

La Sylphide

updated Jul 26

A cursory examination of Amazon's online book catalogue for romance, historic fiction or even time travel will return hundreds of book covers sporting hunky Scotsmen clad in tartan kilts. If you are so inclined, you are welcome to browse these covers but there is actually no need to read any of these books. There are only two plot arcs: The hero is a Laird who is having trouble with his neighbours – cattle rustled, crops burned etc. – and needs to fight to save his land and kin; or the hero has returned from abroad on the death of his father to find the estate bankrupt and run down or even lost to him and needs to fight to recover his heritage. The heroine is at first suspected of collusion with the hero's enemies but because she is young and beautiful and he is handsome in a rugged sort of way, lust wins the day and all ends happily. Indeed, some of these books go so far as to have one page of action moving the plot forward to ten pages of bedroom shenanigans and might almost be better classified as pornography.

This fascination by woman of a certain age for hunky Scotsmen dates to the early 1800s; and just one person is to blame – Sir Walter Scott¹. His "*Waverley*" series of historical novels caught the public's imagination not just in Britain but in America and Europe and led to a fascination with "exotic" Scotland. So of course, ballet also turned to Scotland for new scenarios. The most famous Scottish ballet, *La Sylphide*, introduced a new era in ballet – the Romantic Movement.

Following the turmoil of the French revolution and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 there had been a radical change in human society. One effect was a change in the make-up of the theatre-going public, with an increasing number of working and middle-class people attending, who, used to melodramas and vaudevilles staged at popular theatres, lacked the cultural background necessary to understand classical allusions. Additionally, people craved an escape from the new world that the Industrial Revolution had spawned. A grey world of dirt, noise, squalor and poverty had arisen as people moved from the country to crowd the cities seeking new opportunities. The theatre provided an escape into fantasy from the harsh realities of industrial city life.

The Romantic period started as a literary movement but soon breathed new life into every form of art. In ballet, classical stories featuring Gods or Greek and Roman mythological heroes were replaced by ballets with local settings and colour, national dances and the cult of the supernatural. The introduction of stage lighting allowed for the creation of spooky, moonlit scenes while pointe shoes brought a gravity defying ethereal quality in the supernatural roles. The practical essentials were pointe shoes and long white tutus. Set in exotic locations, the story themes focused on man's pursuit of the unattainable. In *La*

¹ Waverley was published anomalously in July 1814, but no one doubted the author. In September 1814 Jane Austin wrote to her niece and budding novelist Anna Austin (later Lefroy): "*Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones – It is not fair. – He has Fame & Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people's mouths – I do not like him, & do not mean to like Waverley if I can help it – but I fear I must.*"

Sylphide James chases the sylph; in *Swan Lake* Prince Siegfried chases the swan. Both ultimately fail.

La Sylphide was inspired by a novel of the 1820's by Charles Nodier, *Trilby, or the Elf of Argyle*, which dealt with a Scottish lass who was lured away from her fisherman husband by a male sprite. In the ballet the sexual roles are reversed. But note that the names of Effie and Madge in the ballet appear to come from Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian*.

The ballet premiered in Paris in March 1832. The libretto was created by Adolphe Nourrit, who had conceived it specifically with Marie Taglioni in mind, the music by Jean Schneitzhoeffter and the choreography by Filippo Taglioni. The music met with a mixed reception; one critic considered it the weakest element, another found it "excellent". The choreography was praised, particularly the originality of the second act where the sylph circled the stage borne aloft by flying apparatus and the apotheosis displaying multiple flight as the body of the sylph was borne aloft through the trees. Taglioni had set great store by these effects but had been frustrated to tears when the Opera kept filching his sylph dancers for their own forthcoming production.

The scenery and costumes played an essential part in evoking local colour in the first act and the ethereal mood of the second. But what raised the ballet to be a triumph and ushered in a golden age of ballet was the dancing of Taglioni's daughter Marie. This was done not through feats of technical difficulty or the mannered poses and stereotypes of classical ballet but through her simple ease and natural grace. She bent her body, used her hands when she danced and ultimately completely reformed the ballet of her day. Public infatuation with this new star spread from the theatre into everyday life, the French language even being enriched with the verb taglioniser and the adjective sylphide.

Marie made her final performance in *La Sylphide* on the Paris stage in 1844, partnered by Lucien Petipa as James. Lucien (the older brother of Marius Petipa) had made his debut on the Paris stage in 1839 dancing *La Sylphide* with guest celebrity Fanny Elssler. James' Act 2 *pas de deux* deviated from the original by using two sylphides – Fanny and her sister Therese².

La Sylphide remained a mainstay of Paris Opéra's balletic repertoire for 28 years and reached a tally of 146 performances before it last appeared in 1860. There is no choreographic record of the original staging by Filippo Taglioni and by the late 1860's the ballet was all but forgotten. However, in 1971, Pierre Lacotte drew on contemporary records to recreate Taglioni's ballet using Schneitzhoeffter's music. The ballet was broadcast on French television in 1972 and subsequently taken into the repertoire of the Paris Opéra Ballet.

In 1835, St. Petersburg's ballet master, Antoine Titus Dauchy (Titus), freely copied Taglioni's *La Sylphide* for the Russian stage and invited Marie to St. Petersburg. She made her debut

² According to August Bournonville, Fanny Elssler "had to provide for her older sister Therese, who was so large and tall that she could never have found an engagement at any theatre had she not been stipulated as Fanny's partner".

there in 1837, aged 34, and appeared there for five subsequent seasons. Titus' own productions were almost always flops and he visited Paris regularly to see new well-received ballets. For instance, it took him only one year to stage his own *Giselle* in St. Petersburg (in 1842) after seeing it performed on the Paris stage.

In the summer of 1834, August Bournonville had taken a leave of absence from the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen and together with his favourite pupil, Lucile Grahn, spent a few weeks in Paris. Together they attended a single performance of *La Sylphide* to see Marie Taglioni perform. Bournonville "..... came away filled with nought but admiration for Mlle. Taglioni's extraordinary bravura and amazement at the splendid machinery. Both these things were equally unattainable in our theatre Besides, the score was entirely too expensive, and those who could have taught me the roles (for they had to be taught) did not seem disposed to do so just then I had consequently decided not to give *La Sylphide* at the Danish Theatre".

Two years later Bournonville changed his mind and staged his own version in Denmark in November 1836 with Grahn in the title role and himself as James. He did this because of his "desire to present a talented pupil [Lucile Grahn] who seemed made for the title role and whom I had trained entirely after the ideal of Taglioni, and also repeated requests that I try a young musical talent [Herman Løvenskjold] well suited for this genre".

Bournonville records "I made several changes in the plan, gave the ballet a national color that was not to be found in the Parisian version, developed the character of James and thought up new dances and groupings. Now, since the music was completely new, the gestures and *pas* also had to be new, inasmuch as the rhythms determine the makeup of the dances. The composition and staging therefore cost me as much industry and care as if I myself had invented the plan, and I have received testimony to the fact that not only is my ballet completely different from Taglioni's – it even wins the prize as far as dramatic merit and precision of execution are concerned". Bournonville stresses these points in his memoirs to counter the unpleasantness of being referred to in Paris as a plagiarist.

In essence, Bournonville's 1836 version had less mime, more lively dances and in particular more dances for men. However, there is no *pas de deux* between James and the sylph as James is unable to touch her. Furthermore, Bournonville made a clear distinction between Act 1 where all the group dances are in character shoes and are 'grounded' versus Act 2 where all the sylphs dance *en pointe* and are 'in the air'. It is this Bournonville version, which has been passed on from dancer to dancer for over 180 years, that West Australian Ballet staged in 2013 and reprised in 2018.

In Act 1 the forest sylph uses her magical powers to pursue and attract a young man (James) on the eve of his wedding. He at first resists but when she snatches his wedding ring, he leaves his fiancé (Effie) at the altar to chase her. In Act 2 it is now James who chases the ethereal sylph and the sylph who is evasive and defies capture. The witch Madge provides James with a scarf with which he can bind the sylph and cause her wings to drop off. But unbeknown to James the witch has imbued the scarf with malevolent power that causes the

death of the sylph. Of course, the story ends badly because romantic art dealing only in dreams and fantasies could never be realized. There always had to be a return to reality.

The employment of a scarf or shawl was not novel. In the late 1700's and early 1800's scarves and shawls were prized fashion accessories. Handmade Kashmir shawls were imported from India and such was their popularity it was not long before weaving centres in England and Scotland became major industrial producers. Shawls made their way into ballet and were used as a choreographic tool to frame and link dancers and extend the lines of the body. They were also used as a prop to indicate an "Eastern" setting.

The Art Gallery of NSW has an interesting painting of a French dancer from the period – Marie-Louise Hilligsberg, who came to London in 1787 and joined the King's Theatre. The painting shows her holding a scarf frontally in one hand while the other end swirls behind her. Her ankles are showing, and a tambourine is lying on the floor at her feet, in order to portray her occupation as a dancer.

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/564.2014/>

The New York Public library includes in its digital collection a print of this same dancer holding a shawl in the ballet *Ken-si & Tao* performed for her benefit in 1801.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/e9d891c0-b6da-0132-4639-58d385a7bbd0>

Debra Sowell a contributor to the book "La Sylphide" quotes Pierre La Mésangère, the editor of a Paris fashion journal, reflecting on this period in 1815:

Our beauties invented a thousand reasons why the taste 'for kashmirs' should be satisfied. The richest had only to pronounce those words so omnipotent in their mouths: it is the fashion; women of the second rank insisted on the necessity of doing like everyone else; those further down the scale pleaded reasons of health and economy: a Kashmir, said they, lasts for a very long time and dispenses with the need for a complete outfit. Finally, people who had no plausible reason for the purchase relied on that refrain, so powerful with the weak or amorous: 'If you don't give me a Kashmir dress, it is because you don't love me.'

This insatiable desire for 'kashmir' is the historical context explaining why the sylph wrapped Effies' shawl around herself in Act 1 and why in Act 2 both Madge and James were certain that the lure of a kashmir would bring the elusive sylph close enough to James for him to place the scarf around her person.

Key References:

La Sylphide: Paris 1832 and Beyond, Maria Smith (Editor) Dance Books Ltd 2012

My Theatre Life: August Bournonville (translated from the Danish by Patricia N. McAndrew) Wesleyan University Press 1979