

THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

Ballet Notes

The Sleeping Beauty
November 13 – 22, 2009

Greta Hodgkinson as Princess Aurora and
Guillaume Côté as Prince Florimund with
Artists of the Ballet
Photo by Bruce Zinger.



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.

Rudolph Nureyev's Vision: Choreographing The Sleeping Beauty

By 1972, the name Rudolf Nureyev had become synonymous with ballet. He was an international superstar who had performed in every major ballet opera house around the world and had given critically acclaimed performances of most male roles in the ballet canon. When it was announced that he would be coming to The National Ballet of Canada, upon invitation from founder Celia Franca, to stage a lavish new production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the excitement was palpable.

The month before Nureyev's arrival in Toronto, Gilda Majocchi from Teatro alla Scala Ballet had come to work with the company. Nureyev had just finished setting a version of *The Sleeping Beauty* on Teatro alla Scala Ballet and Miss Franca assumed her company's version would be the same choreography. Majocchi taught the National Ballet dancers, ensuring they were familiar with the steps. When Nureyev arrived at The National Ballet of Canada in August 1972, he proceeded to re-choreograph almost every step. Linda Maybarduk, a former First Soloist with the company, remembers this. "[Nureyev] was always trying to improve both himself and us, and was harder on himself – and on us – than we were used to. He pushed himself further, harder and more diligently than we were accustomed to. But he would help us, and used to encourage us by saying 'Dance boldly and full out, hold back nothing!'"

This encouragement to dig deeply into their own capabilities is something Artistic Director Karen Kain remembers. "Before Rudolf, I wasn't totally sure of my abilities. He was so inspiring and would do anything. He allowed

me to discover things about myself that I had never known before."

Rehearsal periods with Nureyev were vigorous. On long rehearsal days, dancers will often "mark" movements and walk through steps rather than jump and lift. Nureyev would have none of this. He required his dancers to push themselves hard at all times. Kain recalls, "The thing with Rudolf was that he knew what he wanted and he never settled for anything less. He didn't try to package his demands or worry about whether or not their articulation hurt people's feelings. But it was incredibly exciting to be in his presence. He made me realize that I could be equal to the challenges he presented."

Former Principal Dancer Veronica Tennant remembers, "he had not much patience with complacency... To dance with [Nureyev] meant to be taught by him, to be cajoled and inspired to share in his vision of what was possible in dance. The hours of rehearsals were definitely intense but in the most productive, exciting, exhilarating way."

The demanding rehearsal process made everyone in the company aware of their common goal, a spectacular new production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Kain remembers, "Rudolf made me realize that every single detail in a production is important. His passion about dance was contagious." Tennant adds, "Rudolf taught all of us how to dance in the moment, to communicate each night with each audience, as we never had before. It was a glorious time for everyone. We were all touched, mesmerized and galvanized by him."

Nureyev was delighted at the welcome he received from The National Ballet of Canada, “no other company... is of [the] same warmth as Canadians.” On the night of April 22, 1973, the company’s debut at New York’s Metropolitan Opera, Nureyev was never prouder of his adopted company. As he walked backstage amongst his dancers, he proclaimed, “There is no need for you to be nervous. You would not be here if I did not think you would astound audiences and critics. You will overwhelm them with your beauty and purity of style. More important, tonight you, yourselves, will discover just how good you really are.”[†]

Creating Beauty: The Story of the Costumes

The year is 1972. The National Ballet of Canada Head Cutter and Costume Executor Angela Arana has just flown from Toronto to London, England, to catch up with the company on tour. She has 62 costumes she needs to fit to the dancers’ proportions for the brand new production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Arana fits for three days straight, stopping only to sleep. She then boards a plane, flies home and begins sewing the costumes. “My mantra at the time was a direct quote from Rudolf Nureyev. He would tell us, ‘Nothing is impossible.’ And we believed him!”

In fact, everyone believed him. The momentum leading up to the premiere performance of Rudolf Nureyev’s staging of *The Sleeping Beauty* on The National Ballet of Canada was something no one involved with the company had ever seen before. Nureyev was not only the choreographer but he was also the star and had slated himself to perform

The National Ballet of Canada’s Metropolitan Opera House debut was a resounding success, with Clive Barnes of The New York Times on April 23, 1973 stating, “This is one of the best productions of *The Sleeping Beauty* around. I thought so when I first saw it – Fonteyn and Nureyev at La Scala – and I think so now. But the Canadians dance it better”.

[†] From Linda Maybarduk’s book *The Dancer Who Flew: A Memoir of Rudolf Nureyev*, Tundra Books, 1999.

almost every show. The cost of the production was large, indeed larger than any other single production the company had previously encountered, but the opportunities it brought were equally impressive, with increased international profile and a debut at New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House. And the end result did not disappoint. Nureyev’s production of *The Sleeping Beauty* put The National Ballet of Canada on the map in a way it had never been before. The huge risk the company had taken paid off.

The scale of *The Sleeping Beauty* was unequalled in the history of the National Ballet. *The Sleeping Beauty* was, at the time, the company’s most lavish and opulent production and creating it wasn’t easy. With Set and Costume Designer Nicholas Georgiadis based in England, the company also had some logistical challenges. When Georgiadis finally arrived in Canada, tempers

in the Wardrobe and Millinery Departments started to fray. An exhausted crew stuck in the middle of an incredibly hot summer was now faced with requests to adjust everything to suit Georgiadis' perfectionist vision. The Millinery Department grew so frustrated with him at one point that they jokingly hung garlic around their work tables to ward off evil spirits, Georgiadis included. When Georgiadis discovered the garlic he burst out laughing, the ice was broken and the department began to work as a team again. A happy work environment was needed as they had to produce 340 costumes for the production and they began the work a mere six months before the premiere. Arana remembers opening the box that was to contain Nureyev's Prince Florimund costume, shipped directly from England, two days before the premiere only to discover that the box contained only the cotton cutout of the costume. Costumes are created in multiple phases; after sketches, a designer will use a cutout of the costume for fittings and then use the final cutout to create the finished product. Normally this process is spread out over a number of weeks. Arana and her crew had two days. "The whole production was an unusual situation," says Arana. "It was such a rush. Instead of six months we should have had 18. We were under such a tight deadline that we were gluing costumes together at the last minute, right before the dancers went onstage. We were still sewing the costumes for *The Sleeping Beauty* at least six months after we had premiered it."

The National Ballet of Canada's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* premiered on September 1, 1972 at Ottawa's National Arts Centre to rave reviews. After its successful opening, the production moved on to Montréal's Place des Arts, and then travelled to Philadelphia. The company then hit the

Xiao Nan Yu with Artists of the Ballet.



road again with an exhausting tour schedule of no less than seven shows in six days for four months, all of which culminated in the company's debut at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 22, 1973.

Milliner Deborah Camken remembers heading down to New York City to help the wig department handle the 122 wigs *The Sleeping Beauty* requires. "I went to help the wig department adjust headpieces and wigs for the New York shows. There is a Monster mask in the production and we realized on the day of the show that it had gone missing. I designed a new one using only millinery wire and tissue paper and it went onstage that night. To my surprise, that's still the Monster mask used in this production. We never did find the original."

But despite these setbacks and obstacles, everyone remembers the time fondly. "They were happy times," says Arana. "We were a small department, pulling together. It really felt like everyone was part of a team. What we did was incredible."

– Katharine Harris