

Coppélia

updated Feb 24

It is 7:30 pm on a Saturday night, the theatre doors have shut, and the curtain is about to rise on the winter season's ballet at Perth's beautiful, but small, Edwardian His Majesty's Theatre. Noticing empty seats to my left I glance around observing partial rows of empty seats behind me and peering down from my Dress Circle seat into the stalls below I see a similar pattern of empty seats. These are not the cheap seats with restricted views that are the last to sell but some of the best and therefore most expensive seats in the house. But the reason for these empty seats is not what you will have immediately presumed. Ticket sales are not dreadful. Contrariwise, all these empty seats have been paid for and tickets issued to the purchasers. Thus, in the ballet company's Annual Report these empty seats will be counted in both audience attendance numbers and monies raised from paid performances.

The seats in question were purchased by dedicated ballet lovers many months previously as part of season packages – and therein lies the problem. For on this Saturday night, at the magnificent Optus Stadium a few kilometres to the east of the theatre, the Dockers are playing the Eagles. And in Perth, when a clash of culture arises and a choice must be made, AFL football will always trump ballet.

To counter this, the only ballet that I can think of that may bring some small comfort to a footy fan is *Coppélia*, or at least Greg Horsman's restaging of this classic ballet. *Coppélia* has the advantage of being a comic ballet providing light entertainment to a wide audience.

Loosely adapted by Charles Nutter from an 1816 story (*Der Sandmann*) and *Die Puppe* (The Doll) by E.T.A. Hoffman, it is a moral tale seeking to show how a girl must fight for the man she loves and how a man can be easily bewitched by a stranger's beauty. Hoffman's tale is a dark tale ending with the suicide of the protagonist Nathanael (Franz in the ballet) when he realizes he has fallen in love with a doll. Nutter turned this sombre tale into a light comedy.

Coppélia premiered in Paris in May 1870 after a performance of Weber's *Der Freischütz*, with the Emperor Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie in attendance. The ballet was a resounding success. The emperor stayed awake for the entire performance.

Coppélia was the first ballet to feature national dances: the Czárdás (Hungarian) and the Mazurka (Polish) from Act 1 as both Arthur Saint-Léon (choreography) and Léo Delibes (music) were folklore aficionados. The music of *Coppélia* is also notable for its use of themes (leitmotifs) to identify characters and describe the mood.

But this is not the ballet that we know and enjoy today. Seven weeks after the premiere, in July 1870, the Franco-Prussian War broke out and the Théâtre National de l'Opéra in Paris closed. In 1875 the ballet was transferred to the newly built Palais Garnier but by 1872 the third act had been all but dropped and subsequently disappeared. While the music of Delibes has been preserved, the choreography of Saint-Léon has not.

The version we know today has descended from a later staging in 1884 by Marius Petipa in St. Petersburg. We do not know if Petipa was familiar with Saint-Léon's choreography and what changes he made but he apparently followed the original stage directions for the action and mimes and was responsible for additions but not wholesale distortions.

According to Ivor Guest in his *Letters from a Ballet Master*: "*The consensus among ballet professionals is that Petipa's revisions consisted mainly of additions, enlarging the quantity of dance but preserving the style*". One change that had to be made was adjusting the female *en travesti* role of Franz to become a role for a man.

It is also possible Petipa choreographed the entire ballet to his own taste as in a letter written in 1892 about Vladimir Stepanov's notation system Petipa wrote: "*a talented ballet master, reviving previous ballets, will create dances in accordance with his personal fantasy, his talent, and the tastes of the public of that time and will not start losing time and effort copying what was done by others long before*".

The ballet was revived for the final time in 1894 for the benefit of Pierina Legnani. Petipa was ill and unable to direct rehearsals, so Enrico Cecchetti supervised the production alone. For this reason, Cecchetti is normally credited together with Petipa as the ballet's choreographer, but it is likely he only acted as *répétiteur* and made no significant changes, merely adjusting dances to suit individuals. This final revival was notated in the Stepanov method in 1904 during rehearsals and subsequently was carried to the West.

Coppélia at WAB

Horsman's new version, a co-production between West Australian Ballet and Queensland Ballet, premiered in Brisbane in April 2014 and to Perth audiences in September 2015, with a restaging in Perth in September 2021. In his choreographer's notes, Horsman said his vision for *Coppélia* was to incorporate Australian elements into the story and create more realistic context behind Dr. Coppélius' character while endeavouring to preserve the original storyline and maintaining the humour. Although stating he "*only made a few changes to the storyline*" these changes are significant and are discussed below. Fortunately, the changes successfully improve the relevance and rationale of the story for a modern Australian audience.

The most obvious change was relocating the story from its original German setting to the 1878 South Australian town of Hahndorf, Australia's oldest surviving German settlement.

Dr. Coppélius, the toy maker, can be portrayed as sinister, tragic, or hilariously funny. Horsman's version opted for the tragic and in an added filmed prologue the audience learns that on the long ship voyage from Germany to Australia Dr. Coppélius' young daughter dies weeks before arriving in port. Heartbroken and now alone in a foreign land with only his daughter's toy doll as a reminder of what he has lost we can understand his desire to build a mechanical doll and bring it to life as a replacement for his lost daughter.

For a modern audience this clever prologue provides psychological reasons for Dr. Coppélius' obsessive behaviour whereas for the audience of the time their fascination with automata was such that no explanation was needed for Dr. Coppélius to make dolls.

Automata date back to antiquity, but they proliferated in the 19th century with the development of mass production techniques. Animated by hidden clockwork mechanisms automata were virtuoso feats of engineering - enabling models of people and animals to play musical instruments, write poems and even paint. They were attempts to mimic life by mechanical means. But automata were not merely objects of entertainment. They were instrumental in building the industrial revolution. They even had philosophical overtones with their clockwork mechanism reflecting the clockwork model of the universe proposed by Sir Issac Newton.

Other changes by Horsman include replacing the use by Dr. Coppélius of a magic spell book to animate his Coppélia doll, something just too far out of modern thinking, by use of an electrical device to shock the doll to life.

By now you may be wondering what any of the above has to do with watching the footy. Well to be honest – nothing. But note that Horsman's ballet is set in a small South Australian town and not in Europe. And what does every Australian country town have – yes, an Australian Rules football team. Thus, in Act 1 we see town's footy team, the Magpies, invade the town square to the Mazurka character dance to celebrate their victory, hand-balling the ball backwards and forwards, bouncing the ball and leaping high to mark the ball. In 2015, the Perth cast even took ball passing lessons from members of the Eagle's football team¹.

You will not see any kicking of the ball as while handballs directed across and upstage may be acceptable, the orchestra, mindful of their precious instruments would never tolerate wayward kicks. However, I have it on good authority that during a dress rehearsal and before netting was installed above the orchestra pit, a member of the orchestra was hit by a wayward ball. What added insult to injury was the loud call from the technical bench to "carry on".

During the football team's celebrations, when Franz's younger sister is hit in the head by a football, the doctor is called upon, but the sight of the injured young girl, after the recent loss of his own daughter, is too much for him and he retreats into his house. In his distress he breaks his daughter's mechanical doll leading him to the idea of creating a new one to replace his beloved daughter. In a neat twist, at the end of the ballet instead of Dr. Coppélius simply being handed a purse of money to compensate him for damages to his mechanical dolls, in his anger he accidentally knocks Mary to the ground, shocking him into reviving Mary and making peace with the townspeople.

¹ Robert Helpmann's ballet *The Display*, created for The Australian Ballet in 1964, included a scene of the men playing a game of Australian football and tossing a football around, while the women picnic. Horsman used this idea, as the Mazurka dance music fitted this scene so well, but created his own choreography. While in his second year at TAB he had danced the role of one of the footballers in a 1983 revival of Helpmann's ballet and remembers he dropped the ball, much to his own embarrassment.