Afternoon of a Faun

Afternoon of a Faun was premiered by Vaslav Nijinsky in 1912, but became a very different work in the hands of Jerome Robbins – a sensual yet cheeky comment on the world of ballet. By Dr Michelle Potter.

In 1984, English rock band Queen had a hit with their song *I Want to Break Free.* While it never reached the number one spot on the charts, it did reach third place and remained on the charts for fifteen consecutive weeks. The accompanying video is well worth looking up. It includes a brief segment of dancing by The Royal Ballet in which Queen's lead singer, Freddie Mercury, plays the cameo role of dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. The segment is a powerful visual reference to Nijinsky's ground breaking ballet, *L'après-midi d'un faune,* and, taking into account the lyrics of the song, it even alludes to the new and free approach to performance that Nijinsky brought to the stage with this work. The reference reinforces the power *faune* has had on the popular imagination over the course of almost a century following its first scandalous performance in Paris in 1912 by Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

But just what is the power of the work? Why was it scandalous? And why has it generated one major reconstruction and been the inspiration for a number of new versions, including Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun?*

In Nijinsky's *L'après-midi d'un faune,* danced to a score by Claude Debussy, a creature that is half human, half beast (the Faun) surprises and is surprised by a group of water spirits (the Nymphs) on their way to bathe. It is a simple story of an encounter. But in making the work, his first choreographic endeavour for Diaghilev, Nijinsky broke away from classical conventions and had the dancers work almost entirely in profile: the dance unfolds in a series of frieze-like movements as on an archaic Greek vase. Nijinsky also emphasized angular movements of the arms and short, somewhat jerky running steps. In addition, Nijinsky, who danced the Faun on opening night, presented an image of powerful sexuality through an expressive use and placement of the body. This was another breakaway from the classicism of the past and perhaps a nod towards the style of modern dance emerging in Europe at the time.

But if this breaking free from the smoothly lyrical movements and the well-known steps and gestures of traditional classical ballet generated whistles and catcalls of displeasure from the opening night audience, the dramatic closing scene divided the audience into two equally passionate but opposing camps — supporters and detractors of the new approach. During the encounter between the Faun and the Nymphs, the leading Nymph drops her scarf as she hurries off stage. The Faun picks it up, fondles it and, as the curtain closes, spreads the scarf out for an autoerotic finale. This assault on early twentieth century morals was too much for one camp, while the pro-Faunists seized upon the innovations delightedly. No doubt to Diaghilev's pleasure, it was a "succès de scandale".

The work, just twelve minutes long, became a staple in the repertoire of the Ballets Russes companies that sprang up after the death of Diaghilev. It was given around forty performances in Australia during the Ballets Russes tours between 1936 and 1940 and has remained in the repertoire of many companies around the world. It cannot be thought of as ever having been 'lost' even if many consider that it had become corrupted over time.

But despite not being lost, *L'après-midi d'un faune* was the subject of a major reconstruction that culminated in a much publicised restaging of *faune* in 1989 for the Canadian company, Les grands ballets Canadiens. It was discovered that Nijinsky had notated *faune* while in exile during World War I. It is the only one of his ballets known to have been notated and what better work to attempt to bring back to its original form? Nijinsky had become a legendary figure not just because of his fame (and infamy) as a dancer and choreographer, but also because of his descent into madness, which began around 1919. Moreover, the Diaghilev repertoire was a continuing source of historical fascination and there was the lure of the detective work surrounding the reconstruction: Nijinsky's notation needed to be decoded as it had been written in a personal and idiosyncratic form. It was deciphered when other Nijinsky notations for well-known class exercises and for a sculptural frieze were discovered and used for comparison. The story, like the man, was characterised by some unusual features.

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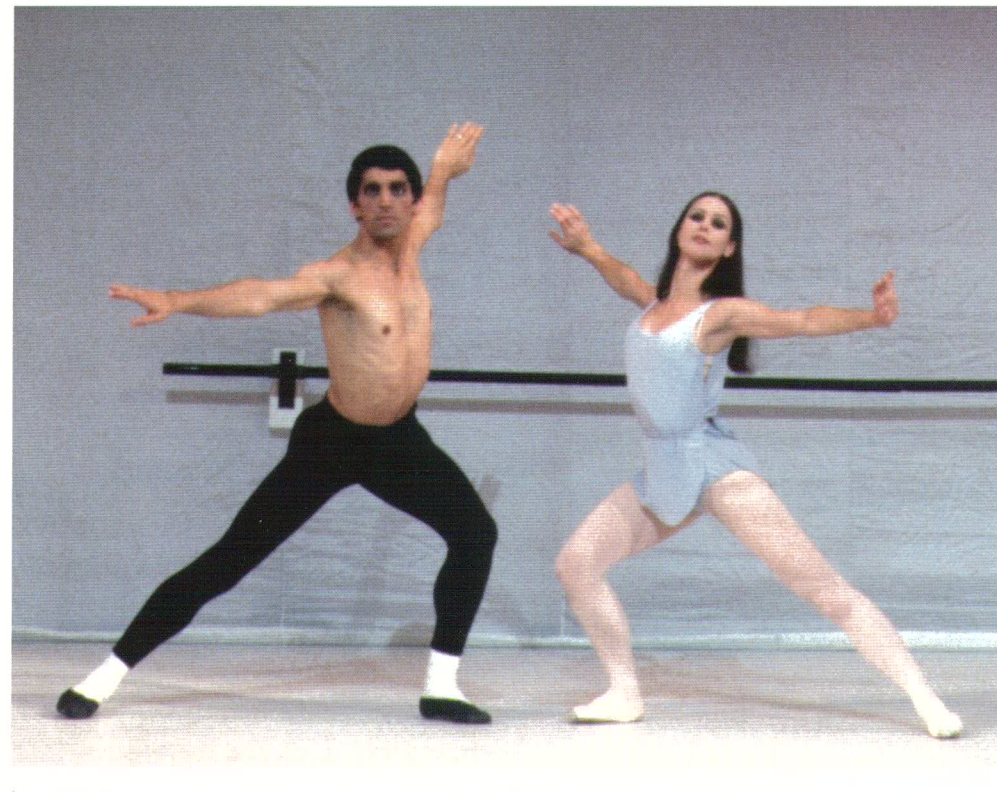
But where does the Jerome Robbins version fit? And does it too deserve to be called a breakaway? Robbins made his version in 1953 for New York City Ballet. He set it on just two people and located it in a ballet classroom. He gave it a translated title – *Afternoon of a Faun* – but kept the Debussy music. The Robbins *Faun* was first seen in Australia in 1958 during the momentous first tour by New York City Ballet when a young, long-legged, sensuously beautiful Allegra Kent danced with Francisco Moncion, who had created the role in New York in 1953 with Tanaquil Leclerq.

Gary Norman and Marilyn Rowe 1978
Photography—unknown

Amber Scott
Photography—Justin Smith



The Robbins *Faun* uses the technique of classical ballet rather than seeking, as did Nijinsky, a new choreographic means of expression. But this 1950s *Faun* does look back to Nijinsky's 1912 work in mood. Robbins, however, replaces the overt sexuality of Nijinsky's *faune* with a more gentle eroticism and the delicacy with which the movement, partnered by Debussy's score, enhances the sensuous mood of the piece.

But *Faun* is also voyeuristic, as Robbins uses the proscenium to represent the mirror of a ballet classroom through which we, the audience, observe the dancers in their practice. The two dancers seem to sketch out a pas de deux but look constantly in the 'mirror' to see how the work is unfolding. The work is intimate enough with just two dancers that we don't simply observe, we participate in the self-critical, and often narcissistic world of the dancer. Robbins' breakaway from convention was his use of the auditorium as an invisible fourth wall – a technique for melding the space of the stage with that of the auditorium.

But perhaps we will never really be able to settle on an answer to the question of why *faune* has had the power it has had over the years. There is something beguiling and mysterious about anything associated with Nijinsky and perhaps that's the real answer. Whether we are looking at a reconstructed *faune, Faun* by Robbins, or The Royal Ballet and Freddie Mercury appropriating the idea for an entirely different purpose, we can be sure that we will be gripped by something quite potent and endlessly fascinating.

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