

Synopsis

Based on one of the world's most enduringly beloved fairy tales, *The Sleeping Beauty*, choreographed by Marius Petipa to a strictly coordinated score by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, tells a story familiar to us all: the lovely Princess Aurora is cursed by an evil fairy and must fall into a death-like sleep until a handsome prince awakens her with a kiss. But even though this greatest of Russian imperial ballets has a story, it is not really about the narrative. There are no tears, no high drama, no passion in this formal construction. Instead, its important action is allegorical, with many of the characters standing for something beyond themselves. Thus, Aurora, the dawn princess whose birth is celebrated in the prologue, signifies the coming of light and goodness into a world of darkness. Her prince is called Florimund (flower of the world) or Desirée, the embodiment of masculine excellence elevated to the greatest virtue by the love of Princess Aurora, whom he saves from the dark stasis of death.

Nowhere is the symbolic nature of the ballet clearer than in the dances of the fairies who welcome the baby princess. Although Rudolf Nureyev's version for The National Ballet of Canada names each fairy simply by a number, traditionally each has a name and a movement quality that betoken the moral gifts she bestows. The first, Candide, betokens purity; the second, Coulante or Gemini, is a whirlwind of vitality; Breadcrumb, the third, is generosity; the fourth, Canary, is eloquence; the fifth, Violante, familiarly known as the Finger Fairy, is energy – or perhaps even electricity, a recent discovery that enchanted many 19th-century choreographers; and the sixth is the most powerful fairy of all, the Lilac Fairy, although in

Nureyev's version it is simply "the Principal Fairy" who performs the sixth variation. The Lilac Fairy, whose gifts are wisdom and radiance, is the only one whose power can overturn the evil witch Carabosse's curse. It is all these gifts, embodied in the balance between Princess Aurora and Prince Florimund in the final act, that create an ideal citizenry for a perfect empire. The ballet is not a beauty contest in which Princess Aurora is "the fairest of them all." Rather, it depicts the establishment of a deeply moral aristocratic civilization.

– Penelope Reed Doob

Prologue: A Room Inside the Palace

The scene opens on a lavish court setting of the mid-16th century where King Florestan and his Queen are celebrating the christening of their baby daughter, Princess Aurora. Beautiful fairies arrive, bringing gifts and good wishes to the baby princess. Catalabutte, the master of ceremonies responsible for compiling the guest list, remembers that he has forgotten to invite the evil fairy Carabosse who suddenly arrives during the festivities.

Carabosse is furious at being slighted and declaring that she will be avenged she predicts that one day Princess Aurora shall prick her finger and die. At that moment the beautiful Lilac Fairy appears and alters the curse by promising that the princess shall not die but fall asleep for 100 years, only to be awakened by the kiss of a prince.

Still distraught, the King forbids anyone to bring sharp needles into the court for fear that Princess Aurora will come to harm.

Pause

Act I: The Palace Garden

As the court prepares for Princess Aurora's 16th birthday, Catalabutte discovers some old women knitting with sharp spindles. The King orders they be executed for breaking his decree but the Queen persuades him to spare them.

The birthday celebrations begin and young girls dance with their partners, carrying beautiful garlands of flowers. Princess Aurora descends the grand staircase and is presented to four princes who are seeking her hand in marriage. She dances with each of them and they in turn present her with a gift of roses.

Carabosse, disguised as an old woman, arrives at the birthday celebration and gives Princess Aurora a bouquet of flowers in which a spindle is concealed. She pricks her finger on the sharp spindle and collapses. Guided by the Lilac Fairy, Princess Aurora is carried into the palace by the courtiers. There the Lilac Fairy casts a spell over the entire court, causing everyone to fall asleep and a thick forest to grow around the palace.

Intermission

Act II

Scene 1: 100 Years Later

Prince Florimund and his courtiers are in the forest hunting for deer. He becomes melancholic and sends everyone away so that he may be alone. In his solitude, he is visited by the Lilac Fairy who learns that he is looking for love. She tells him of an enchanted palace and the sleeping princess who lies there. A beautiful vision of Princess Aurora appears before Prince Florimund and she dances for him. He falls in love with his vision of the princess and boards a magical boat to search for her.

Scene 2: The Awakening

Carabosse, now old and grey, continues to spin her wicked web on a spinning wheel. With the arrival of Prince Florimund, her thread breaks and she finally collapses, overpowered by goodness and virtue.

Inside the palace, Prince Florimund passes immobile courtiers, still asleep in the same positions as when they were put under the spell 100 years earlier. Coming upon the sleeping princess, Prince Florimund recognizes his true love and kisses her. Magically, she awakens from her 100-year sleep and the entire court is restored to its earlier splendour. The King and Queen approve the betrothal of Princess Aurora to their hero, Prince Florimund.

Intermission

Act III: The Wedding in the Palace Ballroom

Catalabutte is once again busy, arranging the court for the wedding of Princess Aurora and Prince Florimund. The scene opens with a glorious Sarabande led by the King and Queen. This is followed by dances performed by fairy tale characters, including the Pas de Cinq of the Jewels: Gold, Silver, Emerald and Diamonds, the Bluebird and Princess Florine and Puss in Boots with the White Pussycat. Descending the grand staircase, Princess Aurora and Prince Florimund arrive and declare their love with a romantic Grand Pas de Deux.