

The Royal New Zealand Ballet: *Giselle*

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The Royal New Zealand Ballet's critically acclaimed staging of *Giselle* is the production of the moment. The company's dynamic dancers imaginatively revisit the ballet first performed in Paris in 1841, harnessing the power of forgiveness and redemption to vanquish the anguish of love and betrayal. The company fills the stage with a throng of 34 talented dancers to deliver one of the oldest living ballets in the international repertory in a lyric, pitch-perfect retelling.

ROSS SCIMECA of the USC Libraries has selected the following resources to help you learn more about *Giselle* and the origins of the ballet's story.

The Story of *Giselle* and Its Creators

The story of the two-act ballet takes place in Germany during the Middle Ages. Albert, the Duke of Silesia, is in love with the peasant girl Giselle. Albert, disguised as a villager, romances Giselle. Halarion, a local hunter, is also in love with Giselle and along with Berthe, Giselle's mother, attempts to keep her away from Albert. In the last scene of the first act, during the arrival of the hunters, the villagers have a festive harvest. Also in attendance are Bathilde, Albert's betrothed, and her father. Charmed by Giselle's innocence, Bathilde gives her a beautiful necklace. Meanwhile, Halarion realizes who Albert really is and takes the duke's sword and shows it to Giselle. All are shocked. Giselle in her grief dies in Albert's arms.

The second act is one of the great examples of "gothic" romanticism in 19th-century music. At the moonlight grave of Giselle, Halarion mourns his lost, but quickly retreats when the Wilis appear. The Wilis are the spirits of girls who have died because of their lover's unfaithfulness. The Queen of the Wilis is Mythra, who takes revenge by having unfaithful lovers dance until they die. Albert arrives to put flowers on Giselle's grave. Giselle's spirit appears to him and he begs forgiveness. She forgives him, but leaves to follow the Wilis. Following her, Albert is encircled by the Wilis. Giselle's love for Albert abates the vengeance of the Wilis. Giselle's spirit returns to her grave as Albert weeps for his lost love.

The libretto of the ballet was done by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Theophile Gautier. The music was composed by Adophe Adam (1803–1856), one of the great French composers of ballet and opéra comique. The original choreography was by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot.

Literary Precursors

It was the German writer Heinrich Heine who first described the legend of the Wilis in his 1835 *De l'Allemagne*. He noted that legends of spectral maidens who cannot rest in their graves are Slavic in origin. The folklore of most Slavic peoples has some variation of this legend. More often than not, their unrest is the result of being jilted by their lover. There have been many instances of this supernatural legend in literature and music. Indeed, Dvorak's opera *Rusalka* and Puccini's opera *Le Villi* are excellent examples that parallel the narrative of *Giselle*.

Recommended Books

***Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (1996)**

By Susan Leigh Foster

Doheny Library: GV1649.F67 1996

***Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle* (2000)**

By Marian Elizabeth Smith

Music Library: ML1729.4.S65 2000

***A Role of a Lifetime* (1977)**

By Violette Verdy

Doheny Library: GV1790.G5V47 1977

Recommended Recordings

There is a unique production of this ballet on DVD at the USC Music Library, located on the ground floor of Doheny Library. It is called *Creole Giselle* performed by the Dance Theatre of Harlem [**MUSDVD 183**].

With regard to audio recordings of *Giselle*, the Music Library has the complete score performed by Michael Tilson Thomas and the London Symphony Orchestra [**5276MUS**]. Available through the Naxos Music Library, an electronic resource accessible through the USC Libraries' homepage, there is a complete recording of *Giselle* conducted by Andrew Mogrelia and the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra at: **<http://uscus.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=8.550755-56>**

For those interested in purchasing an abridged version on CD, I highly recommend the Herbert von Karajan 1961 performance with the Vienna Philharmonic on Decca. For those of you who still haunt used record stores, if you see Jean Martinon's 1959 recording with the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra on Decca or Albert Wolff's recording of the same year with the same orchestra on RCA, grab them.