

Difference faces of the same *Giselle*

This essay will analyse the differences between the original ballet version of *Giselle* and the version of the contemporary choreographer Mats EK. One of the central ways to do this, will be to focus on the narrative within each of these pieces as a means to illustrate the shifts and changes over time. Furthermore, the essay will also consider the historical background, costumes, the stage setting within each of these pieces. In doing so, it will show how each of these dance works have been re-staged to suit the time they were created.

Giselle premiered on the 28 June, 1841, in Paris, performed by Carlotta Grisi in the role of Giselle and Lucien Petipa in the role of Albrecht, from the libretto of Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Théophile Gautier, with original music composed by Adolphe Adam; the two choreographers, Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, were responsible for the first choreography of this famous ballet. Nowadays, the most well-known version is the one by the late 19th century choreographer Marius Petipa.

The ballet of *Giselle*, an archetype of the romantic period, has been an important and innovative ballet because of when it was created and because of its audience.

Set in Germany during the Middle Ages, the most favourite period for romanticism, the ballet is placed within a staged setting of “magical realism”, originally designed by Pierre Ciceri. The first act presents the scene of a village that symbolizes reality, with a dark and almost bare setting with an idealized, rural village where Giselle lives. The second act displays the supernatural plane with the presence of the Willis, creatures that do not turn their essence into something else but remain immutable (Cipriani, 2004).

The presence of a supernatural and magical atmosphere is due to the medieval setting, contrasting with the ideas and instructions of neoclassicism and the ancient Roman rules of art. It has been argued that the Middle Ages was a period of the birth of nations, the

development of their traditions and an anthology of magic and mythical stories, a period soaked in mysticism and religious fervour as was romanticism itself. This belief in the mystical and religious found its way into the theatre. Seeing that love could lead to redemption and defeat death, placed in a mythical setting, would have amazed audiences who would have accepted it because of the romantic idea of persecuted and impossible love (Paolucci & Signorini, 2010). For this reason, within *Giselle* all the characters are symbols and stereotypes, to purposefully represent certain aspects that the audience expected to see.

Giselle is pure, innocent and fragile; she sacrifices herself to save her lover's life even though he is the cause of her death. Albrecht is a rich, noble and attractive man who goes to the countryside and seduces a poor peasant, knowing full well that a marriage between two different social classes would have never been possible: in the 19th century, a wedding was still a contract rather than a proof of love. A secondary character is Hilarion, a peasant who is truly in love with Giselle and considered evil because he tries to separate Giselle from Albrecht and so prevent the death of her lover (Beaumont, 1988).

In Mats Ek's version he suggests that "No character is simply good or evil: all are interestingly flawed" (Foyer, 2015). In fact, in the Swedish choreographer's work, characters are real people; they are interesting and what is important is the relationship between them. Giselle is a poor girl, lacking in heart and in mind, unable to control her emotions, so much so, that she has to be tied up two times through the piece. Hilarion is the only one who knows the true nature of Giselle, but is firmly confident in his love for her; he fights for her against a more undefined and uncertain Albrecht, who betrays his lover and instead of taking her back from insanity, he becomes similarly foolish (Medri, 2014).

The old version shows that Giselle's love will save Albrecht from death but, in Mats Ek's version, Giselle is the one who drives Albrecht mad, who will, at the end, roll naked on stage, and only his rational rival, Hilarion, will show compassion for him and save his life.

In the original version, peasants arrive carrying wicker baskets with flowers and are welcomed by Giselle. She formally introduces her lover to them and they invite her to join the dance. The girls wear long, soft tutus with brown corsets, flowers on their heads, tights and pointe shoes; their costumes show a theatrical idea of peasant clothing of the time. Giselle is similar to them but she is distinguished by the colour of her corset, which is blue (Zuccari,2010).

In Mats Ek's *Giselle*, farmers come carrying huge eggs and pitchforks. Even though they wear ideal costumes they look much closer to the reality of how a farmworker can look. Women have headscarves and dark, simple dresses with black socks and soft shoes and men wear black tops and black trousers with big farmer's hats.

Giselle wears a simple outfit that again defines her because of the colour pink. She is different from the other peasants because of her weak nature and because she is unlikely to take part in working life. Albrecht is dressed in white and his suit is made of an elegant fabric to define his social status, whereas, in the original version, besides the suit, what outlines his noble position is the presence of a sword. They entered the scene together, with Giselle tied up to him; she then starts dancing, trying to make her lover part of the community of peasants, who seem instead to refuse and reject the man (Medri,2014).

In the original ballet, the dance follows the rules of tradition. In the middle, Giselle dances alone surrounded by a V shape composed of the other girls who frame her. When Albrecht joins the dance, the other dancers change their formations, always leaving the spotlight to the principal characters.

In Mats Ek's version, there is no diversity beside the aim of highlighting Giselle's insanity. The scene has the same number of women and men; they all dance together, whereas, in the original, the men only fill the space at the back without contributing to the scene. Giselle joins the dance as part of the group and not as a soloist. When she seeks refuge with her lover, leaving centre stage, the rest of the group occupies the foreground (Medri,2014).

By doing so, Mats Ek relates his work to his own time. The health care system drastically changed in Sweden in 1980, because of an economic crisis. It started not to be worried about the patients anymore. The clinics started to treat poorly their patients, more people were getting ill and no one was getting better (Brodin,1980). Moreover, women power during that time was definitely stronger compared to the Middle Ages; in particular, already in 1921, women get the right to vote and run for offices (The Swedish Institute,2016).

Ek's *Giselle* was staged for the first time in 1982, more than a hundred years after the original version. The role of Giselle was performed by Ana Laguna alongside the rest of the Cullberg Ballet Company with a new choreography and with the musical score by Adolphe Adam. The first act of the ballet is presented on a hill landscape that is reminiscent of "the breasts of a woman" (Cipriani,2014), a possible recollection of Ek's mother's influence. His Giselle lives with no reserve or modesty and declares to Albrecht that she wants to have a baby with him. When she finds out about her lover fiancé, she descends into madness and all the other peasants promise revenge for her. The second act is not placed in a mythical forest because Giselle doesn't die, instead she is locked in a madhouse characterized by a backdrop that shows some female organs and single body parts, enlarged and isolated, drawn in a naive style by the designer Marie-Louise Ekman (Medri,2014). All the female figures, closed up with Giselle, are dressed in white, as in the original version, but this time without a long, romantic tutu, and a tunic tied up at the back, which suggests the idea of a straightjacket. Albrecht is not forgiven but rather pushed away from Giselle, who at first

seems still to be able to love, but then she decides to join the other women and leave the miserable Albrecht alone.

This essay has shown how *Giselle*, performed hundreds of years apart, has changed and adapted over time. Both the original's version and Ek's represent their ideas of love and death, mirroring their historical periods. The original version shows idyllic love that stages a romantic idea of love conquering death, surrounded by a dark and mysterious world full of magical creatures. Mats Ek, instead, shows people with weaknesses and uncertainties, as supposed to good or evil; he portrays a society where love can drive mad individuals and countries.

The two versions show two different Giselles, the first sacrifices herself for love, whereas the second is too weak to be saved from madness. They do not portray a greater or a crueler Giselle, but rather how people are in different historical periods, how they relate to each other and how they face, in different ways, issues as love and death.

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