

Ballet: Paquita

Choreography: Édouard Deldevez and Ludwig Minkus

Composer: Joseph Mazilier (original, but lost), Marius Petipa

The Story

"Paquita" tells the story of a young Gypsy woman, Paquita, living in Spain during the Napoleonic Era. Unbeknownst to her, she is actually of noble birth, having been abducted by Gypsies as an infant.

The plot thickens when a French officer, Lucien d'Hervilly, saves Paquita's life during a skirmish. The two fall deeply in love, but due to Paquita's perceived low social status, Lucien's uncle, Don Lopez, forbids the union. Unswayed, Lucien and Paquita pledge their love for one another, vowing to find a way to be together.

Meanwhile, a mysterious stranger gives Paquita a portrait locket, which she recognizes as identical to one she owns. With the help of an old Gypsy woman, Paquita learns of her noble lineage. She is, in fact, of noble Spanish birth, the cousin of Lucien and the rightful heiress to the throne of Zaragoza.

In the final scene, Lucien's uncle, Don Lopez, is revealed as the man who orchestrated the death of Paquita's parents and her subsequent abduction. Once the truth is revealed, Paquita's noble status is acknowledged, clearing the way for her to marry Lucien. The ballet concludes with a grand pas de deux celebrating the lovers' reunion and Paquita's reclaimed heritage.

The History

"Paquita" is a ballet in two acts and three scenes, with music by Édouard Deldevez and Ludwig Minkus, originally choreographed by Joseph Mazilier. It was first performed by the Paris Opera Ballet at the Salle Le Peletier on April 1, 1846, with Carlotta Grisi in the title role. The ballet is set in Spain and tells a rags-to-riches story about a young gypsy girl named Paquita.

The original "Paquita" was a full-length ballet, often running close to three hours, and was a vehicle for Grisi, a famed ballerina of the time. Unfortunately, much of Mazilier's original choreography has been lost. Today, only the "Pas de Trois" from Act I and the "Grand Pas Classique" from Act II, Scene 3 (both staged by Marius Petipa for the Imperial Ballet of St. Petersburg, Russia in the late 19th century) are performed regularly.

Petipa's revisions of "Paquita" were premiered on November 8, 1881, at the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre. The starring roles at this premiere were danced by the Prima Ballerina Eugeniia Sokolova as Paquita, and the Premier danseur Pavel Gerdt as Lucien d'Hervilly. Petipa's "Grand Pas Classique" and "Pas de Trois" have since been staged by ballet companies around the world.

In the 20th century, the "Grand Pas Classique" from "Paquita" became particularly famous in the West after Anna Pavlova included it in her company's repertory. Today, it is often performed independently from the full-length ballet and is a popular showcase for classical technique.

While the full version of "Paquita" is seldom performed today, the ballet holds a special place in the history of dance. Its Spanish setting and use of character dance set it apart from many other works of the Romantic period. The remaining fragments of Mazilier's original choreography, preserved by Petipa, continue to challenge and inspire dancers with their musicality and technical demands.