

Ballet: La Fille Mal Gardée

Choreography: originally Jean Dauberval, later Sir Frederick Ashton

Composer: Ferdinand Hérold (Dauberval's version), later John Lanchbery (Ashton's version)

The Story

"La Fille Mal Gardée" is a comedic ballet that tells the story of a love square involving Lise, the carefree daughter of a rich farmer, her suitor Colas, a peasant boy, Alain, a wealthy but dimwitted son of a vineyard owner, and Lise's mother Simone who wishes for her to marry Alain for his wealth.

The ballet opens with a charming depiction of rural life where Lise and Colas are found expressing their love for each other. However, their romance is interrupted by Simone, who is determined to secure a prosperous future for her daughter by marrying her off to Alain. Despite Alain's clumsiness and general lack of appeal, Simone is focused solely on the economic advantage the marriage would bring.

Tensions rise as Lise battles her mother's authority, steadfastly refusing to marry Alain. Lise's resistance leads to several comedic episodes, including a scene where she tricks Alain into believing a ribbon she gives him has magical powers. Meanwhile, Colas remains a constant presence, challenging Alain for Lise's attention, despite Simone's attempts to keep them apart.

The ballet draws to a close with a dramatic thunderstorm that sends Alain running scared, thus revealing his cowardice. Lise and Colas seize this opportunity to plead their case to Simone, who finally relents and consents to their union. The ballet ends with a joyous celebration of their love, demonstrating that true love cannot be bought or sold, but must be freely given and received.

The History

"La Fille Mal Gardée," translated as "The Poorly Guarded Girl," is one of the oldest and most enduring comic ballets in the classical repertoire. It was originally choreographed by Frenchman Jean Dauberval and premiered in Bordeaux in 1789, the same year as the start of the French Revolution. Its original title, "Le Ballet de la Pailleaille," or "The Ballet of Straw," hinted at its pastoral setting and rustic characters, a stark contrast to the ornate court ballets of the time.

The ballet underwent numerous transformations through the centuries, with different composers and choreographers leaving their mark. In the mid-19th century, composer Peter Ludwig Hertel and renowned choreographer Paul Taglioni produced a version for the Berlin Court Opera, which became the basis for many subsequent productions. However, it was British choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton's version, first staged in 1960 for the Royal Ballet, that has become the most widely performed today.

Ashton's version of "La Fille Mal Gardée" is lauded for its delightful fusion of classical technique and English folk dance, adding a distinctive charm to the tale of rural love. His portrayal of the characters Lise, Colas, Alain, and Simone are cherished worldwide for their depth, humor, and warmth. Despite its age, "La Fille Mal Gardée" continues to captivate audiences, reaffirming its place as a timeless classic in the ballet repertoire.

The music for the ballet "La Fille Mal Gardée" has undergone several adaptations by different composers over the years. However, the most well-known and widely used score today was composed by Ferdinand Hérold in 1828. This music was later arranged and adapted by John Lanchbery for Sir Frederick Ashton's version of the ballet, which premiered in 1960, and it's this version that is most frequently performed in contemporary productions.