

La Fille mal gardée

updated Apr 25

Ballet had its roots in Renaissance Italy when the country was divided into many small city states that competed, not only in war and politics, but in the splendour of their courts and the spectacles they could stage to celebrate special occasions. The nobility took part in these performances and thus skilled dancing masters were in great demand, not just for the teaching of dancing per se but for training that developed the poise and grace expected in the courts. The earliest surviving dance manual, a handwritten manuscript called *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi (On the Art of Dancing and Conducting Dances)*, was written about 1460 by Domenico de Piacenza.

These courtly spectacles, lasting many hours and comprising poetry, music and dance, were brought to France by Catherine de' Medici when she married the future Henri II of France in 1533¹. Here court ballet flourished and was used for political purposes, Catherine herself skilled at including symbolism that had political significance. In 1617, Louis XIII, Catherine's 16-year-old grandson, used the ballet *La Délivrance de Renaud* to announce that he was now ready to take power into his own hands rather than relying on his mother's regency and his son, Louis XIV at age 14, danced Apollo, the sun god, in *Le Ballet de la Nuit* to promote himself as an absolute monarch. It was this ballet that provided his enduring nickname "*Le Roi Soleil (the Sun King)*"².

In 1661, Louis XIV founded the *Académie royale de danse* to teach social dance to aristocrats, but it was the *Académie royale de musique*³ founded eight years later that combined singing and dancing and when Louis XIV stopped dancing, the entertainments shifted from the court to the theatre and from aristocratic to professional performers. In 1681, Pierre Beauchamp choreographed the first ballet, *Le Triomphe de l'amour*, in which female professional dancers appeared in public. The ballet stars were men as the male costume allowed freer movement than the long, heavy skirts with hoops and heavy headdresses that restricted the movement of women. These entertainments were all opera-ballet spectacles, the dances inserted into the action to allow time for the actors to change costumes and having no connection with the story. It was in London in 1717, not Paris, that the first modern ballet was seen (lasting about 40 minutes). This was John Weaver's *The Loves of Mars and Venus* that told its story through mime, movement and music alone, without singing or speech. Termed a *ballet d'action*, as opposed to the earlier *ballet de cour*, this style of ballet was finally introduced to Paris Opéra by Gaétan Vestris after his appointment as Chief Choreographer in 1770.

Ballet d'action had already spread across Europe with Jean-Georges Noverre publishing his *Letters on Dancing and Ballet* in 1760, arguing that ballet was a serious art, not just a mere spectacle, where the dance and music should work closely together to convey the story, and

¹ They were both just 14. The union was not a happy one as Catherine was politically and emotionally sidelined by Henri.

² This song, music, drama and dancing spectacle spanned 12 hours and was performed in real time.

³ Also known as *Académie d'Opéra*. It is Pierre Beauchamp, the academy's ballet master from 1672, who is credited with the invention of the five positions of the feet and the mime language of ballet still follows French grammar order today.

the steps look natural and appropriate to the dramatic situation. Costumes also needed to be simpler and less restrictive to allow freedom of movement so that the dance and action could be woven together. Jean Dauberval, who had danced with Noverre's company in Stuttgart⁴, followed his ideas when he wove the dance and action together for his village comedy *La Fille mal gardée* staged in Bordeaux on 1 July 1789⁵. A simple story full of believable characters – workaday people, farmers and peasants and not make-believe characters or gods in disguise.

According to French author Charles Maurice (in *L'Histoire anecdotique du théâtre*) the ballet originated in a coloured print Dauberval chanced to see in a shop window of a youth fleeing from a cottage, an angry old woman throwing his hat after him and a peasant girl crying. English ballet historian Cyril Beaumont found in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale a print by Pierre-Philippe Choffard, after a painting by Pierre-Antoine Baudouin, which corresponds closely, but not exactly, to Maurice's description and is now accepted as the ballet's likely source⁶.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fille_Mal_Gardee_-Pierre_Antoine_Baudouin_-_Le_Reprimande_-1789.JPG

At the premiere, the principal role of Lison (now known as Lise) was danced by Dauberval's wife, Marie-Madeleine Crespé, Colin (now known as Colas) by Eugène Hus and the Widow Ragotte (now known as Widow Simone), her mother, by Francois Le Riche. Nothing survives of Dauberval's choreography, but it is generally believed that Lise's mime of anticipated motherhood in Act II likely originated with him. She counts her imaginary children, smacks one's bottom, rocks another to sleep and sings to a third. An original notation of an 1812 production in Stockholm has survived – an interesting feature included is that during the picnic scene the dancers rush to the front of the stage and sing a song in support of the revolution.

As to the plot I can do no better than to quote from the Oxford Dictionary of Ballet: "*The ballet tells of the rural romance between Lise and Colas; how her mother, the Widow Simone, wants to marry her to the wealthy simpleton Alain; and how Lise and Colas compel Widow Simone to agree to their marriage by hiding in the bedroom, where they are promptly discovered.*" Nowadays you will hear some in the audience muttering about the silly plot – why do Lise and Colas have to marry merely because they were locked unchaperoned for a brief time in her bedroom? Ignore such inattentive people who have

⁴ Gaétan Vestris had also danced with Noverre's company. His son, Auguste taught at Paris Opéra after his retirement in 1816, his pupils including the ballerinas Marie Taglioni, Fanny Elssler and Lucile Grahn and choreographers Charles-Louis Didelot, Jules Perrot, August Bournonville and Marius Petipa.

⁵ Two weeks before the French Revolution broke out. The ballet was originally titled *Il n'est qu'un pas du mal au bien* (It's only a short step from bad to good) and was sometimes known as *Le Ballet de la paille* (The ballet of the straw). The title *La Fille mal gardée* (The unchaperoned daughter) first appears to have been used when Dauberval staged it at the King's Pantheon Theatre in London in April 1791. Dauberval's wife again danced the role of Lise, and his student Charles Didelot played the part of Colas.

⁶ This print shows a mother scolding her daughter for neglecting her chores, unaware that the girl's lover is in the background scurrying up the stairs into the loft to hide. Thus, it is more likely this print is not the actual image Dauberval saw but a similar image based on the same theme.

failed to notice that Lise exits her bedroom wearing completely different clothes from those she wore on entry. Enough said I think; let us leave Lise and Colas to their secrets.

For Dauberval's production, Franz Ignaz Beck, a German composer and conductor on the Bordeaux staff, arranged the music which originally consisted of 55 popular French folk songs and operatic airs of the time. When Dauberval's pupil Jean-Pierre Aumer (aka Jean-Louis Aumer) staged the ballet at Paris Opéra in November 1828⁷ for ballerina Pauline Montessu a different score was written for it by Ferdinand Hérold, although Aumer left the plot of the ballet unchanged. Hérold preserved many of the best numbers of the original score but also made borrowings including the overture from Jean-Paul-Égide Martini's opéra-comique *Le Droit du seigneur* and four extracts⁸ from operas of Gioachino Rossini. Aumer's version remained in Paris Opéra's repertory until 1854, totalling 75 performances, and becoming a personal success for ballerina Fanny Elssler for whom a new *pas de deux* was added in 1837 to music "adapted" from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* by the Opéra's music librarian Aimé Leborne.

While the Dauberval version had been taken to St. Petersburg as early as 1818⁹, the ballet acquired greater popularity in St. Petersburg and Moscow from 1848 when Fanny Elssler performed the leading role to Hérold's score. Jules Perrot staged his own version of Aumer's *La Fille mal gardée* in St. Petersburg in 1854, with Cesare Pugni adding new music numbers. Perrot's staging was performed for the final time in 1880 for the benefit performance of Pavel Gerdt.

Elsewhere, when Paul Taglioni¹⁰, ballet master at Berlin Court Opera, staged the ballet in 1864 he commissioned a new score from German composer Peter Ludwig Hertel. Partly based on Hérold's score, it was substantially a new composition more suited to the German opera orchestra and the taste of this theatre's patrons¹¹. It was Hertel's score that formed the basis for Marius Petipa¹² and Lev Ivanov's December 1885 production in Russia based on Dauberval's libretto. At the 1885 premiere, the principal dancers were Virginia Zucchi¹³ (Lise) and Pavel Gerdt (Colin). What Zucchi lacked in technical brilliance she made up for with the power of her acting, her "When I'm Married" mime scene leaving many in the audience in tears. This was Ivanov's first important undertaking as a choreographer, with Ivanov later

⁷ The ballet had been first staged in Paris in 1803 and remained a popular choice for benefit performances in the 1820s at the Porte-Saint-Martin and other Paris theatres. In its 1828 revival for Paris Opéra, Aumer's ballet formed part of a 5½ hour benefit occasion which also included comedy, opera, mime and ended with a circus performance.

⁸ These were the opening chorus from *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, an aria from *La gazetta*, the storm music from *La Cerentola*, and an aria from the second act of *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*.

⁹ Taken by Dauberval's student Charles Didelot who had danced the part of Colas in London. It was staged in St Petersburg at the old Bolshoi Kamney Theatre with the title *La Précaution inutile, ou Lise et Colin* (useless precaution, or Lise and Colin). *La Fille mal gardée* had already been presented in Moscow at the Petrovsky Theatre in 1800 by Ballet Master Giuseppe Solomoni.

¹⁰ The son of Filippo Taglioni and brother of Marie Taglioni.

¹¹ Premiering in November 1864 under the title *Das Schlecht Mädchen* (The Badly Guarded Girl), the ballet was a renowned success.

¹² Petipa had danced in *La Fille mal gardée* in Bordeaux and Nantes in the early 1840's.

¹³ Zucchi was the first in a line of famous Italian dancers to appear on the imperial Russian stage. She had been invited to dance with the Imperial Ballet in St Petersburg on the request of Tsar Alexander III.

staging revivals in 1894 and 1901. After Ivanov's death in 1901, Alexander Gorsky revived the Petipa/Ivanov version at the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre in 1903, the ballet being performed for the final time there in October 1917, one month prior to the Russian revolution¹⁴. Gorsky added additional music numbers to Hertel's score including pieces by Riccardo Drigo, Léo Delibes, Cesare Pugni, Ludwig Minkus and Anton Rubenstein.

In both Europe and Russia there were various mainly unsuccessful revivals of the ballet in the 1930's and 1940's and it was not until Frederick Ashton's celebrated revival in 1960 for The Royal Ballet, with Hérold's potpourri of old tunes newly arranged by John Lanchbery, that there was a marked rise in the ballet's popularity. Ashton had been encouraged to stage his version by ballerina Tamara Karsavina who had told him all about an Ivanov revival of the 1885 production staged at the Mariinsky and in which she had danced the role of Lise in her youth. Ashton began by copying the earliest extant libretto (from the first Paris production in 1803 and held at the British Museum) and then wrote out his own version. In Ashton's imagination the original French story of a little village love affair became an English ballet set in "*the country of eternally late spring, a leafy pastorage of perpetual sunshine and the humming of bees – the suspended stillness of a Constable landscape of my beloved Suffolk, luminous and calm*"¹⁵. Ashton introduced traditional English ribbon dances¹⁶ that culminate in a maypole dance in Act 1, Scene 2, and a men's stick dance in Act 2 that were adapted from genuine folkdances, as taught at The Royal Ballet School, plus a Lancashire clog dance for the Widow Simone to new music. There is also a comical dance for a cockerel and four hens in the farmyard at the start of Act I to herald the dawn¹⁷. Alain's signature prop is a red umbrella, not the original kite of Dauberval.

***La Fille mal gardée* at WAB**

In 2008, the West Australian Ballet (WAB) board had made a commitment to commission new full-length ballets and *La Fille mal gardée* (premiering in September 2014 at His Majesty's Theatre in Perth) was the sixth production commissioned in as many years following *The Nutcracker* (2008), *Don Quixote* (2010), *Cinderella* (2011), *Pinocchio* (2012) and *La Sylphide* (2013). It was the first in a series of co-productions with Queensland Ballet. French freelance choreographer Marc Ribaud retained the music of John Lanchbery after Ferdinand Hérold but moved the action to the south of France in the 1950's stating his

¹⁴ The ballet was notated in the Stepanov notation method and is part of the Sergeyev Collection.

¹⁵ None-the-less, Osbert Lancaster based his set designs on French popular prints.

¹⁶ The ribbon motif goes back at least to 1803 – "*she takes a ribbon from her bodice and hangs it on a tree*".

¹⁷ The idea for the hens and their costumes came from Walter Felenstein's production of Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen* at the Komische Oper in Berlin. The Petipa/Ivanov revival had used live chickens in a chicken coup as part of the farmyard scene décor. Matilda Kschessinskaya (more on this ballerina in my Swan Lake Revivals entry) who refused to let another ballerina dance the role of Lise was dismayed when the role was given to her rival Olga Preobrazhenskaya in 1905. According to theatre legend, she bribed a stagehand to release the chickens which went flying everywhere across the stage and into the orchestra pit. The scheme backfired as Preobrazhenskaya danced her variation uninterrupted as if nothing had happened and received a storm of applause from the audience.

choice of period was “to give the ballet a more modern look “. Thus, scooters replaced horses and carts, the clog dance was replaced by a new tap dance and costumes included bright pastel circular skirts for the girls, jeans, denim overalls and T-shirts for the boys. Because of the simplistic plot many choreographic motifs and steps were repeated numerous times but there was plenty of humour, especially with Alain’s obsession with his green umbrella and Widow Simone’s tap dance accompanied by four male friends who had opened the show with a parody of Ashton’s chicken dance.

Despite positive reviews, the ballet was not a box office success in Perth achieving only 4,900 paid attendees over 10 public performances¹⁸. In comparison, for the same September period in 2015 the ballet *Coppélia* achieved 7,800 paid attendees. Of course, the November/December Christmas season is always the busiest and the 2014 offering of *Snow White and the 7 Dwarves* achieved 16,300 paid attendees over 20 public performances. Internally WAB blamed the poor attendance at *La Fille mal gardée* on the inability of the Perth public to pronounce the ballet’s name¹⁹. The ballet was taken on a limited season tour of Canberra in October 2014 but given its poor initial reception is unlikely to appear again in Perth soon.

¹⁸ His Majesty’s Theatre in Perth, built in 1904, has a maximum seating capacity of 1,263, including some seats with restricted viewing. Audience numbers mentioned of 4,900 do not include unpaid seats allocated to sponsors and charities. Including free seats, the total public audience for *La Fille mal gardée* was 6,500 plus an additional 800 for a community matinee and another 760 for a schools performance.

¹⁹ Over time it has become apparent that Perth audiences are initially reluctant to attend on mass any ballet previously unknown to them. A brand-new ballet will only draw an audience if the public recognize the ballet’s name (e.g. a fairy tale such as Cinderella, or a popular novel e.g. Dracula) and the story is already known and loved.