

# NOTES ON GISELLE: ANGEL CORELLA'S PRODUCTION FOR THE PHILADELPHIA BALLET

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Photo: Yuka Iseda of Philadelphia Ballet in “Giselle,”  
choreography by Angel Corella. Photo by Alexander Iziliaev.  
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**THE CHARMINGLY HISTORICAL** Academy of Music with its gilt and red décor was an ideal frame for The Philadelphia Ballet’s production of *Giselle* (1841). It is subtitled “a pantomime ballet,” which recalls the nomenclature of the late-eighteenth-century ballet reform movement: action ballet or *ballet pantomime*. Telling a story through expressive movement and without words is frequently associated with Jean-Georges Noverre’s still very readable *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* (1760). Today we think of *Giselle* (1841) as a romantic ballet that is unique in the nineteenth-century repertoire for its well-etched characters evolving through an unusually plausible plot with realistic social class distinctions affecting a love triangle. The use of musical leitmotifs

strongly supports the narrative thread. All these elements were pantomime ballet ideas. But, with *Giselle*, we also have the pointe shoe technique for the female dancer. This added a new element to the dancing that vivified the depiction of the female heroine as rising vertically into space, balancing eerily, and possibly expressing an ineffable strength and resolve. When we combine this technique with the idea of a ghost dancing on stage, we can imagine how this new technique revitalized the ballerina's public appeal.

Théophile Gautier, the mastermind of *Giselle* who saw dancers as women to be possessed by the appraising gaze of the male aesthete, was influenced by Heinrich Heine who imagined The Wilis as jilted women taking revenge on unsuspecting males from beyond the grave. These two sides of female identity as erotic and emasculating underline the macabre side of Romantic ballet itself. The feminist critique of Romantic ballet did not foreclose *Giselle* given its remarkable vicissitudes on the twentieth-century ballet stage and its strong audience appeal. Nevertheless, the connection of *Giselle* to the phenomenon of hysteria contains to this day a potent connection to the character's madness that still begs exploration.

Although the pointe shoe endured in twentieth-century ballet the rediscovery of the ballet *Giselle* itself became a second event within twentieth-century ballet history itself. This was due to the interpreters of the female lead, a specialized group bearing comparison with the rarity of the coloratura soprano essential to the rediscovery of the nineteenth-century bel canto repertoire, with Maria Callas leading the way. There have only been a handful of such interpreters: Olga Spessitzzeva, Alicia Markova, Alicia Alonso, Carla Fracci, and Natalia Makarova. The role of *Giselle* thus afforded the rediscovery of the romantic ballerina herself as an undreamt-of figure with her own unique physical lexicon. Of course, these artists did not act alone. Diaghilev's Ballets Russes mounted *Giselle* in Monte Carlo in 1911 and Serge Lifar created a production with Olga Spessitzzeva at the Paris Opera in 1936. Anton Dolin and Alicia Markova distinguished themselves as partners in the work with the founding of the London Festival Ballet (later The English National Ballet) in 1950. By working with them in 1955 Erik Bruhn was introduced to this tradition, which led to the historically lush ABT production with Bruhn and Fracci in 1967.

The challenge in producing *Giselle* today — if the ballet is not being entirely rewritten in the manner of Mats Ek and/or Akram Khan — is

to get beyond the contemporary idea of classical ballet that we inherit from the French tradition as the demonstration of academic technical strength and allow the otherness of Romantic style to take center stage. This project can now extend beyond the phenomenon of the role of Giselle herself to the theatricality of the entire production contributing to the overall effect. Everything about Romantic art is anti-academic and anti-classical. This again points to the rarity of great Giselles in the annals of twentieth-century ballet for such dancers must be able to embody an almost unthinkable fragility that transgresses norms associated with spectacle to create, in essence, an anti-normative spectacle. Here the spectacular is displaced by affect and the audience is moved rather than swept off its feet.

The Philadelphia Ballet is a world class company and artistic director Angel Corella's production of *Giselle* appears based on the American Ballet Theater version of the late 1960s when Carla Fracci and Erik Bruhn in the leading roles ignited a new interest in Romantic era ballet. (Corella is a former principal dancer with ABT). This interest was stimulated by the otherness of Fracci's performance as existing outside classical ballet norms. In fact, many thought she lacked technique because her performance was so historical as to make her seem the reincarnation of the famous Italian ballerina Taglioni who introduced toe dancing. Here the relationship of ballet history to Italy and Italianness also played a role. The historicity of the performance itself was a defamiliarizing factor in the return of *Giselle*.

On opening night (February 29) Yuka Iseda and Zecheng Liang were outstanding as Giselle and Albrecht. And it was wonderful to see two Asian performers take on these roles. Iseda captured the romantic style with its slightly off-balance, forward-tilting line for the ballerina. She seemed to follow Fracci's model of unrelenting lyricism, unreal balances achieved on pointe and the halo of effortlessness veiling the difficult choreography of Act II. Some of her balances made her appear truly ghostlike. My only minor criticism is that having taken on the Romantic style so convincingly, Iseda from time to time was unable to resist finishing off the broken Romantic line by straightening it into a more academic shape thereby emphasizing her technical prowess. This undermined the illusion of otherworldliness she had just created. The audience seemed constantly attuned to technical achievement through brief bursts of applause. So, it is possible Iseda was responding to this pressure.



Photo: Zecheng Liang of Philadelphia Ballet in *Giselle*, choreography by Angel Corella. Photo by Alexander Iziliaev.

Liang's flawless technique made him a good partner for Iseda and his use of mime in facial expression was elegant. The way mimetic gesture is integrated to convey the story is one of the ballet's strong points in most traditional productions. Still, at moments, formulaic gestures signifying "I love you," "I will be true to you" or "will you marry me?" can prove silly. My one criticism of Liang's gestural score is that he repeated the gesture promising fidelity (the first two fingers held aloft in a pledging gesture) in Act II where it seemed out of place as Albrecht had already transformed from a mendacious cad into a tormented lover.

Nineteenth-century ballet as presented today generally segregates pantomime from dancing, which Noverrian action ballet of the 1770s had tried to conjoin by exploring pantomime's expressive power as a form of movement. At the Paris Opera Ballet in the 1970s Pierre Lacotte showed us some alternatives to this with his productions of nineteenth-century ballets based on his historical research. And The Stanislavsky Ballet, rarely seen here, has also merged pantomime and dancing by transforming pantomime into movement rather than gestures alone, particularly with its *Swan Lake*. The Philadelphia Ballet production of *Giselle* does some exciting work to address these issues. It shows us more of the essence of Romantic Ballet than we frequently get to see.

In Act I Giselle is a girl who loves to dance too much and, in some productions at least, is shown to be sickly. Does she die of a broken heart? Or, of over exertion? Although we cannot be certain, her role

at the close of Act I demands acting as distinguished from pantomime and from dancing alike. The role of Giselle encompasses more than the pagan earthiness of Act I versus the Christian ethereality of Act II. These two extremes are joined by an acting scene with the potential to completely transcend pantomime in the formulaic sense and to give us neither earthiness nor ethereality but madness. The mad scene at the end of Act I lacks a formal choreography but is made up of stage directions that allow the individual an opportunity to create the role before our eyes.

Other excellent aspects of the current production are that Corella pays attention to detail in the animation of crowd scenes. This was always considered a strong point of Michel Fokine's productions. And he has added greater nuance to the background of the ballet's two acts — the peasant hamlet in Act I and the haunted forest of Act II. The mime of Giselle's mother, for example, warning of the menace that lurks in the forest was phantasmagorical and evocative of the mesmerizing power of superstition. In Act II, The Wilis were presented as magical creatures when their veils flew off their faces upon entering. These touches added significantly to the Romantic quality of the ballet. However, more could be done to break free of the academic choke hold that encourages the audience to view it as a series of effects. For example, in Mary Skeaping's production for the London Festival Ballet, The Wilis backed away cowering into the wings under the impact of Giselle's resolve to protect Albrecht. The Wilis are characters with an expressive potential even if they are still called upon to epitomize certain classical ballet norms that tend toward rigidity. Mysterious powers have spiritual effects on bodies in *Giselle* and the more vividly this can be portrayed in a flexible body the closer we come to the character of the ballet itself where nature has become a site of the supernatural. So, for example, one of the most evocative moments for the corps de ballet is when they are on the ground and seem to call spirits forth from the earth.

Dancing itself becomes the main dramatic action in Act II because Giselle saves Albrecht from death by dancing with him, albeit as a spirit. For this reason, dancing becomes a fully narrative vehicle here because it literally contains the story we are meant to follow. Every step is fully danced yet can also be imagined as an action performed. This is because what the characters do in the second act is nothing more than to dance. Giselle saving Albrecht would be hard pressed to communicate the notion: "I am dead, but I am still dancing" in sign language or pantomime

alone. We read a deeper meaning into the *pas de deux* because Giselle's actions are interventions from the beyond having real-world effects. In Act II, *Giselle* takes leave of pantomime for the kind of acting we saw in the mad scene blended with dancing that epitomizes Romantic style by concealing effort. Nothing more is necessary.

Looked at from this perspective, *Giselle* is not so much a war-horse ballet as an unknown work that begs to be rediscovered anew. To do this, the Romantic elements need to be emphasized and vividly rendered. This seems something the Philadelphia Ballet could distinguish itself by doing. It might thereby also rejoin an important aspect of its own tradition with former dancers such as Jane Miller, a great if under-recognized American Romantic dancer, and Laurence Rhodes whose work also defied many clichéd expectations of the male dancer. Following in its own tradition, The Philadelphia Ballet has the potential to show what we thought we knew about ballet in a new light.

MARK FRANKO'S *Text as Dance: Walter Benjamin, Louis Marin and Choreographies of the Baroque* will be published later this year by Bloomsbury Academic.