

THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

An Italian
Straw Hat

February 2008

Ballet Notes





An Italian Straw Hat

Choreography: James Kudelka

Original Score: Michael Torke

By arrangement with Adjustable Music,
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Set and Costume Design: Santo Loquasto

Libretto: Timothy Luginbuhl (based on
the play by Eugene Labiche and Marc Michel)

Lighting Design: Kevin Lamotte

An Italian Straw Hat is generously supported
by Gretchen and Donald Ross.

An Italian Straw Hat is presented by:

HARRY WINSTON



Cover: Rebekah Rimsay as Virginia
and Piotr Stanczyk as Felix.

Top Left: Artists of the Ballet.

Bottom Left: Chan Hon Goh
as H  l  ne and Guillaume C  t  

as Ferdinand. Bottom Right:
Lise-Marie Jourdain.

Synopsis

Act I

The place? Paris in the spring. The time? The Belle Époque—and, far more important for our story, the wedding day of Ferdinand, an elegant young man about town, and his bride Héléne, the daughter of a rich country horticulturalist named Nonancourt. Ferdinand's valet, Felix, is carrying on outrageously with Virginia, a lady's maid, as they polish the glassware in preparation for the wedding. Convinced that everything is going perfectly, Ferdinand takes a stroll in the park, but while he is enjoying the weather and the colourful passers-by, his horse has other ideas: spying a very expensive and unattended Italian straw hat, the horse eagerly satisfies his equine appetite.

Meanwhile, the hat's owner (and Virginia's employer), Anais, has chosen this moment to have a tryst with her lover, Emil—or as much of a tryst as they can have in a public place when she, alas, is married. When they discover that the hat has been eaten—a tragedy that they fear will expose their affair when Anais returns to her husband without it—they besiege Ferdinand and threaten to occupy his apartment (and his marriage bed) until he finds them a replacement. Thus begins Ferdinand's desperate chase through Paris.

Being no fool, Ferdinand decides to try his luck at the most fashionable millinery establishment in Paris, where the spring collection is being shown to ladies of the haut monde. Ferdinand cannot find a duplicate of the missing hat, but that's the least of his worries for the moment; the chic, tempestuous hat designer turns out to be his old love Clara, whom he had left at the altar some years before, and she is eager to arouse new passion or take appropriate revenge. The timing couldn't be worse, for his fiancée Héléne and her family and guests have followed Ferdinand to the hat shop, mistaking it for the church. Discovering that a Baroness was known to have bought the last straw hat in Paris, Ferdinand sets off to her mansion, pursued by all the wedding guests.

The Baroness is holding a musical salon at which the great violinist Nisnardi has been commissioned to play, and when Ferdinand rushes in, the eccentric Baroness assumes that he is the illustrious musician. Determined

to keep her good will so he can get his hands on the straw hat, Ferdinand dares not disabuse her of this notion, so he is forced to fiddle as if his life depended on it. To his great astonishment, he turns out to be so good that the Baroness promises him a reward—but when Ferdinand asks for the hat, all seems in vain: she has already given the hat to her niece. Once again pursued by the wedding guests, who are dazzled by what they take to be an exorbitantly lavish reception, Ferdinand sets off to the house of M. Beaujolais, who is, unbeknownst to Ferdinand, Anais' husband.

Act II

The chaotic quest for the hat continues through the streets of Paris, and at Maison Beaujolais Ferdinand makes an awful discovery. The hat he has been tracking down, the only Italian straw hat in Paris, the hat that was given to the Baroness' niece, the hat he must produce to get Anais and Emil to leave his apartment and his future marriage bed, is precisely the hat that Ferdinand's horse has already eaten. With no hat, there seems to be no hope.

Ferdinand and Héléne manage to escape the determined and ever snow-balling crowd by climbing the Eiffel Tower, but after a few moments' respite, the variously angry, hungry, irritable, drunken, and exhausted crowd catches up with them. By now, there has been so much disturbing of the peace that the gendarmes are out in force to arrest everyone, including all the wedding guests with their wedding presents, which the police assume are stolen goods.

Do miracles still happen in the Land of Farce? Will the wedding guests get out of jail? Will Ferdinand find a hat? Will Nonancourt consent to the wedding? Will Anais and Emil escape detection by Anais' jealous husband? Will Felix and Virginia keep their hands off each other long enough to escape charges of public indecency? Will there ever be a wedding at all?

— Penelope Reed Doob



Artists of the Ballet.

The Creation of the Ballet

Eugene Labiche's famous French farce, *An Italian Straw Hat*, premiered at the Théâtre du Palais Royal in Paris on April 14, 1851. The play later inspired a silent film, a Broadway musical and an opera. James Kudelka was the first to make it into a ballet.

Although there are many moments of lightness and clever wit in James Kudelka's prodigious body of work, he had not yet created a comic ballet. Indeed, ballet repertoire does not feature many comedies. *An Italian Straw Hat*, Mr. Kudelka thought, provided excellent material for ballet—the spectacle of the various locations, a large diverse cast full of flamboyant and colourful characters, the alternation of intimate love scenes with madcap crowd scenes and a fast-paced plot. His vision combined a scenario inspired by Labiche set to an original score by Michael Torke.

After librettist Timothy Luginbuhl's initial research and development, the next step for him and James Kudelka was to develop a literal translation of the original play. In order to clearly understand the original intentions of the playwright, Luginbuhl and Kudelka wanted Labiche's words, not an adaptation, to begin creating the narrative structure of the ballet. From this translated copy, the creative artists had a "clean copy" to use as

a starting point for the movement, settings, characterization and music.

"The English versions of the play were all very freely adapted," said Mr. Luginbuhl. "Plays never really translate directly into new languages. References change, fashions and styles are updated. And accounting for the passage of time, symbols lose their potency; the humour needs to be reinterpreted for audiences who would not appreciate the original context."

The Music

James Kudelka commissioned Michael Torke to compose a score for *An Italian Straw Hat*. An original score allows a choreographer more freedom to create the tone and length of a work and shape the music to the story. It also guarantees the new work is unique. Following *The Contract (The Pied Piper)*, *An Italian Straw Hat* was Torke's second commission by Kudelka.

When Kudelka began conceiving of *An Italian Straw Hat*, his mind turned to the overtures of Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), composer of comic operas including *Il Barbiere di Siviglia (The Barber of Seville)*,

L'Italiana in Algeri (The Italian Girl in Algiers) and his masterpiece *Guillaume Tell (William Tell)*. The music of Rossini was celebrated for his wit, inventiveness, melodies, exhilarating rhythm and colourful orchestration. Kudelka wanted to capture the energy and humour of Rossini as well as a “Bugs Bunny-like feel”.

While working on *The Contract (The Pied Piper)*, Michael Torke asked James Kudelka about his future projects. Kudelka mentioned a “Rossini idea”, talking of the humour and chases in the ballet. Torke volunteered to act as musical editor to assemble sections of Rossini’s music for the projected ballet. However, on the opening night of *The Contract (The Pied Piper)* in May 2002, Kudelka asked Torke for an original score for *An Italian Straw Hat*. “The collaboration went so well I asked him to do a score for a comedy.”

The Sets and Costumes

For *An Italian Straw Hat*, James Kudelka teamed up with frequent collaborator Santo Loquasto. A theatre, film and dance designer, Loquasto has worked on many ballets with Kudelka since their first in 1986—*The Heart of the Matter* for Joffrey Ballet. For the National Ballet, they created *Pastorale* (1990), *The Actress* (1994), *Spring Awakening* (1994), *The Nutcracker* (1995), *Swan Lake* (1999) and *The Firebird* (2000).

Setting the ballet in the Belle Époque, late 19th-century Paris, Loquasto took inspiration from different artifacts from the time period:

- Early black and white photographs of the Eiffel Tower under construction
- Black and white satirical cartoons and caricatures
- Illustrations in newspapers
- Advertising posters and the graphic arts of the day

“The opening scene is set at the foot of the Eiffel Tower—so we definitely know it’s Paris,” said Kudelka when talking about the sets for *An Italian Straw Hat*. The action of the ballet takes place in the streets, salons and shops of Paris, whimsically designed by Loquasto in the black and white colour scheme of the ballet.

The sets were designed and built with the nature of farce in mind—the importance of speed, timing, and chases. “The scene in Ferdinand’s apartment contains 10 doors—people running in and out, missing each other, hiding from one other. And, when you bring the Eiffel Tower on stage, you use it: people go up and down the tower chasing each other,” continued Kudelka.

All sets for the company are built at the National Ballet’s production workshop in Scarborough under the supervision of Production Director James Thornley. For *An Italian Straw Hat* there were three resident carpenters and three additional carpenters that were hired to work on the production. With welders, aluminum workers and painters, the production crew totalled 16.

Adding to the sets and scenery, Loquasto designed some amazing costumes for the dancers. For months, the National Ballet’s Wardrobe Department was overtaken by design sketches, bolts of fabrics and spools of ribbon, trim and lace—all in black and white, of course. But the costumes certainly aren’t dull. Different fashions, different fabrics and different patterns—checks, stripes, plaids and florals—provide lots of variety in the frilly, frothy and scrumptious costumes.

“We searched for lots of bold graphic patterns for the costumes for *An Italian Straw Hat*,” said Wardrobe Supervisor Marjory Fielding. “The shape is real. We maintained the look of the 1890s. It was transformed to ballet, however, to show the legs; and we used exaggeration with the fabrics and patterning to bring out the satire of the farce.”

About half the sewing required was done by machine, the other half by hand. For example, the appliqués on Clara’s (the hat shop owner) bodice were applied by hand, and the sculpted hem took one seamstress five days to complete.



The Hats

Almost every character in *An Italian Straw Hat* wears a hat. Santo Loquasto's designs called for over 65 hats, including the hat of the title that starts the plot in motion (causing confusion and chases through the streets and salons of Paris).

Santo Loquasto used many historical references when designing the hats for this production but took liberties with the time period and exaggerated many details to suit the farcical nature of the ballet. The hat of the title is the only hat, in fact, to be made of straw and is the hat most faithful to the period. The rest of the ladies' hats are more whimsical and exaggerated. Most of the gentlemen's hats were bought, however, with the milliners adding small character details.

National Ballet milliners Deborah Camken and Leslie Norgate worked with Loquasto to create memorable hats and headwear in earlier ballets—*The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake* and *The Firebird*. Assisted by Carolyn Maybee for *An Italian Straw Hat*, they began with Loquasto's designs and historical references to make prototypes of the hats, mainly using brown paper and masking tape. This gave the milliners and Loquasto an opportunity to see the size and shape of the hats in three-dimensions before proceeding to build the actual hats. As Norgate said, "you really don't know if a hat is going to work until the fitting process. We then can see the hat in relation to the full costume and how it fits on the dancer's head."

In the millinery workshop, Norgate, Camken and Maybee built about 40 different hats, each in its own style and each accented with various materials such as ribbons, feathers, frills and even dewdrops. The most elaborate of the hats required approximately 40 hours each to make.

The most important thing? As Norgate said, "We always have to think of how a dancer will keep a hat on."

An Italian Straw Hat had its world premiere by The National Ballet of Canada on May 1, 2005.

— John Hart

For more information visit national.ballet.ca

Hats featured in
An Italian Straw Hat.



Above: Sonia Rodriguez as Anaïs and Patrick Lavoie as Emil.

Photography: Andrew Oxenham, Cylla von Tiedemann and Bruce Zinger.

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