

A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM

La Scala's new production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by George Balanchine (1904-1983), presented in the year marking the twentieth anniversary of his passing away and in anticipation of the centenary of his birth.

This precious production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with choreography by George Balanchine, presented exclusively in Europe by the ballet of La Scala, recalls an interesting date from La Scala's past.

In 1855, and twenty-one years before Marius Petipa's pure dance production of *Le songe d'une nuit d'été*, (a one act *ballet fantastique* with music by Felix Mendelsshon-Bartholdy), the choreographer Giovanni Casati produced for La Scala a dance-drama version entitled *Shakespeare, or A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the libretto for this production did not draw from the namesakes 5 act comedy, written in 1595 in verse and prose and which first appeared in a published form in 1600 but, was more of a testimony to the inexhaustible interest in that era of Romanticism, in both the person and works of William Shakespeare. In the 1989-1990 season, the ballet of La Scala revived Robert De Warren's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, originally created in 1981. However, with regards to Balanchine's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in part due to the forceful desire of its present director Frédéric Olivieri to add this ballet to the company's repertoire, the Scala institution went on to acquire this jewel of a production.

In fact to date, only two international companies, putting the New York City Ballet respectfully to one side, have the rights to perform this choreography. A particular privilege for La Scala is that also of being able to premiere the ballet in the year which celebrates the 20th anniversary of the passing away of the great Russian-American choreographer (b.1904 – d.1983) and in prospect of the imminent centenary of his birth.

The origins of the ballet

A surprising choice for such a formalist and lover of pure line who shied away, after experiences with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, from dealing with literary and psychological themes. George Balanchine's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* created in 1962, was born from a personal necessity no less strong from that which had pushed him already in 1954 to create his first and only late nineteenth century repertory ballet, *The Nutcracker*.

At just eight years of age, Balanchine landed himself the role of one of the elves in a production of *Dream* at the Mikhailovsky Theatre in St. Petersburg and from which time onwards he continued finding joy in reading the Bard's verses, some of which he even learnt off by heart in his Russian mother tongue.

Arriving in America, the great choreographer had an opportunity to produce in 1950 various dances for a dramatic version of the play, presented at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut. However, without his discovery of the evocative sounds of spells and elves as depicted in the crystal clear music of Felix

Mendelsshon-Bartholdy, as he reveals in *101 Stories of the Great Ballets*, he would never have realized his own version of this Shakespearian comedy.

In fact, so important was the music that it in turn became the vital condition for the existence of his choreographic work.

Synopsis of the ballet

Given in two acts and made up of six scenes, Balanchine's *Dream* saw the light of day on the 17th of January 1962, with *décors* (and lighting) by David Hays and costumes by Karinska. During the early stages of the production, created on the dancers of the New York City Ballet, it was deemed necessary to add some extra music; from amongst Mendelsshon's many various Overtures and stage music, the choreographer opted to also include *Athalie*, *Die schöne Melusine* and *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* in the first act and choosing both the *Symphony No.9* and the *Die Heimkehr aus der Fremde* overture for the second. The theme of the ballet is not far from that of the play even if here and there, there are slight changes and at times considerable, though desired, omissions – such as the absence of the mini “play within the play” of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which usually closes the comedy.

The first act takes place in a forest beside the palace of Duke Theseus. Oberon, king of the fairies and his queen Titania, are quarreling over the Page which he wishes to have for his entourage but which she is hiding from him. Oberon orders Puck, the sprightliest and most mischievous of his elves, to bring him the flower which, pierced by Cupid's bow, causes whosoever comes under it's spell to fall in love with the first person they lie eyes on and then, whilst Titania is asleep, to throw over her the spell of the flower.

Meanwhile Helena, wandering in the woods, bumps into Demetrius with whom she is in love but which is not reciprocated. In fact Demetrius pushes her away and continues along his way. Oberon however, sees what has occurred and orders Puck to use the flower to make Demetrius change his feelings towards Helena.

There is also another couple wandering in the woods: Hermia and Lysander are in love but, become separated. Puck, longing to conclude the task given him by Oberon, completes his magic but mistakes Lysander for Demetrius and when Helena appears it is Lysander who declares his love for her, to her great surprise. A short while after, Hermia re-appears: at first she is stunned and then dismayed by the sight of Lysander's attentions solely towards Helena.

Using the seductive magic of the flower Puck ensnares Demetrius who now also desires Helena, though this is not much appreciated by Lysander. The amorous suitors, Demetrius and Lysander, begin to quarrel over Helena. Puck, on Oberon's command has separated the weaver Bottom from his companions and has mutated his head to that of an ass, and who he has also transported to the feet of the sleeping Titania. When the queen awakens and sees Bottom, she believes him to be magnificent and showers him with ever growing amorous attention to the point that Oberon, now moved to pity and no longer annoyed with his consort, makes that Bottom is driven away and that Titania is freed from the spell.

Hermia at this point is being ignored by all; Helena to the contrary finds herself the subject of too much attention. The men, completely dazed by the effects of Cupid's flower, are about to turn their quarrel into a proper fight but Puck, with his magic powers, manages to separate them; then, wandering alone in the forest they get lost and in exhaustion fall asleep where they drop. Following this, the irreverent character, makes in turn that Helena falls asleep beside Demetrius and that Lysander lies close to Hermia. In the meantime Duke Theseus and Hippolyta, his future wife, arrive in the forest: they find the young lovers and, awakening them from their slumber, firstly make sure that their problems are resolved and in turn declare a triple wedding ceremony, theirs and that of the two couples.

The second act of the ballet follows events and opens in the sumptuous surroundings of Theseus's palace, with parades, dances and *divertissements* in honor of the newly reunited couples. Once the celebrations are over and the mortals leave, we find ourselves once more in the realm of Oberon and Titania, now peacefully together again.

Puck, who did much to re-establish order after all the chaos, can think of nothing more than to just sweep away any residue of this crazy night; the fireflies, with lightness and harmony, reclaim the forest.

The style of the ballet

Right at the end of the choreography nevertheless, we notice that the grotesque play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, usually performed by Bottom and his companions at the end of the Shakespearian comedy, has not been performed. Balanchine wanted to give the second act of his ballet more of a formal neoclassical figure, of straightforwardly pure dance, rich with unforgettable images of love and thereby, shelving the rougher and more rugged nature of the first act.

Mendelssohn's majestic *Wedding March* instills a sense of marital bliss in the newly wedded couples. Hippolyta, as in the first act, performs another series of *fouettés* in the finale though at this point no longer as an Amazonian warrior, given that she now has an adoring husband as her partner.

The *divertissement* for the courtiers leads to a *pas de deux* which is probably the one that alludes the most to the sentiment of love, in the whole Balanchine repertoire. Devised originally for Violette Verdy and Conrad Ludlow, it became a *tour de force* for some of the most illustrious couples to have come out of the New York City Ballet: Allegra Kent and Jacques D'Amboise, Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins, Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto or Phillip Neal. The two protagonists of this *pas de deux* appear unable to separate from one another and are often side by side: whenever she moves away, he holds her back. At the end the dancer let's herself go in the arms of her partner, epitomizing a pure act of devotion and trust. Puck, challenges the forces of gravity in the ballets final scene. All together the ballet is a true mix of pure, dramatic and pantomimic dance. If in the second act we can admire the metaphorical force of the lines, in the first act we are attracted to the unusual tensions of a real and literal "story-telling", reserving various surprises in this particular reading of the

Shakespearian comedy, which Balanchine makes dynamically fairy-tale like – a true feast for both the eyes and the heart.

The La Scala production

The production presented by La Scala of Balanchine's *Dream*, has newly designed sets and costumes; Luisa Spinatelli, a professional of international renown, has created a veritable feast of colours which, from blue changing colours through green and to pink, enables us to see the forest populated by elves, gnomes and butterfly-fairies as if viewing a majestic Grecian classicism in a neoclassical key: the world of Theseus and Hippolyta, here the true queen of the Amazons, blends into the fairy-tale.

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