

Ballet Story and History: Giselle

The story of Love, Betrayal and Forgiveness

Giselle has been considered as one of the most beautiful ballets in the history of classical dance. It is also one of the most famous « *ballets blancs* » or white ballets in its romantic style from the nineteenth century.

Called white ballet for the colour of the tutus and costumes worn by the Prima ballerina and the female Corps de ballet, ballet history takes Maria Taglioni's 1832 representation of *La Sylphide* as the first real premise of the white ballets (she was also the first ballerina to go on pointe, making her appear weightless and as if she was floating above the stage). They usually featured spirits, shades, shadows, ghosts or fairies in enchanted tales. In *Giselle*, these spirits are represented by the Wilis, souls of women who have been wronged by their beloveds and promised vengeance. The three most famous white ballets are *Swan Lake* (Acts II and IV), *La Bayadère* (Act III) and *Giselle* (Act II).



Alessandra Ferri as Giselle // © Jack Mitchell 1987

First choreographed by renowned French choreographer Jules Perrot with the help of ballet Master from the Paris Opera, Jean Coralli, Giselle was initially the idea of French writer and critic Théophile Gautier who was fascinated by ghost stories. The first representation of Giselle was performed at the Paris Opera in 1841. Giselle was then restaged by Marius Petipa for the Imperial Theatre of Saint Petersburg in 1903, the version on which most modern productions are based.



Edgar Degas, « La Classe de danse » (1874) with Jules Perrot teaching the class

SYNOPSIS

ACT I – Village harvest celebration (Reality)

In a German Rhineland village, Giselle - a lovely peasant girl with a weak heart and a passion for dancing - is courted by a young man known to her as Loys. He is, in fact, Albrecht, Duke of Silesia, disguised as a peasant. He then vows eternal love for Giselle, who lets her guard down and falls in love with Loys (the famous « he loves me/he loves me not » or « daisies scene »). But Hilarion, the woodsman, who has long had feelings for Giselle starts being suspicious of Loys after Giselle had rejected him and made clear her feelings for the young disguised Duke. Suspicious of Loys, Hilarion angrily vows to uncover his true identity and separate the two lovers.

Giselle and Loys are met by friends and villagers coming from the vineyards. They all join in the dance ensemble of the peasants and vintagers. But Berthe, Giselle's mother, admonishes the girl for dancing so much, afraid that her daughter's heart will give out. She tells everyone the story of the Wilis, young women who died before their wedding day because of a broken heart and must spend eternity dancing. Afraid this will be her daughter's fate, Berthe leads a reluctant Giselle indoors, and Loys takes his leave.



Royal Opera House Giselle // © Tristram Kenton 2011

A hunting party arrives at Giselle's village, led by the Duke of Courland and his daughter, Bathilde, who are seeking sustenance. Giselle sees to her guests, and she and Bathilde get along well and start conversing about each other's love. Giselle explains that she is engaged. Bathilde responds that she is also engaged and asks after Giselle's fiancé. Giselle says that she is looking for him but can't find him. Charmed by Giselle, Bathilde requests her father's permission to present the girl with her necklace. A delighted Giselle dances for Bathilde as a gesture of thanks.

Hilarion, using the village party as a diversion, finally discovers a way of exposing the disguised Duke as he finds Loys' sword and his hunting horn with the same crest, understanding that it is his symbol of nobility. Hilarion hides the sword and waits to expose Loys' deception to Giselle.



Alessandra Ferri as Giselle // © Marco Brescia

Giselle is crowned Queen of the Vineyard. Everyone dances in celebration of the harvest, including Giselle and Loys. But their revelry is interrupted by an angry Hilarion, who denounces Loys as a deceiver. He presents the sword as proof. Giselle does not want to believe him. Hilarion summons the hunting party and Loys can no longer conceal his identity. He reveals to Giselle that he is in fact Albrecht, young Duke of Silesia. Giselle then realises that not only is he a nobleman, but he is the one engaged to Bathilde! Distraught, Giselle becomes mad with sadness and stabs herself with Albrecht's sword (the famous « mad scene »). Weakened physically and emotionally, she collapses and dies in her mother's arms.



Natalia Osipova, Leonid Sarafanov and Vladimir Tsal in Giselle David H. Koch Theater // © Paul Kolnik 2014

ACT II – Kingdom of the Wilis (Dream)

The second Act is set in a dank and shrouded forest where Giselle has been buried, close to a lake. The first character to enter the stage is Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis. She summons the spirits to join her. The Wilis appear and start dancing around Myrtha.



Giselle (2021-2022) - Valentine Colasante as Myrtha // © Agathe Poupeney and OnP

Giselle's spirit joins them and they initiate her to their sisterhood. Suddenly, they stop as they hear Hilarion coming to grieve Giselle at her grave. He does not linger as he senses the presence of the Wilis. Hilarion has been found by the Wilis. On Myrtha's orders, they make him dance until he is exhausted and then cast him into the lake, where he dies.



Giselle (2021-2022) – The Wilis // © Agathe Poupeney and OnP

The Wilis then hide when Albrecht, full of remorse and sorrow, comes to mourn at Giselle's grave as well, seeking her forgiveness. She suddenly appears before him, and he runs off in pursuit of her.

But Albrecht's presence is revealed, and Myrtha commands that he, too, must die. Giselle intervenes, telling him to seek shelter at the cross of her grave, where she stands in protection. But the vengeful Myrtha orders Giselle to dance. She obeys, and Albrecht is soon drawn to her. They beg the Wilis to help them, but their pleas are rebuffed. Myrtha will see to it that he dances until he dies.



San Francisco Ballet in Tomasson's Giselle // © Erik Tomasson



Svetlana Zakharova and Roberto Bolle in Giselle // © Marco Brescia Rudy Amisano

A weary Albrecht pleads to put a halt to his dancing. His entreaty is refused. Giselle again pleads for his life, but she cannot sway Myrtha. Albrecht collapses from exhaustion. But the darkness of the forest is broken by the first light of dawn, banishing the Wilis and Giselle. Albrecht, overcome by his love for Giselle and by the generosity of her forgiveness, is left alone as she slowly disappears into the dawn. Heartbroken and shamed, Albrecht realises that the true love between himself and Giselle has saved his life.



Giselle (2021-2022) - Sae Eun Park and Paul Marque // © Agathe Poupény and OnP

SYMBOLISM

« LES BALLETS ROMANTIQUES »

Giselle represents the 19th century Romanticism movement and the intertwining between peasant life and supernatural stories. These two themes give the ballet its shape, with Act I that is set in the village and Act II in the mystical forest. The mad scene where Giselle dies of a broken heart that closes Act I serves as the bridge between the reality and the realm of dreams.

THE FLOWERS

The flowers used as props during the ballet have special symbolism in the story. In Act I, Giselle is treading daisies to know if Albrecht's love is pure and certain (also called the « he loves me/he loves me not » scene or the « daisy scene »). Daisies are associated with purity and innocence, traits so evident in Giselle as she counts the petals like a child would do.



Diana Vishneva and Mathieu Ganio in Giselle // Mathieu Ganio twitter

In Act II, Myrtha's name comes from the myrtle flower, which can be a symbol of love, partnership and marriage. Myrtha carries a wand made of rosemary, an herb associated with fidelity. When she throws her wand at Albrecht she is taunting his betrayal of Giselle. It is also a symbol of remembrance, and is placed on graves and planted at gravesites. Finally, Albrecht brings lilies to Giselle's grave. They are the traditional flowers of funerals, symbolising rebirth of the soul at death. At the end of the ballet, Giselle then dances with them and gives more lilies to Albrecht to show that her love for him hasn't died. At the end of the ballet, the lilies are all that is left of Giselle.

THE MUSIC

Giselle's music was composed by Adolphe Adam who also created the music for the ballet *Le Corsaire* in 1856. Adam composed the score for *Giselle* quickly; he had an outline in three weeks. He worked closely with the choreographers, tailoring the music to the action taking place on stage. He also perfected the use of leitmotif - recurring phrases and repeating themes that refer to a specific character, emotion or movement - as a narrative device. Giselle, Albrecht and Hilarion have their own leitmotifs. Same with when Giselle is dancing with different flowers all along the ballet. For example, Giselle and Albrecht's love theme first occurs during the « daisy scene » Pas de deux, and is poignantly echoed in the « mad scene ».

The Wilis' theme is used twice as a foreboding premonition, even before the Wilis appear: It's heard in Bathilde's warning to Giselle in Act I when she tells her she is engaged to Albrecht, and also during the « mad scene », after Giselle discovers Albrecht's betrayal. When the Wilis finally appear in Act II, we realise we have already been musically warned about them.

THE ARMS MOVEMENTS

The two most famous arms movements in Giselle are the third arabesque position and the hands crossed against the heart.

Giselle Wilis have a very specific arms position which is crossing the hands at the wrists, palms turned towards the sky, positioned in front of the lower part of the ribcage. This position of the arms symbolises death. Wilis have died of a broken heart and were promised revenge in their after life.



Ballet Giselle // © Opéra national de Paris

The third arabesque is Giselle's characteristic arms movement as she pleads for Albrecht's life. The ballerina dancing Giselle's role elongate both arms front either standing alone on pointe shoes or going a little bit forward in a penché during Pas de deux.



Svetlana Zakharova and Roberto Bolle Giselle Teatro Alla Scala Milano // © Большой Theater

Giselle was always my favourite ballet because of all the symbolism that a dancer can use to express herself and make this story a reality for the audience.

Now that you have read about the beautiful story that is Giselle, and have a little understanding of what the choreographer had in mind creating the ballet, here are some links to watch the complete ballet on Youtube:

- Teatro Alla Scala 2005 – Svetlana Zakharova and Roberto Bolle
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqOm922Fhx8>
- National Opera and Ballet Theatre of Mari El - Mikhaylova Kristina and Starikov Roman
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VroMXEDLTq8>
- The Royal Danish Ballet
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GLrJQM62nA>



**Written by Adèle Cuel Wood
Copyright @BalletinYorkshire**