

Ballet: La Sylphide

Choreography: Filippo Taglioni

Composer: Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffler, with libretto by Adolphe Nourrit

## The Story

In the great hall of a Scottish manor, a young man named James Ruben dozes fireside. Unknown to him, a Sylph- an ethereal, fairy-like creature- gazes upon him lovingly. The Sylph dances around his chair before planting a kiss on his forehead. James is woken by the kiss and startled to catch only a glimpse of the mystical creature who gave it to him. The Sylph vanishes, and James wakes his friend Gurn to ask if he saw her too.

Gurn denies seeing anyone and reminds him that it's the morning of his wedding day. James' fiancée Effie then enters the manor, followed by her bridesmaids. Everyone is cheerful except James, who is still distracted by thoughts and visions of the Sylph. James dutifully tries to pay affection to his fiancée, but when he sees a figure in the shadows and thinks the Sylph has returned, he rushes over, only to find it is Old Madge, a witch who is warming herself by the fire.

Angered with disappointment, James tries to throw the witch outside, but Effie and her bridesmaids beg the witch instead to tell them their fortunes. Old Madge agrees and gleefully foretells that Effie will not marry James after all, that James has fallen in love with someone else and it is Gurn who will marry Effie.

Furious, James has the old witch thrown out of the manor. Effie and her bridesmaids laugh off Old Madge's forecast and retire upstairs to prepare for the wedding. Only Gurn is secretly pleased at the witch's prediction, for he is secretly in love with Effie.

The Sylph appears again, this time at James' window, and conveys her love for him. James tries to resist at first, and the Sylph weeps at his seeming indifference, dancing sorrowfully around him. Captivated by her ethereal beauty, James can't deny it any longer and gives in; he gives the Sylph a tender kiss. Gurn sees this and hurries to tell Effie and the others.

When the distressed Effie bursts into James' room, the Sylph has disappeared, and everyone laughs at Gurn, thinking that he acted out of jealousy. The festivities begin and everyone dances. In the midst of the merriment, the Sylph appears again by James' side and attempts to distract him. She snatches the wedding ring from his finger and slips it on her own finger instead. With enticing smiles, she rushes into the forest. Driven to distraction by this Sylph, James runs after her, abandoning the wedding. The guests are stunned. Effie is heartbroken and sobs into her mother's arms.

Meanwhile, in a dark and foggy part of the forest, Old Madge has gathered together her witch cohorts, and together they dance grotesquely around a bubbling cauldron, tossing all sorts of

ingredients into the brew. Then Old Madge pulls from the cauldron a diaphanous, magic scarf. The witches scatter, the cauldron sinks into the ground, and the fog dissipates.

In a lush and sunny part of the forest, the Sylph has led James into her beautiful woodland realm. She and the other Sylphs shyly perform delightful, airy dances for James, but each time he tries to embrace her she dances away. One by one, all the Sylphs flit away into deeper parts of the woods.

Meanwhile, Effie is distraught and weary. All the wedding guests have been searching the woodlands looking for James. Gurn finds his friend's hat, but Old Madge warns him to say nothing about it. She then urges Gurn to propose to Effie, which he is all too happy to do. Effie accepts Gurn's proposal, believing James to be dead.

Gurn, Effie, and the wedding guests leave the woods, and Old Madge finds James wandering alone, lost in thoughts that swirl around his dear Sylph. She gives him the magic scarf and tells him that if he drapes it over the Sylph's shoulders, she will be bound, never to fly away from him again, and they will be together forever. Elated, James eagerly accepts the scarf, and when the Sylph appears again at his side, she allows him to place the scarf gently over her shoulders.

As James embraces the Sylph, her wings crumble and fall off! She dies in his arms. James is stunned and horrified. At that moment he looks across the glen and sees the wedding procession of his friend Gurn and his once fiancée Effie. Old Madge is triumphant over the Sylph's lifeless body and at James' great sorrow, but as James looks up he sees the Sylph's spirit being carried up to heaven by her ethereal sisters.

## The History

From the moment it begins, *La Sylphide* lures you in with a sense of otherworldliness. It seems to contrast two realms with two different ideals that we can relate to; the Sylph's love for James—sudden and innocent—James' duty to his fiancée, Gurn's unspoken feelings, the Sylph's charming confession of her affection for James, the witch's resentment, the Sylphs' dainty and carefree existence, the abrupt end to the Sylph's life and James heavy realization of it all at the end of the ballet.

*La Sylphide* is a romantic ballet in two acts, and is one the oldest ballets still performed today! It is marked by movements and music that are airy and delicate, lyrical and charming. James' dancing is occasionally reserved as he grapples with his emotions, while at other times it is strong and boisterous, full of his stirring emotions for the Sylph, who moves with otherworldly softness, innocence, and mischief, while Effie and her bridesmaid's merry dancing is cheerful and energetic.

On March 12, 1832 the first version of *La Sylphide* premiered at the Salle le Peletier of the Paris Opera, with choreography by Italian choreographer Filippo Taglioni and music by Jean-Madeleine

Schneitzhoeffler. Taglioni created this ballet to showcase the wonderful talent of his daughter, a famous ballerina Marie Taglioni. Marie, in this very performance, was the first one to introduce pointe into the aesthetic framework of ballet itself! Audiences were enthralled by the way Marie floated gracefully across the stage...on her toes!! From then on, pointe became an intrinsic part of ballet. Marie Taglioni also became infamous for shortening her ballet skirts for this role in order to show off her excellent pointework. Her exposed legs were considered scandalous at the time! After she retired, Marie Taglioni even stayed on to coach the young, debuting ballerina Emma Livry in the role, passing on this ethereal and groundbreaking role that had been created for her.

Danish ballet master August Bournonville wanted to present *La Sylphide* in Copenhagen with the Royal Danish Ballet. But when the Paris Opera demanded too high a price for Schneitzhoeffler's score, mounted his own production of *La Sylphide* instead based on the original libretto, with music by Herman Severin Løvenskiold, premiering on November 28, 1836. The Bournonville version has been danced in its original form by the Royal Danish Ballet ever since! It remains one of Bournonville's most celebrated works. Though Taglioni's original choreography has been lost over the years, both Bournonville's version and revived versions of *La Sylphide* continue to grace stages worldwide.