

# La Bayadère

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Nadine Meisner<sup>1</sup> in her biography of Marius Petipa writes: “In his career with the St Petersburg Imperial Ballet, he served four emperors, was chief ballet master for forty-one years, created more than fifty original ballets, staged versions of nineteen other ballets, and made dances for thirty-seven operas. Among the extant ballets, *La Bayadère* is considered to contain unparalleled, groundbreaking choreography.”

Indeed, *La Bayadère* contains one of the most mesmerizing scenes in the history of classical ballet: *The Kingdom of the Shades*. In an opium-induced vision the young warrior Solor sees a procession of ballerinas in white tutus descending to earth from a moonlit sky. They are (arguably) multiple visions of the bayadère (temple dancer) Nikiya with whom he is in love but cannot marry as the Rajah has announced he is to marry his daughter Gamzatti as a reward for his valour. Depending on the size of the company and the size of the stage the number of bayadère descending the ramp to the stage usually varies from 24 to 32 (Petipa’s original ballet had 64; the 1900 revival 48). The entrance is not technically complex comprising an initial *arabesque penchée* (in many versions, including Petipa’s, the *arabesques* are simple not *penchée*) in profile followed by the same slow series of steps creating a hypnotic effect, but the steepness of the ramp can provide some difficulties, and the entire act is of such a length that fatigue sets in. One mistake and the whole effect will be spoiled. Usually, the *corps de ballet* switch supporting legs at every turn to help with fatigue and muscle cramp. Once everyone is off the ramp the *corps de ballet* echoes and enhances the work of the principals. There is no drama in *The Kingdom of the Shades* scene, its effect relying entirely upon its dancing<sup>2</sup>.

*The Kingdom of the Shades* is but one act (Act III) in this grand ballet (originally named *Bayaderka*) comprising four acts and seven scenes with an apotheosis. The ballet, choreographed by Marius Petipa to music by Ludwig Minkus and libretto by Petipa and Sergei Khudekov, premiered in February 1877 at the Imperial Bolshoi Kamenny Theatre in St. Petersburg starring Ekaterina Vazem (*Nikiya*), Lev Ivanov (*Solor*), Maria Gorshenkova (*Hamsattii*) and Christian Johansson (*Rajah*). Its final revival by Petipa at the Mariinsky Theatre was in 1900, the cast including Matilda Kschessinskaya (*Nikiya*) Pavel Gerdt (*Solor*) and Olga Preobrazhenskaya (*Gamzatti* – renamed from *Hamsattii* for this revival).

The history, background and the multiple changes made to this ballet have been so well documented by Amy Growcott for her Marius Petipa Society that I will not attempt any summary here but instead refer you to her own blog entry if you wish to delve deeper:

<https://petipasociety.com/la-bayadere/>

However, the Marius Petipa Society does not go in any great depth into the sources that may have influenced Petipa in his creation of the ballet. Fortunately, Giannandrea Poesio, who until his death in 2017 had been the Director of the Research Institute for Media, Arts and

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<sup>1</sup> Marius Petipa (The Emperor’s Ballet Master) by Nadine Meisner, Oxford University Press 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The entrance of the Shades was inspired by Gustav Doré’s illustrations for Dante’s *Paradiso* from *The Divine Comedy*.

Performance at the University of Bedfordshire and a free-lance dance critic working as an historical consultant and reconstructor, has much to say on Petipa's sources and I will include his observations later - in my section on Cultural Appropriation.

The ballet was largely unknown in the Western World until 1961 when Kirov Ballet performed *The Kingdom of the Shades* in Paris with the 23-year-old Rudolf Nureyev as Solor. Sir Frederick Ashton subsequently commissioned Nureyev to stage the Shades scene for The Royal Ballet in 1963. The full ballet was not seen in the West until Natalia Makarova staged it in May 1980 for American Ballet Theatre (now in three acts and eight scenes). She included her own version of the destruction of the temple scene, which had been dropped in Russia, the ballet there ending with the Shades scene<sup>3</sup>. Her inspiration for the destruction scene was the famous painting *The Last Day of Pompeii* by the Russian painter Karl Bruillov, which he painted in 1830-33.

[https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/18\\_19/zh-5084/index.php?lang=en](https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/18_19/zh-5084/index.php?lang=en)

She also added an apotheosis scene showing Nikiya and Solor reunited in a better world. At the invitation of Artistic Director Anthony Dowell<sup>4</sup>, Makarova staged her version of *La Bayadère* for The Royal Ballet in 1989 and for La Scala Ballet in Milan in 1992<sup>5</sup>.

## ***La Bayadère* at WAB**

*La Bayadère* was performed in Perth by West Australian Ballet in May 2019 and reprised in April 2024. A co-production between WAB, Queensland Ballet and Royal Winnipeg Ballet and choreographed by Greg Horsman, only *The Kingdom of the Shades* act remains faithful to the original. Comprising three acts with eight scenes plus a prologue and epilogue, Horsman's reimagined version is set in India during the British Raj in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Solor is the son of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar while Edith (the renamed Gamzatti) is the daughter of the British Governor General. The Maharajah and the Governor General have brought hostilities between the two parties to an end with a treaty that included the arranged marriage of Solor and Edith. Solor of course objects but reluctantly agrees to the marriage whilst secretly planning to elope with Nikiya, the temple dancer with whom he is in love.

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<sup>3</sup> It is believed the final act was dropped circa 1924, but the reasons are unclear. A flood at this time which destroyed the former Mariinsky Theatre stage may also have destroyed the sets and the theatre lacked the funds to replace them. Furthermore, the work of the machinists for the destruction of the temple had been highly applauded and Fyodor Lopukhov claimed that the theatre now lacked the technical staff to stage the destruction.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Dowell (*Solor*) and Natalia Makarova (*Nikiya*) had danced together in the premiere of her *Bayadère* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in 1980 accompanied by Cynthia Harvey (*Gamzatti*) and Victor Barbee (*Rajah*).

<sup>5</sup> Makarova's production for The Royal Ballet was filmed in 2009 and again in 2018; her production for La Scala filmed in 2006.

In Petipa's version it is possible to feel empathy with Solor, Nikiya and Gamzatti and to view the story arc from each character's perspective. In Horsman's much more grounded version, Edith (the renamed Gamzatti) is a one-dimensional spoilt brat for whom it is impossible to have the slightest sympathy. It is Edith that kills Nikiya at her own engagement party, not through a snake bite but with a dagger stolen from a soldier.

In Scene I of Act 2, Solor seeks solace in an opium den providing a series of comic moments prior to Scene II, *The Kingdom of the Shades*. WAB restricted by being a mid-sized company, brings down only 19 bayadère via two long ramps and after the three soloists depart retains on stage a corps of 16 dancers in 4 x 4 and 2 x 8 patterns. This may appear to be a disappointingly small number compared to the larger companies, but this number is perfectly sized for the small stage of His Majesty's Theatre. As if to compensate, the size of the moon has been doubled to a very pleasing effect.

In Act 3, Solor, forced to proceed with the marriage while still under the influence of opium, gets drunk and is taken to his room. Edith decides to seduce him but when she is rejected reveals that it was her that killed Nikiya. Angry at hearing this, Solor attacks Edith and in the struggle is shot dead by a soldier. The Epilogue shows the spirits of Solor and Nikiya reunited in death. So, while Horsman's ballet does not end with the Shades scene nor does it end with a collapsing temple where everyone is punished by the offended gods.

To their credit, Horsman and Musical Arranger Nigel Gaynor also have advanced this ballet in other areas. The original music by Ludwig Minkus and choreography by Petipa are entirely western whereas for Horsman's production Gaynor made subtle changes to melodies that more closely resemble musical scales of the east and weaved into the score the sounds of the *doumbek* and *riq* – traditional Indian instruments. The costumes designed by Gary Harris also show a contrast between the Indian and British cultures: The Indian costumes are opulent, colourful and free flowing; the British costumes are corseted with high collars and long sleeves<sup>6</sup>.

## ***La Bayadère* and Cultural Appropriation**

*La Bayadère* is considered a masterpiece of the classical ballet canon but in recent years every time it is produced the presenting company is subjected to an email campaign by Rajan Zed, the self-appointed President of Universal Society of Hinduism<sup>7</sup>, urging the company and its sponsors to drop the ballet. Thus, as soon as West Australian Ballet's 2024

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<sup>6</sup> A WAB audience survey found 98% of attendees rated the ballet as a good or excellent aesthetic experience but only 59% thought the ballet had relevance to today's world.

<sup>7</sup> The Universal Society of Hinduism was officially established by Rajan Zed, an Indian immigrant and now American citizen, in September 2011 and is headquartered in Reno, Nevada. Zed has no official ties to any of the formal Hindu sects and the Society's web site contains little data on the organization or even if there are any other members. In the spirit of American entrepreneurship Zed appears to have made a business for himself as a speaker, panelist and board member promoting various causes around the world including environmentalism and Roma in addition to Hinduism. To this cynic, his email campaigns appear to be publicity attempts for his own causes.

season was announced the company received an email from Zed stating that: *“taxpayer-funded WAB and HMT (His Majesty’s Theatre) should not be in the business of callously promoting appropriation of traditions, elements and concepts of “others”; and ridiculing entire communities”* and, in what must have been a surprise to WAB which prides itself on its cultural sensitivity programs, he added the company needed to *“send their executives for cultural sensitivity training so that such an inappropriate stuff did not slip through in the future.”<sup>8</sup>*

Every company scheduling the *La Bayadère* ballet in the last decade has received an essentially identically worded email complaint from Zed as to that received by WAB, but company responses to him have varied widely. Below I have chosen just a few examples to reflect the range of responses to Zed’s email.

The Mariinsky Ballet did not bother responding to his email campaign, but the company had made its opinion clear when it toured the USA in 2019 and performed at the UC Berkeley campus. Some students with Berkeley Ballet Theatre were invited to perform in two scenes but one required blackface makeup. When parents objected, Mariinsky replaced them in the scene stating that dancers must *“wear whatever was created for the production”*. On this issue the Bolshoi Ballet has a similar view, theatre director Vladimir Urin responding to Misty Copeland’s blackface criticism in a 2019 Instagram post saying: *“The ballet La Bayadère has been performed thousands of times in this production in Russia and abroad, and the Bolshoi Theatre will not get involved in such a discussion”*.

Benjamin Millepied who was the Director of Dance at the Paris Opéra Ballet from October 2014 to January 2016 took the blackface makeup off the students in his November 2015 production of *La Bayadère*, calling *la danse de négrillons* simply a children’s dance. This change did not prevent Zed from wanting Paris Opéra Ballet to cancel its 2021 production. Korean National Ballet received a similar email complaint while Houston Ballet and The Royal Ballet both had received complaints from Zed the previous year<sup>9</sup>. Houston Ballet’s refusal to acquiesce to Zed’s demand caused controversy but ultimately the entire 2020/21 season was cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

When Zed took offence at Norwegian National Opera & Ballet scheduling *La Bayadère* for its 2022 season, the company did at least reply politely to his email but refused to cancel the production. Artistic Director Ingrid Lorentzen did not believe cancellation was the best solution stating: *“This ballet, La Bayadère, is a fairy tale ballet placed in a time and a place that never existed”* and *“its content must be viewed in relation to its time....”*. She further

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<sup>8</sup> Zed did not stop there, emailing the Perth City Council, which has opened its monthly meetings with a non-denominational Christian prayer since at least 1997, requesting to have a Hindu opening prayer be added as part of *“a rotation of prayers representing major religions/denominations, including slots for non-believers”*. When the Lord Mayor rejected his request, he felt *“that it is plainly a case of unfairness, discrimination, favoritism; and does not speak well of a democratic society”*. In 2002 he had even unsuccessfully requested the Western Australia Parliament, Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly include a Hindu opening-prayer at one of their sessions.

<sup>9</sup> Other companies targeted by Zed’s email campaign at this time included Latvian National Opera Ballet, Tbilisi Opera and Ballet State Theatre and Hungarian State Opera.

stated *“The answer is to push and establish a reformation by creating new works that stand up to the old ones. I would rather use our force and momentum to create new works for the future, rather than edit the past”*. Zed’s response to Norwegian National Opera & Ballet’s refusal to cancel its production was *“We plan to appeal to Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre as it is simply unfair, unethical and inappropriate to spend taxpayer’s money on caricaturing other culture”*<sup>10</sup>.

While European companies have largely continued with their standard full-length productions, many American ballet companies have dropped the full ballet from their repertoire. In May 2022 when Susan Jaffe was interviewed after being announced as the new Artistic Director of American Ballet Theatre, she said she aims to shelve, temporarily, ballets such as *Le Corsaire* and *La Bayadère* which *“contain offensive stereotyping or run counter to contemporary sensibilities”*. An odd attitude to the company’s history for it was ABT that led the way in bringing the full ballet to the West. Boston Ballet for its 2023/24 season included only a 25-minute version of *The Kingdom of the Shades*. The company stated: *“In our ongoing commitment to **DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION**, Boston Ballet is not presenting the full-length production of La Bayadère. We recognize its problematic storyline and strongly disagree with its appropriation of South Asian culture”*.

In Wales, even *The Kingdom of the Shades* scene was considered inappropriate although it was the theatre, not the ballet company, that cancelled a January 2023 performance, clearly unaware of the difference between this scene and the full ballet. *“Following contact from Rajan Zed earlier today, New Theatre Cardiff immediately contacted the producer of the production, which featured this work as part of a mixed programme. They responded to us immediately, to say: La Bayadère is performed at the world’s most prestigious venues and the International Classic Ballet Theatre was looking forward to presenting an excerpt (Kingdom of the Shades) during its Glorious Gala in the UK. However, it was never the intention to cause offence to any community and, in the light of the points raised by Rajan Zed, of Nevada (USA), the company will find an alternative piece to open their Gala...”*

At least in these latter examples the ballet companies and the theatre were open about their cancellation and the reason for it, giving possibilities for a public discussion of viewpoints. What is more worrying is the noticeable trend of some ballet companies to silently cancel *La Bayadère* through the expediency of no longer scheduling it in their season programming. The ballet quietly disappears from the repertoire without anyone noticing. What is also apparent in New Theatre’s experience is that Zed is reacting solely to the ballet’s name and certainly has never viewed any modern versions that I will now discuss where companies have attempted to address his concerns.

An alternative approach to either cancelling the ballet or to ignoring issues of cultural appropriation and insensitivity is to modify the story to place it in a firm historical and cultural context. One of the first attempts at doing this that I am aware of is Nikolaj Hübbe’s

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<sup>10</sup> Norwegian National Opera and Ballet self-generate about one fifth of its income, the other four fifths coming from state funding. The 2024 state budget allocated NOK 743.77 million (AUD 113.1 million) in public funding from the Ministry of Culture and Equality.

November 2012 production of *La Bayadère* for the Royal Danish Ballet. To quote from DanceTabs: *“Solor and Gamzatti are translated into William and Emma, a British lieutenant and the woman he’s expected to marry – she’s the daughter of the local Viceconsul and has just arrived in India, so her shock when William’s liaison with Nikiya is revealed springs from the difference in race rather than caste. The other major change is that William, unable to live with his conscience after Nikiya’s death, shoots himself: the Shades scene therefore isn’t his dream, but shows his reunion with Nikiya in some kind of afterlife. And of course that means that there’s no Act 4, no destruction of the temple...”*. Thus, Hübbe has injected both race and colonial politics into the story. William must choose between a white woman of his class, and an Indian woman far below his station. Additionally, by setting the Shades scene after William’s death he has provided a sense of closure to the story without the unwieldy final act temple destruction.

Greg Horsman’s co-production for WAB, Queensland Ballet and Royal Winnipeg Ballet premiering for QB in March 2018 and for WAB in May 2019 also placed the ballet in a firm historical and cultural context and was **approved** by Indian cultural representatives consulted before its premiere in Winnipeg in October 2019. The details of this ballet have been discussed under my WAB comment.

At Dutch National Ballet, Rachel Beaujean, Kalpana Raghuraman, Dr. Priya Srinivasan and Ted Brandsen have collaborated on a new storyline that moves away from the orientalist perspective of the original version. Brandsen, a co-director of Dutch National Ballet, said: *“Just as you don’t just replace a Rembrandt with a new painting, you don’t let such a wonderful ballet heritage go to waste either. The only way to preserve it is to keep performing it. That can only be done by putting it in a different context, away from the orientalist gaze of the nineteenth century and towards equality”*.

Scheduled to premiere in March 2026, according to the pre-publicity *“The new La Bayadère is set in Southeast India, where the Dutch established several trading posts during the era of the Dutch East India Company. The sincere love between Nikiya, a spiritual temple dancer, and Solor, a dancer and captain of mixed heritages, challenges the expectations of race and caste in the original work. Solor allows himself to be manipulated by the Dutch governor William Carel Hartsinck, who forces him to marry his daughter Alida. When Alida discovers that Solor already loves another, she decides to eliminate Nikiya. Overcome with grief and guilt at her departure, Solor drifts into a dream state. In the iconic ‘Kingdom of the Shades’, he sees Nikiya once more, but she remains out of reach. The consequences of his wrong choices will haunt him forever”*.

Birmingham Royal Ballet, where Carlos Acosta has been Artistic Director since January 2020, has taken moving the storyline one step further. Acosta is planning for September 2026 a reimagined version of *La Bayadère* to be called *“The Maiden of Venice”* which places the action in Renaissance Era Venice and not India. Perhaps the change of name will help prevent an outraged email from Zed.

Zed is certainly offended by what he sees as the appropriation of Hindu cultural in *La Bayadère*, so it is worth examining his claim in more detail and determining if he has good

reason or is what one critic called just a “*perennial whinger*”. Firstly, there are several ways cultural appropriation can occur but at its simplest it takes place when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way. These include profiting financially or socially from the culture of a minority group; oversimplifying their culture or treating their culture as a joke; separating a cultural element of a minority group from its original meaning; and adopting an element of a minority culture without consequences while members of the minority group face backlash for the same cultural element.

There are many reasons why Petipa chose an Indian setting for his new ballet featuring a bayadère. Europeans had long been obsessed with the images of veil-clad temple dancers. Goethe had written a poem in 1797 in which a god visits a bayadère while disguised in human form. Schubert set the poem as a song and in 1830 Daniel Auber turned it into an opera-ballet, *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* danced by Marie Taglioni<sup>11</sup>. A group of Indian dancers<sup>12</sup> even visited Paris in 1838 drawing French national press attention and while Petipa is unlikely to have seen them dance he would certainly have been aware of them as at that time he was a principal dancer in Nantes.

Giannandrea Poesio, the former Director of the Research Institute for Media, Arts and Performance at the University of Bedfordshire and a free-lance dance critic, wrote concerning Petipa’s inspiration for the ballet’s story. “*What is certain is that in 1843 his brother Lucien created the role of Achmet in La Péri, an oriental-flavoured, themed ballet that may have had a significant influence on the creation of La Bayadère. Indeed, both the appearance of the Pèris, or Egyptian fairies, and the of the ‘Shades’, or ghosts of dead bayadères, are prompted by the same dramatic expedient: dissatisfied with life, the male hero resorts to opium to escape reality. The ethereal nature of the Pèris and the Shades, moreover, is characterized in each work by similar theatrical devices. The Egyptian fairies are first seen coming down from suspended clouds, while the ghosts of the dead temple dancers enter one by one down a slope, as if descending from a higher dimension. Even the concluding scenes of both ballets look alike. In La Péri, the walls of Achmet’s prison collapse in the same way as does the temple in La Bayadère. The lovers, finally reunited, thus soar to a better world: Achmet and the Péri ascend towards the latter’s realm, while Solor and Nikiya are seen flying over the Himalayas, according to the original libretto*”.

Poesio also pointed out parallels with the 1869 Italian ballet *Brahma* by Ippolito Montplaisir. “*In the second act of Brahma, for instance, the exiled priestess Padmana is asked to perform for the engagement of her lover to the evil daughter of the local viceroy. Not only does she throw herself into a languorous Hindu dance like Nikiya, but she, too, carries a basket of flowers throughout the dance*”.

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<sup>11</sup> Petipa danced in this ballet in Bordeaux, and his first wife Maria Surovshikova danced it in an 1854 revival in St. Petersburg. He was 36 and she was 18 when they married in 1854. She was not much of a dancer but popular with numerous admirers because of her “sexy” looks.

<sup>12</sup> The group from Puducherry in southern India comprised five dancers aged from six to thirty accompanied by three male musicians. On their arrival in France, they attended a performance of the opera-ballet *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* in Bordeaux before performing to great public acclaim in Paris.

Again, Poesio highlighted parallels with Christoph Willibald Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*. "Petipa choreographed the dances and arranged the chorus's mime movements for a production of the opera in 1868 and it is possible that this classical myth, of the hero who descends into the underworld to retrieve his beloved, prompted the 'Kingdom of the Shades' – not to mention the fact that both Eurydice and Nikiya die because of a snake bite".

Soviet ballet scholar Yuri Slonimsky states that Petipa had viewed his brother Lucien's 1858 ballet *Sacountala* in Paris which featured a bayadère who falls in love with the King of India after meeting him hunting in a sacred forest. A vindictive fakir curses their love so that when the bayadère travels to the palace the King no longer recognizes her. The Queen, Hamsati, sentences her to death by fire. Of course, the King's memory is restored in time, a celestial dancer saves the bayadère from death and the two lovers are united in a *pas de deux* surrounded and illuminated by a swarm of celestial dancers encircling the stage.

Two years before his own ballet Petipa had choreographed incidental dances for the 1875 local premiere of Verdi's *Aida* in St. Petersburg and there are striking parallels between the opera and the ballet. *Aida* is an Ethiopian princess who has been captured and enslaved by the Egyptians. She and an Egyptian military commander Radamès are in love, but the Egyptian King wants him to marry his daughter Amneris who is also in love with Radamès, although he does not return her feelings. Not only is there a love triangle but the two principal female characters confront each other. There are also parallels in that both the opera and the ballet have a Triumphal Procession in the opening of the second Act<sup>13</sup>.

Petipa was also inspired by Gustave Doré's illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy* when creating *The Kingdom of the Shades* scene and the destruction of the temple in the final act by Doré's *The Death of Samson*<sup>14</sup>.

The most important influence, but often overlooked, is the four-act ballet *Mlada* staged in December 1879. Although this was almost three years after the premiere of *La Bayadère* it had been planned long before by Stepan Gedeonov when he was director of the Imperial Theatres. The music was to be composed by Alexander Serov, a proponent of Wagner's music, and the libretto was put before Petipa in 1870. The project was shelved after Serov died in 1871. The ballet had a tangled complex plot that is not worth discussing in detail, but certain narrative components and motifs appear to have been recycled six years later into *La Bayadère*<sup>15</sup>. The heroine *Mlada* is already dead before the ballet starts, killed by a poisoned bouquet of flowers. The murderer is her rival Princess *Voislava* who, encouraged by her father, wants the hero *Iraomir* for herself. *Iraomir* not knowing how *Mlada* died is torn between *Voislava* (thanks to a spell cast on him by *Voislava*'s ally the goddess *Morena*) and *Mlada*'s ghost which repeatedly appears, visible only to him. Following *Mlada*'s ghost he comes to a valley where other ghosts or Shades flit about the trees and ground. *Mlada*'s

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<sup>13</sup> Poesio writes that Petipa planned his procession very carefully "prescribing an exact order of entrance for the first and second coryphées, the second danseuses, the principal characters, the pupils of the ballet school and the various extras, a total of 220 people".

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/308496276454340/posts/727762287861068/>

<sup>15</sup> Much of this section on *Mlada*'s storyline I have taken from Nadine Meisner's biography of Marius Petipa but the full synopsis is available online.

ghost, like Nikiya's, also performed a dance with a tulle scarf. In the final scene arriving at a temple to ask the oracle for guidance, Iraomir is trapped by Voislava and her father who wants to start the marriage rites there and then. When Mlada's ghost again appears, Iraomir refuses to go ahead with the marriage, at which an enraged Morena destroys the temple. Of course, Iraomir and Mlada are reunited in a celestial apotheosis.

Petipa thus plucked story and balletic elements from a wide variety of sources for his own creation. Only two of those mentioned above are set in India, the others in Egypt (x2), Greece or mythical lands. The most important influence, *Mlada*, was set in the Slavic lands of the Baltic Sea coast. Petipa weaved all these disparate story elements into a coherent whole and thus could have chosen from a wide variety of settings to locate his ballet - his choice of an Indian setting was likely cemented by the visit of the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII of Britain) to India on a diplomatic mission in 1875-76. Edward was promoting Britain's imperial policy by persuading Indian princes that they were now part of a great empire. But note that while Imperial Britain at this time was the dominant power, and could easily be accused of appropriating Indian culture, Britain had nothing to do with creation of this ballet – Petipa was French, and he created the ballet in Russia.

Edward's visit received extensive news coverage in Britain and Europe with *The Graphic* and *Illustrated London News* carrying romanticized images of India: tigers, elephants, temples and temple dancers, palaces and processions. All these elements are captured in the ballet. The ballet of course was never meant to be a faithful rendition of India's culture. It is a romanticized vision aimed at a western audience. Indeed, Petipa's depiction of India does not differ much from his earlier depiction of Egypt in his 1862 hit ballet *The Pharaoh's Daughter*<sup>16</sup>. Even Minkus' music was typical fare for any classical ballet with only the costumes, sets, a few props such as tigers and an elephant (that Solor rides in Act II) and some choreographic elements reminding the audience of the Indian setting. In other words, *La Bayadère* is not set in real-world India but in an imaginary world that has never existed.

The word *bayadère* is not even a word that exists in India. It is an 18<sup>th</sup> century (?) French corruption of the Portuguese word *bailadeira* meaning dancing girl and derived from the Medieval Latin word *ballare* (to dance)<sup>17</sup>. The Hindu term is *devadasi* (meaning servant of God) which in the past referred to a purely religious practice whereby prepubescent girls (as young as four) were offered in marriage to deities and served the temple as dancers and courtesans. According to the e-paper New Indian Express: "*Devadasis are expected to live a life of religious devotion, forbidden from marrying other mortals, and forced at puberty to sacrifice their virginity to an older man, in return for money or gifts*". It is no surprise then that the practice over the centuries descended into common prostitution. As a result, the Devadasi system was outlawed in 1988, but the practice of dedicating young girls as Devadasis continues to be prevalent among the Scheduled castes.

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<sup>16</sup> Note that in both these ballets the heroes, Solor and Lord Wilson (danced by Petipa at the premiere of *The Pharaoh's Daughter*), smoke opium leading to dream sequences.

<sup>17</sup> In Classical Latin the general verb to dance was *saltāre* and a dancer was a *saltator* (m), *saltātrix* (f). A ceremonial dance however was called a *tripudium*.

Some opponents of performing this ballet question why the High Brahmin would lust after a temple dancer (despite their links to prostitution as noted above) and liken it to the Pope harassing an abbess. But this criticism is tendentious as while Brahmins are at the top of the overall caste system there is no universally recognised hierarchy within the Brahmin varna itself. i.e. there is no Pope equivalent – a Brahmin is more analogous to a Bishop at most, and the sexual peccadillos of a few bishops are well known today. Furthermore, from these temples the devadasis are meant to sexually satisfy the priests, zamindars (landlords) or higher caste patrons because *“for her service to them is akin to service to God”*.

Never-the-less, my conclusion is that no matter what changes choreographers make to the ballet or what arguments balletomanes such as myself may make they are unlikely to satisfy Zed who is on a campaign and reacting purely to the ballet’s name. Acosta’s choice to move the action out of India to Renaissance Era Venice, and rename it *“The Maiden of Venice”*, may work to escape Zed’s notice but it does seem an odd choice of location.

In India temple dancers have lingered into the modern era but in antiquity temple dancers were a common feature elsewhere in the known world, notably in archaic Greek and the Roman Republic temples where dance was central to their religious festivals<sup>18</sup>. It was the rise of Christianity that saw the end of religious dancing as it was considered too closely associated with bodily pleasure. So here is my advice for what it is worth. Move the action from India to the Mediterranean world of antiquity. You would only need to drop the lush vegetation, tigers and elephant (but keep the snake) and make a few changes to names and costumes. That way you can basically just transpose Petipa’s ballet largely unchanged or if you prefer (as I do) transpose Makarova’s version created for ABT. And if anyone cries about cultural appropriation, I know many archaeologists and historians of antiquity who would be eager to interview them to record their knowledge of archaic cultural practices.

You can even keep the final destruction of the temple by angry gods for in about 1700 BCE a Minoan temple was destroyed exactly in the manner portrayed by Petipa. Known as Anemospilia and located on the island of Crete near the Minoan palace of Knossos the building was destroyed by an earthquake. Archaeologists excavating the temple discovered four crushed skeletons, killed when the temple collapsed. In the corner of the main room was a female (priestess?) about 28-years old lying face down. Next to the altar and lying face upwards was a man (priest?) estimated to be about 47 years old and in good health before he died. Scientists could even do facial reconstruction on these two to see what they looked like. In a corridor area were the poorly preserved remains of a third individual who was likely trying to escape the building. Sex and age could not be determined. What shocked the excavators was the fourth skeleton, that of a young man about 18 years old lying on his side on a rectangular stone and clay structure (an altar) in the centre of the main room. The position of the bones suggested that the body had been tied up and had been sacrificed<sup>19</sup>. Perhaps this was done to placate the gods after earlier tremors had been experienced, but I

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<sup>18</sup> Ancient Greek rhetorician and satirist Lucian of Samosata in his treatise (*On Dancing*, 15) states that *“no mystery could ever be celebrated without dancing”* and in clause 16: *“In Delos, not even sacrifice could be offered without dance and musical accompaniment”*.

<sup>19</sup> Sacrifices were a normal practice – but of animals not people. Perhaps it speaks to their desperation.

like to imagine that the gods destroyed the temple angry that an unwilling victim had been sacrificed rather than a willing devotee.

The only problem I foresee in transferring the ballet's setting to the Greek world of antiquity is the woman's costumes. For while Minoan men typically wore a breechcloth passing between the legs and anchored by a belt, or a short kilt sometimes with leggings, Minoan women wore long bell-shaped skirts with a bodice that curved into a high collar behind the neck but that left the breasts bare. This would not be a problem in Europe as Jiří Kylián's ballet *Bella Figura* for Nederlands Dans Theater in 1995 raised no concerns that I am aware of. In the USA where gratuitous violence passes without comment, but heaven forbid you show a woman's breast, Boston Ballet is the only company I know to feature this ballet (in April 2011 and again in April 2024). The Australian Ballet performed it in May (Sydney) and June (Melbourne) 2013 as part of a triple bill, but it has yet to be performed by WAB, although one WAB ballerina has performed it in Europe and another told me this was a ballet on her wish list to dance. WAB's new Artistic Director Leanne Stojmenov appointed in January 2026 did dance this ballet when at TAB but perhaps it never will be performed by WAB for when Ivan Cavallari a former artistic director unveiled his unique choreography of *The Nutcracker* in 2008 while the ballet received critical acclaim it also received a least one written complaint for showing topless dancers for a few seconds even though they had their backs to the audience.

I have become sidetracked from the topic at hand. So, I will conclude with a quick mention of Shakespeare many of whose stories do not meet today's culturally accepted norms, but which are largely accepted for what they are; studied in schools and enjoyed by the public not only as plays but as movies, operas and ballets. Just as anyone interested in English literature cannot ignore Shakespeare, no one interested in ballet can ignore the works of Marius Petipa. People outside of the world of ballet do not realise that he is the Shakespeare equivalent in this world. While there have been many great choreographers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and many still around today, only George Balanchine with his plotless dances can be said to have come close to matching Petipa's influence on ballet. Please, can we not just sit back enjoy Petipa's very few surviving ballets even whilst knowing and accepting that they are a product of his time and place?

### **Key References:**

Marius Petipa (The Emperor's Ballet Master) by Nadine Meisner, Oxford University Press (2019)

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