



THE TIME AND THE DANCING IMAGE
Deborah Jowitt



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than by devices of gesture." Petipa's way of handling masses and soloists was a kind of dance symphonism embedded in the story ballets that were his prescribed format. In the brief period of wild artistic experimentation that followed the Revolution, long after Mikhail Fokine's reforms had supposedly proved the fustiness of Petipa, Petipa was invoked by one of the presumed radicals, Fyodor Lopukhov. In 1923 Balanchine performed in Lopukhov's controversial "dance symphony" *The Magnificence of the Universe*—a ballet set to Beethoven's Fourth Symphony that drew its substance almost entirely from Lopukhov's reading of the music. One of Balanchine's strongest memories is of Lopukhov's battle cry: "Forward to Petipa."

Marius Petipa arrived in St. Petersburg in 1847, his French training a gilt-edged security in a Russia bent on taking its cultural leads from Western Europe. A dancer of some accomplishment—he had once partnered Marie Taglioni—he worked under two French ballet masters in power in



Marius Petipa in *Daughter of the Pharaoh* (1862)

St. Petersburg: Jules Perrot, an adept at romantic fantasy and naturalistic crowd scenes, and Arthur St.-Léon, a man who could deliver up spectacles quickly and smartly without worrying overmuch about dramatic coherence.

Petipa's first important ballets were produced during the period of restlessness and civil strife that followed the Crimean War. Alexander II's "great reforms"—the freeing of the serfs, the restructuring of local and town government, the legal system, and the military—led to an inevitable decline of the gentry and, along with economic growth, to the rise of a middle class. Yet the reforms ignited even more problems than they solved.

Ballet, however, as a virtual property of the tsar, didn't echo the populist sentiments of writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky or their later disillusionment and sadness. For the aristocratic and wealthy audience, ballet's spectacular fantasies and exotic dreamworlds and impossible visions were supposed to provide entertainment, beauty, and escape. Political awareness, if any, of balletmakers generally took the form of tactful tributes to enlightened power. In two of Petipa's most famous early ballets, *Daughter of the Pharaoh* (1862) and *La Bayadère* (1877), rulers were fair-minded and benevolent when faced with the truth—which was often revealed to them by heroines who carried on the tradition of righteous bravery established by French Romantic ballet. The scenario for Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, which originally premiered in Moscow (reputedly with indifferent choreography by Julius Reisinger), offered the provocative dilemma of a future ruler who could not distinguish between good and evil, and suggested with the utmost poetic delicacy that without idealism, devotion to duty is nothing.*

During the reactionary period that followed the assassination of the reform-minded Alexander II in 1881 and the accession of his son, Alexander III, to the throne, the ballets demanded by Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the director of the Imperial Theaters, emphasized pomp and diversion even more than had their predecessors—often at the expense of an even halfway interesting plot. Operas might be based on major works of Russian literature, as were Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* and *Eugen Onegin*. Not ballets. As

*In the story as it has come down to us, a royal maiden (Odette), along with her companions, is held in thrall by a wicked sorcerer. Allowed to appear in human form by night, the women spend their days as swans. Prince Siegfried falls in love with Odette; the formal plighting of their troth will break the spell. To the ball at which the Prince must choose a bride, the sorcerer, von Rothbart, brings his daughter, Odile, disguised as Odette. The Prince is smitten and vows to marry her. The real Odette is forever condemned to swanhood, and Siegfried, realizing his mistake too late, joins her in suicide. (Some productions now feature a happy ending, while others finish with a despondent Siegfried watching a crowned swan slowly glide past him.)

Russian cultural historian James H. Billington writes, *fin de siècle* Russian ballets provided "childlike interludes of graceful fancy for a harassed people."

Yet the swan was a traditional Russian symbol of purity and redemption. Given *Swan Lake's* central image and its cautionary theme, it is an interesting coincidence that the reorchestrated ballet by Petipa and Ivanov was first performed in St. Petersburg early in 1895, around the time a new tsar took power. Vsevolozhsky's choice of *The Sleeping Beauty* as a ballet scenario most certainly was based on the number of delightful divertissements it might occasion, but the story has a moral: a breach in royal courtesy, even to such nasty adversaries as wicked fairies, can allow chaos to upset the orderly flow of events. Did that really escape him, Petipa, and Tchaikovsky? Although such speculations may seem far-fetched, certainly Petipa formed a style not simply in spite of tsarist protocol, but in intuitive and creative response to it.

According to Russian ballet historian Anatole Chujoy, there were nineteen courts in St. Petersburg alone at the beginning of the twentieth century. The entourages of the tsar, the dowager tsarina, and the various grand dukes numbered in the thousands. Together with high-ranking military officers and foreign ambassadors, they could have filled all three of the Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg and the three smaller theaters to which the general public was not admitted. Only at the Maryinsky (which seated 2,500) was ballet presented regularly—meaning about fifty performances a year, on Wednesdays and Sundays, only ten of them nonsubscription. Diaghilev's collaborator, Alexandre Benois, deploring the stodginess of the Imperial Ballet's presentations, said, with some truth, that they were created for "children, hussars, and ranking dignitaries."

When Marius Petipa worried about pleasing "the public," he was speaking of a power elite. Dancers on the stage of the Maryinsky could look out into an orderly assemblage, seated according to rank and prestige, with rich merchants, lesser officials, members of the theater or the press, students, and children filling the places not reserved for courtiers.

The spectators looked back at a stage world that flatteringly mirrored theirs in protocol, decorum, and elegance. The ballerina and premier danseur, like the tsar and tsarina, were framed by a select company of soloists (the grand dukes and duchesses) and demi-soloists (court officials, if you like) and by a further stratified corps de ballet. When Balanchine was staging the "Garland Waltz" from *The Sleeping Beauty* for the New York City Ballet's Tchaikovsky Festival in 1981, he joked with his dancers about the

third echelon of the corps in prerevolutionary St. Petersburg. Barely able to stand on pointe, they were called "the fountain girls" because they were always placed at the back, near the apparently ubiquitous scenic water.

The parades, grand entrances, and large ensemble dances in the ballets affirmed the power of ceremony. The surviving works from this period—*The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *La Bayadère*—contain courts of their own. In last-act divertissements, the various dancers who entertained both the onstage and the offstage nobility are often presented before they dance their variations, and reenter together later to receive the royal thanks and applause. Soloists may walk ceremoniously to a position on the stage to begin dancing or be magically revealed by a shifting of the ensemble, as if living curtains were drawing aside.

It was natural that even the most frivolous of the spectacles would involve a manipulation of props and costumes as fastidious and elaborate as that of court ceremony and church ritual. Petipa's notes contain a plan for a dance during which horizontal lines of female dancers come forward alternately, displaying with each advance a different color of skirt. (While concealed by the line in front, the women in the next rank hastily tucked up the top layer to reveal the new shade.) His original plans for Act I of *Swan Lake* called for twenty-four couples and twenty-four red-and-green stools on which they could perch to create pleasing designs; the women were to carry flower baskets, the men batons that would suddenly sprout flowers. Fanciest of all: on the last beat of the "Grand Ballabile des Caryatides Animées" in *Daughter of the Pharaoh*, small children popped up out of baskets carried on the heads of dancers (who were presumably male and sturdy). Some divertissements we read accounts of may strike us as the nineteenth-century equivalent of half-time entertainment at football games; but in others, spectacle, symmetry, and repetition were used to profound effect. Of Petipa's mass dances, a contemporary, critic Akim Volynsky, wrote delightedly, "There are everywhere lines and figures which harmonize with one another and create the impression of one line and one figure." The dancing ensemble, which for Perrot and Bournonville had been a bouquet of individuals with common characteristics, became an impersonal force—garlands and frames and lakes of women, shifting the equilibrium of story and musical structure.

Gautier's scenario for the 1841 *Giselle* indicates that among the ghostly wilis could be distinguished girls of different nationalities, who performed wondrous echoes of their characteristic dances. After Petipa reorchestrated the ballet in 1850 and again in 1884, all that remained of that individuality were two exotic names, Moyna and Zulma—now owned by dance-alike

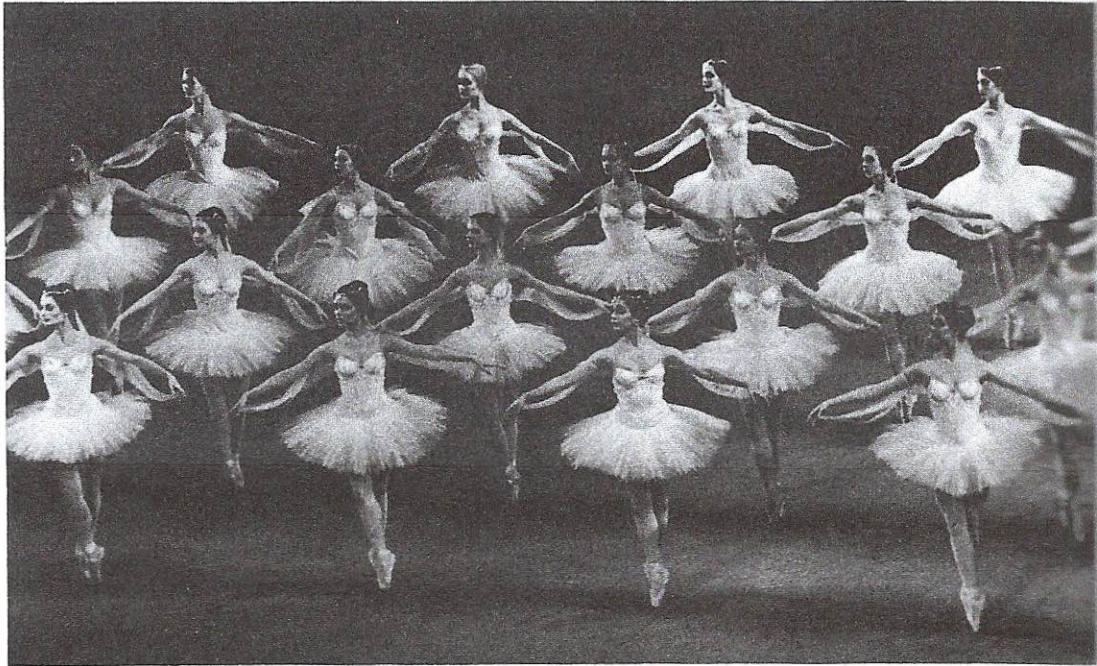


Members of the Kirov Ballet of Leningrad in Act II of *Swan Lake*

demi-soloists. Descriptions of the earlier *Giselle* suggest that the hapless gamekeeper, Hilarion, venturing into the woods at night, was waltzed around and around by one ghost-girl after another until, dizzied and exhausted, he was whirled into the lake by his last partner. "Ogresses of the waltz," Gautier called them. What has come down to us from Petipa is far more abstract: Hilarion is rapidly spun down an implacable diagonal line of wilis, each giving him a push, until he vanishes offstage; the image is of a glamorous and chillingly efficient machine for executing summary justice. And at the climax of Act II, the chains of wilis crisscrossing the stage with inexorable *arabesques voyagées** seem to cast a net of dancing to entrap the exhausted hero, Albrecht.

Petipa's memoirs give little clue to a brilliance that must have been largely intuitive. He appears to have concentrated on diagramming ever more

*Standing in *arabesque* on a bent leg, the dancers travel by means of tiny hops that scarcely leave the ground. Because they hold the position as steadily as possible, torso and extended leg almost parallel to the ground, they look almost as if they are being pulled across the stage by invisible cords.



Members of the corps de ballet of American Ballet Theatre in "The Kingdom of the Shades" act in *La Bayadère*, staged by Natalia Makarova in 1974, and incorporated into the full-length production in 1980

amazing spectacles, accommodating reigning ballerinas, attempting rather pathetically to curry imperial favor and win job security. Yet through his skill as a master mechanic, the most resonant of poetic images emerged.

The famous entrance of the dead temple dancers in "The Kingdom of the Shades" act in *La Bayadère* exerts its magic both as choreographic strategy and as metaphor. One by one, the white figures appear at the top of the ramp; each executes once the little phrase—step into *arabesque*; step back and arch deeply backward (*cambré*), arms wreathing overhead; straighten up and take two steps forward—before the next woman appears. Time seems suspended in a blanched eternity while, to the sweet, placid Minkus music, the women of the corps de ballet, one by one, advance to fill the stage with their snaking procession and, at last, assemble in four vertical lines to begin their smooth, slow balances. On a technical level, Petipa planned the dance as a long crescendo and an entrancing display of the unanimity of the corps de ballet. He had been struck, it's said, by Gustave Doré's illustrations for Dante's *Il Paradiso*. But the scene also reminds us that the entire act is an opium dream of the bereaved and anguished Solor, who, through opportunism and moral cowardice, has caused his beloved's death. The dance of the *bayadères* has a narcotized slowness and evenness; it suggests a blurring

of the hero's vision: seeking one woman in the spirit world, he finds her endlessly multiplied.

Lev Ivanov allowed this kind of metaphor to shape the ensemble patterns and choice of steps in his choreography for Acts II and IV of *Swan Lake*. The white-garbed women don't imitate swans, they take on their habits—now gliding, as if over water, now flocking wildly, their wing-arms beating the air. In the "Snowflake Waltz" of his *The Nutcracker*, the leaping women swirl and drift past each other, giving the illusion of being caught up by imaginary currents of air. Such ensemble imagery had little place in the earlier French or Danish ballets, where dancing, for the most part, was "dancing," whether you were a sylph or a harem girl.

The late nineteenth-century dance ensembles, like the orchestra for a concerto or the court of a ruler, could echo the soloists' steps on a simplified level, or offer a step as a suggestion for the soloists to elaborate on. Sometimes these purely formal connections created an impression of human volition. Reviewing a revival of "The Kingdom of the Shades" act from *La Bayadère*, staged by Natalia Makarova for American Ballet Theatre in 1974, Arlene Croce wrote:

My favorite moment comes in the final waltz, when the three principal Shades are doing relevé-passé, relevé-attitude cambré to a rocking rhythm, and the corps, seeing this, rush to join them on the repeat. They—the corps—remember those cambré positions from their big dance.

The solo dancers that Petipa and Ivanov had to work with were very different from the dancers of Marie Taglioni's generation. Years of interchange between ambitious dancers and ingenious shoemakers had gradually transformed the pointe shoe from a thin slipper reinforced by darning and buckram to something with a steel shank and a stiffened box of a toe. In Russia in 1858, in Perrot's *Eoline*, the Italian ballerina Amalia Ferraris managed jumps on pointe, a supported triple pirouette, and long balances, and was applauded by balletomanes for displaying only the tiniest of quivers. We can infer from a review of her performance that her shoes were fairly sturdy. Yet twenty-seven years later, when another Italian, the glamorous and dramatic Virginia Zucchi, made her Russian debut at the summer theater at Kin Grust, shoes and technique had developed to such a degree that she was able to perform an entire solo on pointe.

Most of the brilliant Italian ballerinas who came to Russia late in the century had been pupils of Carlo Blasis in Milan. Russian dancers who

hadn't studied under Blasis in Moscow, where he worked between 1861 and 1864, picked up the dazzling new virtuosity on their own. Whether Petipa worked with the likes of the native Ekaterina Vazem (*La Bayadère*) or the foreign Pierina Legnani (notably in *Swan Lake*), he was assured of a ballerina whose "steel pointes" were a vital part of her equipment. The new virtuosity stimulated him. His many solos for women investigate all manner of illusions in the way that articulate toe can touch the floor—brushing, jabbing, piercing delicately, gliding, hopping, resting.

Solo *adagios* on the whole foot all but disappeared; the public wanted to see pointework. Since long, intricate balances on pointe necessitated a partner, a new duet form emerged—one that altered how men and women danced together. Instead of doing spirited steps side by side with an occasional lift or embrace, or taking turns—as did Bournonville's dancers—supporting and turning each other, the man stood behind his partner and, holding her waist or hand, revolved her smoothly on one toe through a sequence of constantly changing poses, as if to offer her to the audience in all her three-dimensional charm. Expanding the complexity of these earth-bound patterns, lifts became more intricate too: the premier danseur might change the position of his partner in the air several times before returning her to the tip of one toe. Musical rhythms or an aura of narrative could render these *pas de deux* ardent, but they also occurred for sheer display, unoccasional by the plot. In Petipa's remake of *Le Corsaire*, the heroine doesn't dance with the pirate-hero when they're safely aboard his ship; she dances *for* him with a handy and surprisingly amorous slave.

When Pierina Legnani made her debut in Russia, a critic complained that she "lacked lightness," but he was clearly a reactionary. Lightness was not the issue it once had been. Nearer to fingering contemporary taste was the critic who praised Legnani as Odette in *Swan Lake* for her "grace, art, precision, and confidence" and for "the extraordinary strength of her steel muscles and her beautifully shaped legs." Little bounding steps had lost precedence to large leaps, soaring to gliding. The sylph's emblematic steps had been airy jumps, quick little runs on tiptoe, and transitory balances; the swan moved by gliding and plunging. Her rippling chains of *bouffées* on pointe, her long, supported balances on one toe with the other leg probing floorward like a swan's neck or beating against the ankle like a quivering wing were all made possible by the changes in technique.

For the most part, photographs of the reigning ballerinas—Legnani, Mathilde Kshessinskaya, Olga Preobajenska, Carlotta Brianza, Varvara Nikitina, and others—show strong-legged, well-rounded little women with

Carlotta Brianza, the first Aurora in Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890)



fashionably dressed hair and jewels (the gifts of admirers) prominently displayed. Leaning casually on a convenient pillar, or supported by a solicitous partner, the dancer establishes a plumb line from headdress to firmly planted pointe—and could stand there unflinching while the slow-shuttered cameras cranked out the seconds. For all her short skirts, she's a Russian princess and is meant to act like one. Virginia Zucchi was rebuked by Petipa for removing her headdress and disarranging her hair and clothes for the scene in *Daughter of the Pharaoh* in which Aspacia has been pursued by a lion. Lion or no lion, he told her, a princess ought *never* to appear without her crown.

Although cameras of the day were unable to capture motion, the photographs accurately reflect the fact that equilibrium, rather than ethereality and restless flight, had become the guiding image in the dance style, as well as in the overall stage picture. Mortal heroines, like Raymonda, show pas-



The "Rose Adagio" in a contemporary production of *The Sleeping Beauty* by American Ballet Theatre. Susan Jaffe is flanked by (from left) John Summers, Robert Hill, Ricardo Bustamante, and Clark Tippet. Photograph by Martha Swope.

sion through aplomb, their feet jabbing the floor in moody playfulness. Supernatural heroines may display their moral delicacy or their deadliness through how they assume a balance. When the spiritual Odette sits folded over and quivering on the ground, Siegfried leans over her from behind and gently pulls her up and onto one tentative pointe. When he is dancing with her double, Odile, the pawn of the evil Rothbart, she sits in something very like that position, then lifts her eyes, daring him; this time he faces her, and as he pulls her by one hand, she darts triumphantly into a *piqué arabesque* that's almost like the pecking of a fierce swan.*

A brilliant use of balance as combined feat and metaphor occurs in the "Rose Adagio" of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Sixteen-year-old Princess Aurora is supported by each of four suitors who have come to vie for her hand in marriage. The way in which she balances unsupported on one toe in an *attitude* while each prince comes forward in turn to offer her his arm, and

*It must be understood that *Swan Lake* as it is performed in Russia today, as well as those versions mounted in the West (many of them descended from the production that former Imperial Ballet artist Nicholas Sergeyev staged for the Vic-Wells Ballet in 1934), have been altered considerably. Nevertheless, many details of the choreography remain the same or similar in most productions, and we conveniently assume that in seeing these passages, we are seeing the Petipa-Ivanov choreography.

later to revolve her slowly in the same pose, showcased the virtuosic equilibrium of the original Aurora, Carlotta Brianza. Yet these balances can poignantly suggest the testing of a young princess's maturity and her ability to be calm, gracious, and balanced in her judgment under stress. A message any little grand duchess might take to heart.

In terms of excellence, women outnumbered men in Russian ballet—imported virtuosi like Enrico Cecchetti, for whom Petipa made the scissoring, flying solo of the Bluebird in *The Sleeping Beauty*,* or eloquent Russian actor-dancers like Pavel Gerdt, who prolonged his career into late middle age by the device of dance stand-ins or assistants. (No one among Gerdt's fans would have thought it odd that during Siegfried's first impassioned duet with Odette, his friend Benno should be standing by to catch her as she swooned backward or to lift her into the air.) As in Western European ballet, the prominence given the ballerina sapped the strength of the male role and demoralized promising young student dancers. Training and morale had improved by the end of the century; no longer need Russian balletomanes suggest, as one had in 1879, that while men were clearly necessary to have around onstage, they ought not to be allowed to perform solos.

In the ritualized *pas de deux*, the male dancer was almost equal to his partner. He supported her in the *adagio*, danced a solo variation that showed off his ability to leap and spin, ceded the stage to the ballerina for her display of rapid pointework and secure balances, then spelled her and rejoined her in the fireworks of the coda. Yet his major function, as the sturdy physiques of the men affirmed, was as a *porteur*, and there were fewer opportunities for him to dance than for her. The character dances that Petipa also excelled at—a Spanish dance, a *czardas*, a *mazurka*—would bring on the men, but a male corps de ballet dancing without women was almost unheard of. The variation for four men in the last act of *Raymonda* (1898) attested to a renaissance of male dancing supposedly sparked by Cecchetti's performing and teaching.

The lives of the dancers who performed in the Imperial Theaters reflected some of the desired stability, decorum, and attention to protocol that characterized the roles they played in the ballets—roles that had to be affirmed in the increasingly precarious world of royal privilege that the majority of the audience hoped would never end. Children accepted into

*Cecchetti is often given credit for the choreography of his own solo. It is more likely that the two men collaborated—Cecchetti showing Petipa some of the fancy jumping he was capable of, Petipa weaving these into a pattern. In any case, it was certainly Petipa who conceived of the solo as aerial and an ideal vehicle for Cecchetti.

the imperial schools were wards of the court. Their clothes were provided for along with their schooling, food, and lodging. Uniforms distinguished the various levels, and boys and girls were kept separate, except in classes in social dancing and, later, in partnering. When a ballet required the participation of children, carriages with liveried coachmen and footmen carried them from the school to the theater. Teaching and playing character roles assured dancers of long careers. When too old or unsuited to do either, they were pensioned off. The jobbing around, the scrounging, the search for wealthy patrons was not a necessity for them as it was for dancers in most of Western Europe. If the women took archdukes and generals as lovers, it was because they liked the social cachet and the lavish support. Certainly those who attained stardom behaved like stars.