

Giselle

updated Nov 23

In the decades following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 the Romantic movement triumphed in France and embraced every form of art. If Filippo Taglioni's ballet *La Sylphide* (1832) starring Marie Taglioni raised the romantic ballet to its most exalted form, the most successful application of the romantic formula was *Giselle* (1841). *Giselle* incorporated the two typical features of a romantic ballet: Act 1 providing local colour in a foreign and exotic setting (happy peasants, elegant aristocrats and conventional dancing); Act II having a supernatural moonlit setting where a mortal character is beset by spirits dressed in white and who dance *en pointe*.

The inspiration for *Giselle* began when Théophile Gautier's attention was caught by a passage in Henrich Heine's story *De l'Allemagne* telling of a Slavonic tradition of nocturnal Wilis that lure young men to their death by enticing them to join in their dancing. Inspired he wrote the words "*Les Wilis, a ballet*" on a sheet of paper, envisioning the action for the first act to be set in a beautiful ballroom of some prince with the Wilis attracted by the dancing, but then faced with the reality of staging such poetic fancy his initial interest faded and he threw the paper in the waste basket. Fortunately, that night at the opera he told his friend Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges about his inspiration. Saint-Georges, fired with enthusiasm and with expertise in writing for the stage, produced a scenario in three days. His scenario bore little similarity to Gautier's original idea for the first act but was closer to Gautier's conception in the second except for Saint-Georges selecting only white costumes for the Wilis as per earlier "white act" ballets such as *La Sylphide*¹

In January 1841, Jules Perrot's 20-year-old pupil (and lover) Carlotta Grisi had been engaged by Paris Opéra and Perrot was searching for a suitable ballet role for her. The first suggestion was a revival of *La Sylphide*, but the role had been promised to another, so Grisi was offered the lead role in the projected ballet *La Rosière de Grand*, which François-Ferdinand Decombe (Albert) was to produce to music by Adolphe Adam. At this point Perrot was shown the *Giselle* scenario and considering it a more suitable work for Grisi at once took it to Adolphe Adam.

Everyone agreed to give *Giselle* priority and after Saint-Georges (librettist) and Adam (composer) for *La Rosière de Grand* had been suitably indemnified, Adam immediately set to work, taking only three weeks to compose the score, although the orchestration took considerably longer and was not finished until the early part of June. He used some pages from *Faust*, an earlier ballet score that had been performed in London some years prior, but the bulk was wholly original.

Jean Coralli, Paris Opéra's first ballet-master, was nominally put in charge of the choreography and oversaw rehearsals while Perrot arranged all Grisi's *pas* and mime scenes, although he was never acknowledged on the title page of the scenario. This meant he was

¹ The famous first white act was Filippo Taglioni's *Ballet of the Nuns* which appeared in Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le Diable* in 1831. It featured ghostly nuns who are summoned from their graves at night.

not entitled to a share in the royalties, his only reward being in overseeing Grisi's triumph. The ballet premiered on 28 June 1841 with Carlotta Grissi² as Giselle, Lucien Petipa as Duke Albert of Silesia (later renamed Albrecht), Jean Coralli as Hilarion and French *Prima Ballerina* Adèle Dumilâtre as Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis.

Adolphe Adam wrote to Saint-Georges who had not been present at the premiere the good news: *"We enjoyed a roaring success. The first act, which is the less strong, had already achieved success, thanks to Carlotta, who was enchanting in it, when the second act came and transformed the success into a triumph"*.

Carlotta Grisi's triumph was recognized within a few weeks by her being given a new contract and salary increase. In the eight years she remained at Paris Opéra (she departed in 1849) only one other dancer (Elisa Bellon) played the role of Giselle, and then only twice, and the rest of the cast essentially remained unchanged. Bellon had danced the role in Bordeaux in December 1841 in the first production of the ballet outside Paris.

The ballet has undergone several revisions since this opening night. A mime scene between Giselle and Albrecht at the beginning has gone as has much of a long *pas de deux* in the first act. The Duke of Courland and his daughter Bathilde no longer enter mounted on horseback and in some versions no longer remain on stage to witness Giselle's death. In the second act, a scene in which several villagers pass through the glade and are pursued by the Wilis has also been dropped and Bathilde no longer reappears at the end of the ballet. Fortunately, the seamless unity of Adam's score and his use of Leitmotifs (such as the famous "he loves me, he loves me not" theme in Act I) to carry the plot forward has protected the music from some of the cut-and-paste meddling inflicted on other ballet scores.

Nine months after its Paris premiere, *Giselle* was staged in London, again with Grisi in the title role. Thirteen performances were held with Queen Victoria attending two. Grisi returned to Paris in April 1843 and Fanny Elssler, who had recently returned from a tour of America, was engaged for the London 1843-44 season planned to include *Giselle*. The consensus of audiences was that Elssler lacked Grisi's lively step and suppleness, whose dancing betrayed no sign of effort regardless of difficulty and thus lacked the otherworldliness the role of Giselle required in the second act, but Elssler made up for it in the first act as she *"shifted the balance of the work. Grisi's mad scene had been more danced than mimed; Elssler's was acclaimed as an acting triumph"*.

Giselle did not last in either London or Paris, the last Paris Opéra performance occurring in 1868, two years before the Franco-Prussian war which broke out in July 1870 and which saw the Paris theatres close. It was to be another 56 years before *Giselle* was again danced on the Paris stage, thanks to it being retained in the St. Petersburg repertory.

² Opening night was also Grissi's 22nd birthday

A year after its Paris premiere the ballet had been staged in St. Petersburg by Ballet Master Antoine Titus³ in December 1842 with Elena Andreyanova as Giselle. Five years later, Marius Petipa arrived in St. Petersburg, debuting in Titus' production in the role of Albrecht in December 1847. The following year Fanny Elssler also arrived in Russia to dance as Giselle in Titus' production with Petipa as Albrecht. While Marius Petipa's brother Lucien had originated the role of Albrecht in Paris, Marius had danced the role of Albrecht in Bordeaux in 1843 and in Madrid in 1844 and was familiar with the ballet. Later, as ballet master in St. Petersburg, Marius Petipa kept *Giselle* in the repertoire, although updating it over several revivals (1884, 1887, 1899 and 1903). To the first act a waltz was added and the peasant *pas de deux* was revised (nowadays it is usually performed by at least six dancers). Petipa also substituted music for the variation that Myrtha now dances. It is Petipa's version of the ballet from which all modern productions derive, his final revival being notated in the Stepanov notation method.

Giselle was first performed in Australia (Melbourne) in 1855 but coming after a three-act opera (Bellini's *La Sonnambula*), as was usual for ballets at the time, it was not well received. It was not until April 1929 when Anna Pavlova, who had danced the role of Giselle in Petipa's 1903 revival at the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre, danced Giselle for the closing night of the Brisbane season of her second Australian tour arranged by JC Williamson Theatres Ltd that Australian audiences finally had an opportunity to fully appreciate this ballet. According to the Brisbane Courier: "*The audience was enthusiastic to the verge of frenzy, and seldom has any artist received an ovation as did Pavlova*". *Giselle* then opened the Sydney season, with the company later performing in Melbourne, Adelaide and finally Perth. By the end of the 1929 Australian tour, the company had presented 120 performances over a period of four months with Pavlova (aged 48) dancing in every performance.

Giselle at WAB

In 1984, Barry Moreland, in the first year of his 14-year tenure as Artistic Director of WAB, invited Beryl Grey, the former director of London Festival Ballet, to stage the Mary Skeaping production of *Giselle* in Perth. Skeaping's production was widely regarded as the closest realization of the original 1841 choreography by Coralli and Perot. Royal Ballet dancers Errol Pickford and his wife Benazir Hussein, were invited as guest artists with WAB for 12 months, making their first appearance together in Australia as Albrecht and Queen of the Wilis respectively. *Giselle* was danced by Lisa Miles and Hilarion by Andrew Hill while the company's small *corps de ballet* was supplemented with 13 guest artists. The dancers were reviewed favourably, particularly Hussein for her "*statuesque coldness and poetic elegance*" as Queen of the Wilis but David Measham conducting the WA Symphony Orchestra and

³ Titus' own ballets were flops. Nadine Meisner in her biography of Marius Petipa quotes a Russian journal's amusing report on Titus' first presentation in St. Petersburg of his ballet *The Swiss Milkmaid*: "*In the first act they dance, mill about, run around, and abduct the milkmaid, while in the second act they marry her, run around, mill about, and dance*".

noted for his symphonic work showed *“little recognition of what was happening on stage or understood the dancer’s needs”*. Moreland restaged the ballet in 1986 and again in 1997.

A new version of *Giselle* was choreographed in May 2014 by then Artistic Director Aurélien Scannella and his wife Principal Ballet Mistress Sandy Delasalle, this being their first full-length work for the company since joining WAB in 2013. Their version was true to Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot’s original creation whilst including their favourite elements and details from the versions that they had previously danced. Subtle changes included providing more dancing and less mime and returning the peasant *pas de deux* to its original two dancers rather than six dancers common today. The ballet was reprised in September 2019 and again in May 2021. Jessica Gethin, then Chief Conductor of the Perth Symphony Orchestra and for whom the 2019 performance was her debut at conducting for ballet, and perhaps mindful of the differences between conducting for ballet and symphony as noted above, recalls how she sought advice from other conductors. The advice she received was *“You’ll be fine, as long as it is not Giselle”*.

How did Giselle die?

The cause of Giselle’s death varies depending on which production you watch. For example, in Sir Peter Wright’s 1985 production for the Royal Ballet, Giselle stabs herself with Albrecht’s sword; in WAB’s version choreographed in 2014 by then Artistic Director Aurélien Scannella and his wife Principal Ballet Mistress Sandy Delasalle, Giselle suffers from a weak heart and dies after her heart gives out.

Wright thought the ballet to be inconsistent and *“sometimes downright stupid”* and was insistent that *“Giselle actually kills herself as in the original production”*. Alternatively, given their history together, Aurélien and Sandy believe differently. Aurélien had first danced the role of Albrecht at the age of 23 for the Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden in Germany, partnered with Sandy as Giselle, and for them the ballet has special meaning. Aurélien commented *“Although it wasn’t my first principal role, it was my first role as a Prince and more importantly I had the joy of dancing the role with my future wife”*. It is romantically understandable that they believe Giselle died of a broken heart.

Most versions nowadays will conclude with Giselle attempting suicide but failing with Hilarion, or sometimes Albrecht, stopping her from stabbing herself. However, historian Ivor Guest giving an account of the first performance of *Giselle* states that *“Carlotta Grisi, as Giselle, takes Albrecht’s sword, plunges it into her heart and dies”*.

The strongest evidence that Giselle committed suicide and did not die of a broken heart is continuously before your eyes from the moment the curtain goes up at the beginning of Act II until the final fall of the curtain at the ballet’s conclusion. We see a lonely grave amid a forest clearing. Why is Giselle not buried in the church graveyard with her forbearers?

Because in that time and place people who committed suicide could not be buried in consecrated ground.

Those who believe she died of a broken heart counter this evidence by claiming Giselle is buried in a forest clearing rather than a consecrated graveyard because *“everyone believes that she was possessed by an unholy spirit, which caused her [to] descend into madness, therefore making it inappropriate for her to be buried in a Christian grave”*⁴. Furthermore, choreographer Alexei Ratmansky, who was director of the Moscow Bolshoi Ballet from 2004 to 2008 and known for his exceptional musicality, has explained that the music for the scene does not suggest suicide.

If the original production starring Grisi clearly had Giselle stabbing herself with Albrecht’s sword, then the question arises as to when and where the switch to Giselle going mad and dying of a broken heart began. Perhaps it arose when Fanny Elssler took over the title role for the London 1843-44 season and changed the emphasis of the first act ending from one of dancing to acting, portraying Giselle’s descent into madness.

What to conclude? If you are a rationalist who demands a story plot have internal consistency, then you may decide one way; if you are a romantic who wants to be emotionally moved by a tragic love story you may decide another way. Giselle going mad and dying when her weakened heart gives out or Giselle committing suicide are acceptable story alternatives that fit the evidence of her burial in a forest clearing. Giselle romantically dancing herself to death or simply dying from her weak heart because Albrecht has spurned her love does not fit the evidence of her burial. Whatever your own view ultimately you should respect the choice of the choreographer in whatever version you watch. I will leave the last word to Alastair Macaulay who states when discussing Giselle’s death in a 2002 essay: *“You can waste many hours over this one. And many have. the precise cause of Giselle’s death is not something that is really of much consequence to Giselle as overall drama. She dies an untimely death at the end of Act One; she rises again in Act Two; and that’s that”*.

<https://www.alastairmacaulay.com/all-essays/giselle-and-her-problems>

Who is Giselle?

Let us start our enquiries with a question: **Where is Giselle’s father?** as he is never mentioned in the ballet. Given the original setting of medieval Germany, we can immediately discount that Giselle’s parents are divorced. Possible, but unlikely, is the notion that Giselle’s father is absent on Estate business. The grapes are in the process of being harvested, so wine sales are unlikely at this time of year, plus given the importance of wine sales to the Estate’s economy, such business would be handled by the Estate itself, not by a peasant from

⁴ Quote from Marius Petipa Society

the village. This only leaves the conclusion that her father is already deceased, bringing our enquiries on this line of questioning to a (dead) end.

But Giselle is not the only one with a missing father, for Albrecht's father is also missing. He does not accompany his guests, who are staying at his estate, as part of the hunting party. Nowadays, Albrecht is seemingly always titled *Count of Silesia*, suggesting that as he has not inherited the title of duke that his father is still alive, but in the original 1841 production he was titled *Duke Albert of Silesia* indicating he had already succeeded to the title and his father was thus deceased. It makes more sense for Albrecht's father to be still alive as it would explain who is forcing him into an arranged marriage.

In 1985, Sir Peter Wright choreographed a new version of *Giselle* for The Royal Ballet that remains in the company's repertory to this day. He had previously (in 1966) been asked by John Cranko to choreograph a version for Stuttgart Ballet and was given six weeks to research the ballet. His research led him to ask a far more interesting question than the one above: **"Who is Giselle's father?"**.

Wright postulated in an interview about his creation of The Royal Ballet's production that *"in a Rhineland village in those days, the local Duke would have the 'droit de seigneur', which would give him the right to take any young bride to his bed before her wedding night could it be that Giselle's mother Berthe suffered a similar fate and was abandoned by her fiancé at their wedding. Thus, her daughter Giselle, although illegitimate, would have some blue blood in her veins – hence the fact that her looks are very different from all the other peasants', and her dancing too"*⁵

But what duke does Wright mean? David McAllister, the former Artistic Director of Australian Ballet takes Wright to be referring to the Duke of Courland. McAllister's logic here is that the Duke of Courland appears to be familiar with Berthe's house and comfortable to enter it for a rest (implying he has visited before) and calls again *"to keep an eye on the beautiful Giselle"* his daughter. But the Duke of Courland is not the local duke. He is visiting the estate because his daughter Bathilde is about to marry Albrecht, and it would be more likely to be Albrecht's father, the Duke of Silesia who is (or was) the duke in question. That Albrecht (and therefore his father) are the locals is evident by Albrecht possessing a key to the locked shed opposite Berthe's house and which he must either own or be renting. It is also obvious from this that he has visited Giselle before and that they are already a couple, a point that was clear in 19th century productions as in these Giselle immediately embraces Albrecht when she emerges from the house.

⁵ I hope what Wright is trying to say here is that her fair skin (thus showing blue veins, a mark of the gentry as opposed to brown sunburnt peasants) is a result of her never having had to undertake backbreaking toil all day in the fields under the hot sun as had the other village girls, because of her "weak" heart, and not due to genetic inheritance.

The notion that it is the Duke of Silesia who is Giselle's father would explain many puzzling features:

1. the absence of Albrecht's father from the hunting party assuming he is still alive. He would possibly be reluctant to risk the awkward scene that may arise when he entered the village and confronted Berthe, Giselle's mother, whilst in the company of important guests.
2. Hilarion's persistence in pursuing Giselle despite her continual rejection of his advances. If he knew she was the illegitimate daughter of the duke, then marrying her was a potential way for him to raise his own status in the village.
3. It would also explain how Berthe a single mother with no visible means of support could afford to own a house adjacent to the village square, a prime location, and furthermore a house both large and comfortable enough for gentry to be willing to rest there whilst awaiting the conclusion of the hunt.

The suggestion that Giselle is the illegitimate daughter of Albrecht's father also is given support by the strange behavior of Berthe. When she first spots Giselle and Albrecht holding hands and seemingly in love, she does not ask "who is this man?" but instead immediately grabs Giselle by the hand and drags her away. She is not averse to Giselle having a beau, given her support for Hilarion's advances, it is who Giselle is with that matters to her. She overreacts because she knows who Albrecht really is – Giselle's half-brother.

She immediately warns Giselle that she is in danger from the Wilis when Albrecht inevitably breaks her heart. No one else in the village seemingly cares about the Wilis – but Berthe has had her own heart broken and been left with child, which while saving her from such a fate herself has left her preoccupied by their existence. The Wilis are reported to be virginal young girls who die before their wedding day, and one cannot but help note the irony that if Giselle had been seduced by Albrecht, she would have been saved from such a fate.

Many women of my acquaintance (including my own wife) express their contempt for Giselle. I do not mean that they despise the music or dancing of this ballet but the character of Giselle herself. Why in Act II did she try and save Albrecht who had cheated on her and yet let Hilarion die, the very man who seemingly truly loved her and tried to help her family? In their opinion this stupid girl should have used the sword to stab Albrecht, not herself. To answer their concerns, I have tried to point out that they have seriously misconstrued the character of Giselle. For if we undertake a forensic analysis of the story a very different picture of Giselle emerges than that of an innocent young girl who falls in love, only to be cruelly betrayed and die of a broken heart.

Variations differ, some performances open with Albrecht's entrance, others Hilarion's. But regardless, in the opening scenes of the ballet, we will typically see Hilarion, the gamekeeper, returning from his early morning excursion to his traps, the villagers heading off to the fields to gather the grape harvest, and Berthe, bucket in hand, setting out to fetch water. But where is Giselle? Up early to help with the harvest or household chores? No – she is inside her house and judging by the persistent knocking required to bring her to the door

she is fast asleep in bed. But of course, she has a weak heart, so no one expects her to be up early to toil in the fields.

When Giselle does exit the house, thinking herself alone, she dances prettily about showing no sign of a weak heart. In anticipation of Lers' (Albrecht's) arrival she even practices a curtsy. Why? Peasants do not curtsy to each other. It can only be because she already knew that Albrecht is no peasant. It is likely she has previously seen him storing his sword in the shed - swords were expensive and only carried by the upper class. He has not fooled her, and this is why Giselle can so readily reject Hilarion, who her own mother clearly thinks is a great catch. As the gamekeeper, Hilarion has the highest position in village society to which any peasant could aspire. But by snaring the "peasant" Albrecht, Giselle thinks she can do even better and leave village life behind.

When the villagers return and celebrate a successful wine harvest through dance Giselle immediately joins in – but then she suddenly must sit down, overcome by weakness. Notice the pattern here – her weak heart only shows when she has an audience. She is so convincing that the villagers, feeling sorry for her, crown her Queen of the Vintage, despite the fact she has not lifted a finger to help with the harvest. When Bathilde arrives she fondles Bathilde's dress, holding it to her cheek, against all protocol and good manners, dreaming she will be wearing a dress like this soon instead of the one that she signs to Bathilde that she had sewn herself. And when Bathilde gifts her with a beautiful necklace she takes barely one musical beat to give her thanks but runs straight away to show it off to the other girls. No wonder she is so devastated when Albrecht's deception is exposed and her dreams come tumbling down that she, in the depths of despair goes mad.

In Act II we see Giselle raised from her grave by Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis, better known nowadays as female vampires. There is a common misconception that all vampires drink the blood of their victims which has arisen because people are only familiar with stories about Dracula and his drinking mates. Let me assure you that no female, whether alive or dead, when out to dine of a night would ever consider supping on sloppy red food whilst wearing a white dress. No, female vampires do not suck your blood, they drain your life force. And what better way to portray this in ballet than through a dance to exhaustion. Such creatures still exist today – for I recently heard tell of a man who encountered one of these creatures on the side of a lonely road late at night but fortunately he escaped after a brief tango with only his wallet drained.

Vampires are well known to have an aversion to the Christian Cross, and we see this clearly in Act II. Giselle stands in front of Albrecht with her arm outstretched in the form of a cross and the Wilis all turn their heads away, averting their eyes. When Myrtha forces Giselle to leave the grave and come to her, Giselle turns to Albrecht and signs for him to stay by the cross where he is protected from harm. But of course, Albrecht is a man, so no one should be surprised when he ignores her sound advice. Men know best and beside he must play the hero and save her from Myrtha. Ah well – we all know how that turned out.

But surely, I hear you say Giselle was protecting Albrecht from harm because of her love for him. Not so, as followers of the Twilight Series would know, newly created vampires have an

insatiable feeding lust and Giselle selfishly wanted him solely for herself and was merely trying to prevent the other Wilis from sharing in her spoils. The final clincher that the Wilis are vampires occurs when dawn breaks, their power is broken by the sun's rays and they all return to graves and coffins.

So now it is time to decide: Is Giselle a naïve and innocent young girl cruelly jilted by the man she loves and going mad dies of a broken heart or does she stab herself with Albrecht's sword in a fit of despair; is she the illegitimate daughter of Albrecht's father and thus a half sibling to him; is she the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Courland and thus a half sibling to Bathilde; or is she as I contend a lazy girl who fakes a weak heart and cunningly attempts to entrap Albrecht in order to fulfil her aspirational dreams of moving to a higher station in life, and in the process successfully fooling her peers, her mother and audiences all around the world for nearly 200 years?