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Marius Petipa (1818–1910) is perhaps the most emblematic figure in classical dance and is perceived as the father of ballet as we know it. Born in France in 1818, the aging dancer came to Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 1847 where his career flourished. We owe him the creation and revival of some of the most celebrated ballets in the world: Paquita (1847), La Fille mal gardée (1855), Don Quixote (1869), La Bayadère (1877), Sleeping Beauty (1890), Swan Lake (1895), Raymonda (1898), Giselle (1899), and Le Corsaire (1899).

Within dance and dance academic communities, Petipa is the object of profound respect and admiration, and somewhat of a highly idealized character. Literature dedicated to his work is abundant—although not very recent—and most scholars depict him as a genius choreographer. The fifty-four-minute documentary Marius Petipa: The French Master of Russian Ballet presents a more sober portrait of the ballet master. Basing the documentary on four major ballets and on different interviews of specialists and dancers, director Denis Sneguirev traces Petipa’s career in Russia and creates an interesting, complex, and well-balanced film.

Sneguirev’s documentary is organized in five parts, all discussing an aspect of Petipa’s work through a specific ballet. The first part, titled “Celebrated Choreographer,” focuses on the man’s arrival in Russia and rise to fame. In this part, the filmmaker puts in context the importance of ballet in Russian imperial society and Petipa’s use of his social skills to achieve his goal of becoming a choreographer. His first ballets, such as The Pharaoh’s Daughter (1862), included little dancing and were heavy on artifice: a real fountain with running water in the middle of the stage; fake and living horses, camels, monkeys, and lions; and elaborate sets and magnificent costumes. While the critics deplored “the abysmal superficiality of this slick and gaudy production,” the audience loved it due to Petipa’s use of the Egyptian themes that were fashionable at the time because of the new construction of the Suez Canal. As Sneguirev demonstrates, Petipa was at first a poor choreographer, but he had a strong sense of entertainment and knew how to take advantage of the zeitgeist of the time.

The second part of the film, “Becoming an Artist,” focuses on how Petipa gained respect as a choreographer. This section presents La Bayadère, whose story is set in a romanticized India where geopolitical tensions are expressed through rivalry between princesses. Largely based on the style of the Orientalists, this ballet was made specifically to please the military who regularly attended the theater. For them, Petipa chose to address a specific political issue: the Russian conquest of
Central Asia and the British attempt to block their expansion toward India. Sneguirev argues that La Bayadère truly exposed Petipa’s poetry in dance as it never did before with one specific act. “The Kingdom of Shades” was set in an unusually modest decor where thirty-six ballerinas moved in a serpentine line from upstage to downstage, filling the space with their presence. As they repeated the same simple classical arabesque and cambré movements in perfect synchrony, they created what the filmmaker calls a “meditative” and almost “hypnotic” effect, dedicating the stage to dance in its purest form.

This new approach to dance and the profound changes in dance technique resulted in the Sleeping Beauty, also the title of the third section of this documentary. Inspired by Louis XIV’s (1638–1715) court in Versailles, it was a true hymn to monarchy. Once more, Sneguirev demonstrates how these choices were influenced by the political events of the time: French-Russian diplomatic relations. This production represents all of Petipa’s achievements: impressive costumes, grandiose sets, and new intricate and different variations that were never seen before. To this day, specialists perceive Sleeping Beauty as the perfect symbiosis between music and movement and the performance that opened the door to the twentieth century. In this part, Sneguirev does not just focus on Petipa but also acknowledges the collaboration and work of Ivan Vsevolozhsky (1835–1909), the new director of the Imperial Theaters and the first major artistic curator in Russian dance history. Vsevolozhsky’s ambition, to create great Russian art, was characteristic of the post-Crimean War era, which brought a time of cultural self-definition and questioning in Russia and eventually led to a stronger sense of nationalism in the arts. Unfortunately, this aspect is underdeveloped in the documentary, arguably to keep the focus on Petipa’s career.

In this part, Sneguirev also addresses today’s constant reinterpretation of Sleeping Beauty. Through the work of contemporary choreographer Nacho Duato, the filmmaker shows how classical ballet must be adapted to contemporary audiences: shorter narratives, faster music, less time for the preparation of each movement, and more important roles for male dancers, as seen in the example of Carabosse, the wicked fairy godmother traditionally danced by a man. In today’s eyes, Petipa’s work is perceived as “static,” and more fluid versions, expressed for example in an emphasis on the upper body, seem necessary to generate emotion from the audience. According to Duato, it is today’s “more advanced technique” that allows us to modify and yet to remain true to Petipa’s vision.

Particularly interesting aspects of this documentary are the notions of transmission and adaptation of dance that are not fully addressed but remain recurrent themes in the film. Throughout the documentary, Sneguirev mentions the difficulty in teaching Petipa’s original work as the collective memory was kept “from one leg to another” or from one prima ballerina to another. Some other ways developed to teach and archive dance are shown to the viewer as well. One of them consists of the use of papier-mâché marionettes on a miniature stage and stop-motion animation. This technique is unfortunately barely addressed in this film although Petipa was known to use it when working on group choreographies.

Another technique to record dance is revealed in the notation of Petipa’s assistant, Vladimir Stepanov (1866–96). Stepanov, who is unnamed in the documentary, was responsible for creating a dance notation system that encoded dance movements with the musical score instead of using the complex traditional labanotation based on abstracted symbols. Alexei Ratmansky, a researcher and choreographer, uses this archival material to reconstruct Petipa’s original versions of the dances. This entire section in the film, titled “Reconstructing the Dance,” is dedicated to Ratmansky’s work in the archive, his analysis of the
material, and the revival of Petipa’s original work. It is especially interesting to witness the reactions of New York City Ballet dancer Tiler Peck as she tries to adapt to nineteenth-century style and her difficulties in performing this “tedious” and “specific” set of steps. While this section breaks with the film’s main theme, it also shows that Duato’s earlier perception of Petipa’s original steps is not necessarily accurate, and that taste and the way dancers move had changed but not because the technique is better nowadays.

In the last part, Sneguirev goes back to Petipa’s biography and addresses one of his masterpieces: Swan Lake. The section opens with the original Swan Lake based on Ratmansky’s work. Filled with heavy mime and long pauses, Petipa’s most famous work also presented a faster tempo than the one played currently. One of the reasons why it was played so fast according to conductor Mikhail Jurowski is because at the end of the nineteenth century, dancers “didn’t do all of the elaborate things that were gradually added by the dancers who made it more complicated to perform the music.” Once more, Sneguirev subtlety suggests without clearly saying anything: is it possible that today’s dancing is more concerned with the virtuosity and emotion of the dancer and less concerned with music like it used to be one hundred years ago? Is musicality so deeply different now? Or can we conclude that we have lost a part of the symbiosis between dance and music that was so precious to Petipa? These questions are never answered.

Despite tackling two distinct subject matters—Petipa’s career in Russia and the challenge in teaching, adapting, and reviving his work—Sneguirev has created a well-balanced documentary. While academics might find that he does not delve deeply enough into many of the topics he presents and disregards many of Petipa’s ballets, he arguably presents a long overdue and significant contribution in reintroducing the life and work of the ballet master. The film certainly sets the basis for understanding the golden age of Russian ballet before Sergei Diaghilev drastically modernized it and shows how the imperial ballets were intertwined with Russian imperial society. For this reason, the film represents excellent material for research and for use in the classroom for those who study dance, Russian culture, and nineteenth-century visual culture. With interviews, archival material, and videos of contemporary dancers rehearsing and performing, the filmmaker creates a dynamic and accessible narrative that will delight the nonspecialist as well as the academic. Marius Petipa is built on subtleties. Indeed, the filmmaker suggests with images and information without bluntly imposing his opinion. Just as in La Bayadère’s “Kingdom of Shades,” Sneguirev made a documentary in its almost purest and most objective form.
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