

Ballet: Coppelia

Choreography: Arthur Saint-Leon

Composer: Leo Delibes

The Story

The story begins in a quaint village, where a festival is being held to celebrate the arrival of a new bell. A young girl named Swanhilda plans to marry her sweetheart Franz during the festival. But Franz suddenly becomes enamored with another beautiful maiden named Coppelia. Though Coppelia sits motionless on a balcony reading, Franz is determined to attract her attention. Annoyed with Franz, Swanhilda questions his love for her by shaking a sheaf of wheat to see if it rattles, proving his love is true. When she hears nothing, she becomes even more frustrated and sets out to uncover the truth behind this mysterious Coppelia.

The balcony where Coppelia sits belongs to the house of Dr. Coppelius, a mysterious inventor. When he is not at home, Swanhilda and her friends sneak into his house and discover that Coppelia is actually a life-size doll! All around the inventor's house are similar mechanical dolls. Swanhilda and her friends wind up the dolls and watch them move, laughing at the ruse. Suddenly, Dr. Coppelius returns, and Swanhilda quickly hides and disguises herself as the doll Coppelia. At the same time, Franz has decided to climb up to the balcony to meet Coppelia himself. When he sees Franz, Dr. Coppelius invites him inside for a drink, but he puts sleeping powder in Franz's wine so he falls unconscious. Dr. Coppelius plans to cast a spell on Franz that will transfer his spirit to the doll, bringing Coppelia to life!

When Swanhilda springs from the balcony disguised as the doll and dances, he thinks he has succeeded! But when Franz wakes up, he realizes he has been tricked and that Coppelia is, in fact, just a doll. At first, he is angry and confused by their intrusion and Swanhilda's trick, but Dr. Coppelius later forgives her. Swanhilda forgives Franz for his folly, and the two are married.

The History

Coppelia, sometimes referred to as "The Girl with the Enamel Eyes" or "La Fille aux Yeux d'Email" is a lighthearted and comical story told through classical ballet and folk dance. It premiered on May 25th 1870 at Paris' Théâtre Impérial l'Opéra. Sixteen year old Italian ballerina Giuseppina Bozzacchi danced the principal role of Swanhilda, and Eugénie Fiocre played the part of Franz. Parisian audiences loved Bozzacchi's performance as Swanhilda, and she quickly became a star on the rise! Her career was tragically short-lived, however. Just months after Coppelia's debut, the ballet was halted due to the Franco-Prussian war. Giuseppina Bozzacchi fell sick during the siege of Paris and died on her 17th birthday.

The ballet Coppelia returned to the stage in 1871 and became the most frequently performed ballet in Paris Opera history! Coppelia lives on today as a beloved ballet, though its choreography has changed a lot since Saint-Leon. It was restaged by Marius Petipa in 1884, and the versions of Coppelia we see today are largely derived from his influential choreography.

The picture below shows Giuseppina Bozzacchi as Swanhilda.

