, silently prepare their crossbows and take aim at the swans. Suddenly, a beautiful maiden appears and pleads for mercy. The Prince, struck by her beauty, puts down his crossbow and forbids Benno and Wolfgang to shoot. Odette, the beautiful maiden, explains to the Prince that she and all the other maidens are the victims of an evil spell cast upon them by the wicked Sorcerer Von Rothbart. Each day at the first morning light, the spell changes the maidens into swans, and every night they regain their human form. The Sorcerer himself assumes the form of a Great Owl and watches over them. Odette reveals to the Prince that this dreadful spell will never be broken until a man, who has never sworn his love to another, truly falls in love with her and promises her his fidelity forever. The Prince, completely enchanted, proclaims that he will rescue Odette from the Sorcerer, and declares that he will marry only she. The Prince invites Odette to the Royal Ball, and the young men take their leave for they must prepare for the Prince's Royal Birthday Celebration.

At the beginning of Act III, Von Rothbart, having overheard the Prince's vow to Odette, arrives at the Royal Ball with his beautiful daughter, Odile, whom the Prince believes is Odette. Confident that Odile and Odette are one in the same, the Prince chooses Odile for his bride. Triumphantly, Von Rothbart places Odile's hand in the hand of the Prince, who

publically pronounces his vow of eternal love for her. Precisely at that same moment, Odette appears at the window of the Palace attempting to warn her beloved Prince that she indeed is not Odile. However, he is so captivated by Odile's beauty that he neither sees nor hears anything but Odile, until it is too late. Finally Prince Siegfried sees Odette fluttering in the window, and realizes that he has been deceived. No matter his pleadings, the vow had been pronounced and Odette must now remain under the evil spell forever. Von Rothbart and Odile vanish. In a burst of despair, Prince Siegfried flees the Royal Ball.

In Act IV, the second of the Ballet Blancs, the Prince returns to the Lake of Tears and searches for Odette. He confesses his betrayal and begs her forgiveness, but the deed cannot be undone. Rather than remain a swan forever, Odette chooses to die. Prince Siegfried cannot live without his one true love and so he decides to die with her, and they both leap into the Lake of Tears. Their deaths break the spell and vanquish Von Rothbart. In the Apotheosis, the swan maidens hail Prince Siegfried and Odette's ascent into Heaven where they will be reunited in eternal love.

# *The Ballet Blancs*

## THE NUTCRACKER ACT I



Students from the Imperial Ballet School as Snowflakes in the first production of  
The Nutcracker (Imperial Russian Ballet, 1892)



The Nutcracker  
Original Cast Of Snowflakes

**"THE NUTCRACKER"**  
**ACT I**

**"The downy pompoms on the white dresses, on the headwear in the form of rays of stars,  
and on the accessories in the form of cluster wands swaying in the dancers' hands,  
very successfully and picturesquely represented the movements of snowflakes,  
while the initial grouping of dancers produced a fine impression of the artistic allegory of  
a snowdrift."**

**~Shalkovsky, Russian Ballet Critic~**

*The Nutcracker* premiered on December 18, 1892 with Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's last opera, *Iolanta* in the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia. It would be Tchaikovsky's third and final ballet as well, as the great composer died in 1893 less than one year after this double premiere. The ballet's storyline is based on both *The Nutcracker* and *The Mouse King* by E.T.A. Hoffmann, and an abridged version *The Tale of the Nutcracker* by Alexandre Dumas. Marius Petipa was commissioned Chief Choreographer and was very familiar with Tchaikovsky, as they had previously collaborated on *The Sleeping Beauty*. Petipa gave Tchaikovsky a list of instructions for the composition of the music, and by March 6th, the day Tchaikovsky left for a tour of Paris and America, he had already drafted the music for half of Act I and the *Waltz of the Snowflakes*. He continued to compose while on tour, but was not satisfied with his compositions. Suffering great emotional distress during the tour, Tchaikovsky requested that the grand premiere of the opera and the ballet be postponed until the following season. As if he were not distraught enough, on April 16th, he learned that his beloved sister, Alexandra, had died. After this terrible tragedy, his request to postpone the premiere was granted.



At long last, the score was completed, but other problems soon arose. The libretto proved to be far different from Hoffmann's original story, and was difficult to understand due to the omission of the backstory of the Mouse Queen and Princess Pirlipat. Usually, ballets were comprised of three or even four acts giving ample time to tell a relatable story, but *The Nutcracker*, with only two acts, seemed more like a ballet spectacle than a complete story ballet. Children of the Imperial Ballet School obtained roles in the productions because audiences dearly loved children's dances. Although Petipa had included children's dances and a small corps de ballet of children in all of his ballets, he had never cast children in leading roles. He suffered great scrutiny for having cast children in the leading roles of Clara, Fritz, and Nutcracker because the children's lack of technical attainments meant that Petipa was prevented from choreographing the difficult dances that were customary for leading roles.

On August 26, 1892, after rehearsals had finally begun, Petipa suffered a terrible tragedy when his daughter of 15, Evgenia, died of cancer. On September 29th, he withdrew as Chief Choreographer, and Lev Ivanov was commissioned to replace the great master choreographer with Enrico Cecchetti appointed as his Ballet Master. Although Petipa had withdrawn from choreographing, he still retained power over the Libretto.

While *The Nutcracker* as a whole ballet did not receive an enthusiastic response, its most successful choreography was its Ballet Blanc, *The Waltz of The Snowflakes*. *The Nutcracker* only remained in the repertoire of the Imperial Ballet for one more season, and then was absent from the stage for at least five years. It was performed in Russia for the final time on October 25, 1917 on the cusp of the Russian Revolution. Throughout the 20th century, *The Nutcracker* has been revived and restaged countless times and is now considered to be the most popular classical ballet in the world.

Act I begins on Christmas Eve with Herr and Frau Silberhaus' beautiful party. Clara, their lovely daughter, receives a Nutcracker from her Godfather Herr Drosselmeyer that he has brought for her from his exotic travels around the world. Her mischievous little brother, Fritz, breaks the beautiful Nutcracker who is then left under the tree. Later that night, Clara

creeps down into the parlor to retrieve her precious gift. Although the Nutcracker is broken, Clara still loves him fiercely. She cuddles up in Grandfather's chair with her beloved toy when suddenly a Mouse Army led by the Seven-Headed Mouse King invades the parlor. The Nutcracker and his Army of Gingerbread Soldiers spring to life and begin to battle with the Mice. The Nutcracker is mortally wounded in the battle, but Clara, in an attempt to save her Nutcracker, hits the Mouse King over the head with her slipper and kills him. At that moment, the Nutcracker is transformed into his true self, a Prince.

Act I ends with the Ballet Blanc, as the Prince arises from death and escorts Clara on a journey through The Land of Snow. According to the critics who witnessed the premiere of 1892, the most successful part of *The Nutcracker* was *The Waltz of The Snowflakes* performed by over fifty dancers.

In Act II, Clara and her beloved Prince arrive in *Confituremburg The Land of Sweets*. The Sugar Plum Fairy and Her Cavalier, Prince Coqueluche, welcome the Prince and Clara home. They have prepared a great celebration filled with dancing sweets and flowers. The Nutcracker Prince and Clara are crowned King and Queen of Confituremburg.

*The Ballet Blancs*  
LES SYLPHIDES  
OR  
CHOPINIANA



Les Sylphides (Fokine, 1907/1930): Sally Gilmour and Robert Harrold (centre),  
Leicester, 1943. Photo © Peggy Delius. RDC/PD/01/30/01



**Les Sylphides**  
**Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo**

**"CHOPINIANA"**  
**OR**  
**"LES SYLPHIDES"**

*Chopiniana* or *Les Sylphides* is a short, non-narrative Ballet Blanc, choreographed by Michel Fokine. The score was written by Frédéric Chopin and orchestrated by Alexander Glazunov who had set the music in 1892 as a purely orchestral suite, under the title *Chopiniana*, Op. 46.

*Chopiniana* or *Reverie Romantique: Ballet sur la musique de Chopin* premiered on February 10, 1907 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Mikhail Fokine re-choreographed his ballet, adding a waltz, and one year later on March 8, 1908 *Chopiniana* premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre. On June 2, 1909, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes premiered Fokine's masterpiece in Paris, but Diaghilev had given the ballet a new title, *Les Sylphides*, a completely new



commission for re-orchestration, a new décor by Alexandre Benois, and long white tutus designed by Léon Bakst.

In creating *Chopiniana* or *Les Sylphides*, Fokine had drawn his inspiration from several sources. In 1904, Isadora Duncan had visited St. Petersburg and given a recital that strictly used Chopin's music. Fokine was extremely impressed by her rapturous way of carrying gestures around the stage and her way of turning simple walks, runs, and poses into images of inspiration. He captured these modern attributes, but he also evoked the ephemeral qualities of the Romantic Era as seen in *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*. Petipa's choreography with less virtuoso structural features, and Ivanov's compositional precedent set for Act IV of *Swan Lake* employing the female ensemble that frames but constantly responds to the dances performed by the soloists were clear influences. In fact, one of the choreographic fascinations of *Chopiniana* or *Les Sylphides* is the use of the corps de ballet. In the opening and closing sections, the corps de ballet is almost always dancing, but during the most central episodes they mainly hold one picturesque tableau that seamlessly melts into another.

*Chopiniana* had a different musical composition than *Les Sylphides* with a Polonaise in A major, Nocturne in F major, Mazurka in C# minor, Waltz in C# minor and Tarantella in A♭ major. *Les Sylphides* musical composition was much larger with Polonaise in A major, Nocturne in A♭ major, Waltz in G♭ major, Mazurka in D major, Mazurka in C major, Prelude in A major, Waltz in C# minor, and Grand valse brillante in E♭ major.

*Chopiniana* or *Les Sylphides* is described as a "Romantic Reverie." A young man, who is the Poet wearing white tights and a black tunic with a white cravat, is walking through the forest dreaming about his inspirations. During his evening walk, he encounters a group of white-clad Sylphs dancing in the moonlight, and joins in the dances with the beautiful Sylphs. Each ballerina is named after her own musical movement, the Valse, the Mazurka, and the Prelude.