

Don Quixote

updated Aug 25

Marius Petipa's first professional employment as a dancer was at the Grand-Théâtre of Nantes where he stayed for three seasons (1839 – 1842)¹. Aged only twenty-one he immediately turned his hand to choreography later claiming in his biography that he choreographed three complete ballets in Nantes, as well as dances for operas. The three ballets he named have not been found, and Petipa's memory is often demonstratively faulty making his biography not always reliable, but there is no reason to doubt the essence of his claim as there is a record of an 1840 ballet choreographed by him as part of a double bill which judging by the date, may have been his first professional ballet:

“Grand-Theatre——Today Thursday, 16 July 1840, at six o'clock. 1. *Don Juan of Austria*, comedy in five acts, by M. Casimir Delavigne; 2. *The Scatterbrain, or the Love Affair*, ballet in two scenes, by M. Marius Petipa”.

His early first steps into being allowed as a young dancer to choreograph new ballets likely stems from the small size of the Nantes company² and because the ballet master, Étienne-Hughes Laurençon, had served in Brussels under his father Jean Petipa. Importantly, he received an author's fee for each performance, which according to his memoirs “*flattered my ego, and I decided to devote myself to this speciality*”.

From Nantes, Petipa headed to the Grand-Théâtre de Bordeaux which had been in dire financial straits but where the new ballet master Auguste Devéria had won an increased subsidy and had plans to expand the number of performers and attract bigger audiences. Accepted into the company as a *premier danseur en tous genres*, Petipa failed to win over the audience and reviewers, his dancing considered weak although he “*mimes and gestures well*”. As a result, he was demoted to *deuxième danseur* and appeared mainly in character dances, especially Spanish dances – the *cachucha*, *bolero*, *jota aragonesa* – which were popular with Bordeaux's Iberian community. When Devéria, the latest in a long succession of speedily bankrupted directors, declared bankruptcy in May 1844, Petipa departed for the *Teatro del Circo* in Spain.

Here, Petipa thrived and his debut with *Giselle* in June 1844 partnering the company's *prima ballerina assoluta* Marie Guy-Stéphan “*was received with general applause*” and showed that “*his dance schooling, like his mime, was very good*”. The *Crónica de Madrid* had a more nuanced view and thought Petipa in “*classical (heroic) dance is no better than average, but in character or ballroom dances he is excellent*” and “*his acting is natural and realistic*”. In Spain he was exposed to Spanish dance, no more so than when he and Guy-Stéphan were in the spring of 1846 invited by Fernando Millet, impresario of the Teatro Principal of Seville, to tour Andalusia with Millet's ballet company. In Sanlúcar de Barrameda their visit coincided with an annual festival and Petipa, wearing a Spanish costume and feeling “*just like a Spaniard*”, joined in the dancing in the torchlit streets, accompanied by students playing

¹ According to Nadine Meisner, “*Marius made his stage debut on 19 March 1823 (that is, shortly after his fifth birthday), as a small cupid (petit Amour), in the company's premiere of Gardel's Psyché et l'Amour, the same ballet in which his father had appeared as a child*”.

² Petipa, with Laurençon, was the company's only *premier danseur*.

guitars. In his memoirs he remembered dancing the fandango and other traditional dances saying, *"I danced and played the castanets no worse than the best dancers of Andalusia"*.

National and folk dances from foreign lands were a feature of ballets at this time and Spanish dances were an obvious choice for inclusion in divertissements. It is no surprise then that Petipa's earliest standalone composition in Russia was an uncredited divertissement of Spanish dances to music by Cesare Pugni called *The Star of Granada*. Premiering in January 1855 at the Mikhailovsky Theatre in St. Petersburg it featured Maria Surovshchikova. Nadine Meisner writes: *"according to the reviewer Fedor Koni, The Star of Granada divided opinion: some were unquestionably delighted; others thought that she (i.e. Surovshchikova) danced too authentically, as would 'the people on the streets of Grenada, Seville and Madrid', without taking care to show 'that French grace which the St Petersburg public had come to expect in ballets'"*. Meisner goes on to say: *"It would seem that Marius had indeed observed folk dancers closely during his time in Spain"*.

No surprise therefore that when Petipa had the opportunity to create a new full-length ballet where he was solely responsible not just for the choreography but also for the libretto, he chose a Spanish story based on Miguel de Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. A ballet in four acts and eight scenes to music by Ludwig Minkus³. The ballet was originally to be set to music by Petipa's chief collaborator up to that point, composer Cesare Pugni, but with Pugni's decline into alcoholism and thus unreliability Petipa turned to Minkus who provided a suitable Spanish sounding score. Minkus was an expert in providing music that had simple rhythms and provided the means to showcase dance movements but was not too demanding on the ears of the audience thus taking attention away from the visual elements on stage.

Cervantes' story was not new to Russia as Charles Didelot had produced a two-act version of the tale in St. Petersburg in 1808 to the music of composer Frédérick Venua. The following year Didelot's production was staged in London in a revival by James D'Egville. The novel had first been adapted to ballet in Vienna in 1740 by Franz Hilverding and again in 1768 by Jean Georges Noverre to music by Austrian composer Josef Starzer, a production thought to have been a revival of Hilverding's original ballet. These early attempts struggled at adapting Miguel de Cervantes' rambling long novel to ballet, a problem finally solved in 1801 by the Paris Opéra Ballet-master Louis-Jacques Milon who shifted the story focus to a minor episode in Book II in which Don Quixote and his servant Sancho Panza help the beautiful Quiteria (Kitri) outwit her father, who wishes her to marry the wealthy but foppish Gamache, and marry the handsome but penniless barber Basilio.

The premiere of Petipa's staging was held not in St. Petersburg but at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in December 1869, the ballet being a relative success. A revised version comprising five acts and eleven scenes, plus a prologue and an epilogue, was mounted in St. Petersburg

³ *Don Quixote* was the first of 16 ballets that Minkus created in collaboration with Petipa. Neither man was Russian in origin, Petipa French and Minkus Austrian. At this time Minkus was on staff of the Moscow Imperial Theatres.

in November 1871⁴. Some of the changes included the roles of Kitri (daughter of Lorenzo a local innkeeper) and Dulcinea (a princess from one of Don Quixote's fantasies) becoming a dual role, whereas in the 1869 Moscow production they were danced by two different ballerinas. Many of the comic scenes and character dances were cut and Basilio's mock suicide was changed into a more dramatic scene in which Kitri threatens to kill herself rather than marrying Gamache. In addition, this scene was transferred from Act 3 to Act 2, happening before the windmill scene rather than after. A new fifth act was added with new characters, the Duke and Duchess, and it was in their castle that the final act took place, not the tavern from the 1869 production. Don Quixote's duel with the Knight of the Silver Moon was cut and the ballet ended with an epilogue in which Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, after Kitri and Basilio's wedding, return home sad and broken rather than setting out again on their quest.

The reason for these changes was that the Moscow and St. Petersburg audiences were very different⁵. Moscow was the centre of business and commerce and here lived the old ancestral nobility and rich merchants who attended the ballet dressed in shawls and jackets. St. Petersburg was the centre of banking and imperial power full of court officials in tails and military officers with spurs and elaborate moustaches, the woman with snowy white *décolletés* – diamonds, perfume, lace⁶. The tastes of the two audiences also differed. The Moscow audience favoured ballet with a strong narrative, mime scenes, folk and comic dances. In St. Petersburg rich spectacle and elegance were pivotal elements. Thus, the original 1869 production in Moscow was a heart-warming comedy; the 1871 revival in St. Petersburg a serious drama.

Alexander Gorsky, appointed ballet master in Moscow in 1900 at age 29, mounted his own adaptation of Petipa's staging at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, in December of that year and brought it to the Mariinsky, St. Petersburg in January 1902. Gorsky's 1900 revival restored some of the 1869 detail and the comedy, including Basilio's mock suicide, but modified Petipa's scenario to three acts and six scenes.

Petipa's production had focused primarily on Don Quixote, the titular character, whereas Gorsky's production shifted the focus to Kitri and Basilio, their *Wedding Pas de deux* (aka as the *Grand Pas de deux*) being the ballet's main highlight. For Petipa, Kitri and Basilio were meant to be supporting characters as they appear in only one chapter in the novel. Today they are the stars of the ballet (Don Quixote is a non-dancing role) and the *Wedding Pas de deux* between Kitri and Basilio in the final act is such a showstopper that it is often performed as a gala or competition number.

⁴ This production earned Minkus the title Ballet Composer of the St Petersburg Imperial Theatres in 1872 following composer Cesare Pugni's death. He held the post for 14 years until the post was abolished by director Ivan Vsevolozhsky and composed over twenty ballets altogether, including *La Bayadère*.

⁵ Additionally, the budget for the Moscow production had been only 8,913 roubles, half that of *King Candaules* (16,389) and Saint-Leon's *Little Humpbacked Horse* (15,843) in the same theatre.

⁶ Description according to Vladimir Teliakovsky who in 1901 moved from Moscow to St. Petersburg to become the new director of the Imperial Theatres.

Below is a table extracted from Wikipedia showing the various original castings.

Role	Petipa Moscow 1869	St Petersburg 1871	Gorsky St Petersburg 1902
Don Quixote	Wilhelm Vanner	Timofei Stukolkin	Alexei Bulgakov
Sancho Panza	Vassily Geltser		Enrico Cecchetti
Kitri	Anna Sobeshchanskaya	Alexandra Vergina	Mathilde Kschessinska
Basilio	Sergei Sokolov	Lev Ivanov	Nikolai Legat
Gamache	Dmitri Kuznetsov	Nikolai Goltz	Pavel Gerdt
The Street Dancer			Olga Preobrajenska
Juanita			Anna Pavlova
Dulcinea del Toboso	Pelageya Karpakova	Alexandra Vergina	Mathilde Kschessinska
Amor			Tamara Karsavina

Perhaps the biggest changes Gorsky made in his two revivals were to *The Dream* scene after Don Quixote is knocked unconscious whilst attacking windmills and dreams that he is in the enchanted garden of his beloved Dulcinea. According to The Marius Petipa Society: *"In Petipa's staging, The Dream scene began with Don Quixote, dressed in shining armour, fighting various monsters, the last of which was a giant spider on its web After Don Quixote successfully slew the beasts, he cut the spider and its web in half, which revealed the garden of Dulcinea"*⁷. Don Quixote was brought before Dulcinea, who was accompanied by a huge corps de ballet of dryads and seventy-two students as little amours. After a series of dancing, he knelt before her and everything vanished".

Gorsky's *The Dream* scene is typical of vision scenes in many earlier and later ballets such as Solor's opium induced *Kingdom of the Shades* vision in *La Bayadère*. Vision scenes were in essence a look back to the past Romantic Ballet period. There are exceptions to all the following general observations, but vision sequences are almost always strict classical dance, feature elaborate geometric patterns, suspend the ballet's narrative and bring the two

⁷ The ingenious stage effects which included a spider descending along its web, a large moon that cried and then laughed, outsized cacti, dragons and windmills helped launch the career of the Bolshoi's machinist and designer, Karl Valts.

protagonists together. *Don Quixote* differs in that it is Dulcinea that takes part in the dream, not Kitri, but this is understandable as it is Don Quixote's dream not Basilio's and as mentioned previously the two roles of Kitri and Dulcinea were merged in Petipa's 1871 staging.

Three famous variations were interpolated into *The Dream* scene by Gorsky, none of which were composed by Minkus. For his 1900 revival Gorsky added a new character, the Queen of the Dryads, her variation set to music composed by Anton (Antoine) Simon. For his 1902 revival Gorsky interpolated the *Variation of Amour*, composed by Alexi Barmin for Varvara Nikitina's performance in *Paquita* circa. 1885 and the *Variation of Dulcinea*, which had been composed by Riccardo Drigo for Elena Cornalba's performance in *The Vestal* in 1888.

However, the "fan" variation entitled "*L'éventails*" of Kitri in the *Wedding Pas de deux* whose authorship has been questioned in the past does appear to have been composed by Minkus, but according to Yuri Burlaka, former Artistic Director of the Bolshoi Theatre Ballet (2009-2011) and who has worked extensively on reconstructions of historic repertory, it was composed not for *Don Quixote* but for *Roxana, the Beauty of Montenegro*⁸.

In crowd scenes, Gorsky treated the *corps de ballet* members not as an ornamental group dancing in unison behind the principals but as individuals, giving them different personalities and costumes. Petipa may not have liked seeing realistic crowd scenes⁹, but today's dancers do and one of the young artists after West Australian Ballet's May 2025 reprisal of their version following Gorsky wrote to me saying: "*I loved even the small moments in our townspeople scene, playing with the props on the stage, flirting and acting around to create lively stage interactions was so much fun*". As the ArtsHub reviewer of WAB's staging put it: "*several sets of eyes are required to fully appreciate the richness of detail occurring in the background at any given point*".

Gorsky's 1902 revival was not well received in St. Petersburg, causing shock for the elderly Petipa and among ballet enthusiasts, who claimed that the production was a mutilation of Petipa's original masterpiece by one of his former students and dancers¹⁰. The 83-year-old Petipa was so furious with the changes he is reported to have said: "*Kindly tell that young man that I am not dead yet*".

Today all productions of *Don Quixote* stem from Gorsky's revival and such have been the revisions, alterations and interpolations from other ballets noted above since his time it is unknown if any of Petipa's original choreography has survived. Some believe that only a variation for Kitri, notated in the Stepanov method when performed by Vera Trefilova, is

⁸ This was one of several ballets that Petipa created for Eugenia Sokolova. It premiered in St. Petersburg in 1878.

⁹ Alexandre Benois, a painter, art critic, and later set designer for the Ballet Russes, but no fan of Gorsky, described his staging as consisting "*of making the crowds on stage bustle and move about fitfully and aimlessly*".

¹⁰ In fact, Gorsky had been given complete freedom to revise Petipa's ballet by Vladimir Teliakovsky who had been appointed director of the Imperial Theatres in June 1901.

possibly Petipa's. None of the Spanish dances in modern productions are real or authentic (and therefore not by Petipa) but clearly what Soviet choreographers thought to be Spanish.

The Times dance critic John Percival wrote in a 1997 article that Igor Belsky, the choreographer and the Vaganova Academy's artistic director, had told him "*We know that the gypsies dance is not by Petipa, because it was staged by Nina Anisimova and myself.*" But Belsky is convinced that all the ballerina's solos and duets, the dances for her two friends and the whole dream sequence are real Petipa, and most of the rest is authentic "Petipa-or-Gorsky".

Today, the most popular staging of *Don Quixote* is Rudolf Nureyev's version based in turn on Gorsky's three-act version. Nureyev had debuted in the role of Basilio with Kirov Ballet, aged 21, and after he defected to the West in 1961 this became one of his signature roles. In 1966, Rudolf Nureyev staged the ballet for the Vienna State Opera, using Minkus' score adapted by John Lanchbery. Nureyev enhanced the comedy, including a slapstick duel between Don Q and Gamache. Nureyev revised this version for The Australian Ballet in 1970 which starred himself as Basilio, Lucette Aldous as Kitri, Robert Helpmann as Don Quixote and Ray Powell as Sancho Panza. The Australian Ballet then took *Don Quixote* on tour with Nureyev to North America. In 1972, Nureyev returned to Melbourne to direct and star in a filmed version of the production, with virtually the same cast, produced in hangars at Essendon airport.

Don Quixote at WAB

West Australian Ballet (WAB) commissioned its own version in May 2010 with renowned Australian *prima ballerina* Lucette Aldous reimagining the choreography after Petipa's original but including parts from Nureyev. She brought her own interpretation to the work, her choreography highlighting the ballet's humour and the relationship between the characters. Aldous's production is economical in scope and scale while effectively incorporating all key elements of the story within two entertaining acts of four scenes and a short prologue. A large scroll hand-written in Spanish appears at times, referencing the ballet's literary origins. In Act II when the townspeople celebrate Kitri and Basilio's wedding, the lively Fandango led by Espada and Mercedes was choreographed by Perth-based flamenco teacher and consultant on Spanish dance internationally, Deanna Blacher.

The ballet was restaged in May 2017 and in May 2025 and again was well received. One reviewer described the duel between Gamache and Don Quixote as "*the most amusing sword-fight in any ballet, ever*". Some notable features are Don Quixote's 'horse' comprising

a literal wine barrel¹¹, and the windmill blades he battles being very effectively staged not by use of an actual windmill but simply by three dancers rotating material banners. The vision scene brought differing responses. The ArtsHub reviewer wrote that Don Quixote “*exudes physical longing for Dulcinea, encapsulating the feeling of longing that comes with chasing a dream, only to (find) oneself grasping at empty air*”. In a sign of these Woke times however, Dance Australia’s reviewer wrote “*Watching a scene that revolves around an old man fantasising about three young women (Dulcinea, Queen of the Dryads and Cupid) feels uncomfortable, to say the least, in 2025. This isn’t an issue unique to Don Quixote, or even to classical ballet, but it is to be hoped that ways can be found to present canonical works whilst acknowledging such power imbalances*”. I cannot help but agree about power imbalances, for Don Quixote had in his youth been enamoured with the neighbouring village girl Aldonza Lorenzo (who he renames Dulcinea del Toboso just as he renames himself), and such was her power over his youthful mind that as an old man bordering on fifty, he still dreams of her.

Note: Cervantes died impoverished on April 23, 1616, ten days after Shakespeare had died. Regarding his novel *Don Quixote*, Cervantes wrote: “*Children handle it, youngsters read it, grown men understand it, and old people applaud it. In short, it is universally so thumbbed, so gleaned, so studied, and so known that if people but see a lean horse, they presently cry, ‘there goes Rocinante!’*”.

¹¹ For his 1869 Moscow production, Petipa had acquired an emaciated horse (named Rocinante by Don Q) for a measly nine roubles. ‘Rocin’ means nag or hack in Spanish and ‘ante’ (meaning ‘before’ in Latin) implies he is formerly an old nag. This is a typical Cervante’s joke as Don Q in his fevered imagination meant the ‘ante’ as a badge of distinction - i.e. his steed ranked ‘before’ all other horses. Nowadays, use of real horses has proved tricky as they are too well fed. Ballet critic Cyril Beaumont wrote that “*the horses hired locally for the Pavlova Company’s production of the ballet were much too well-fed for the part of Rosinante and had to be made up accordingly*”. Zoë Anderson reporting on this adds the comment “*often so successfully that there were visits from the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*”.