

Growing up in Beauty

Many of The Australian Ballet's dancers, including its artistic directors and staff, have grown up performing *The Sleeping Beauty*, and over the decades each of the new versions of this classic work has been a milestone in the life of the company and its dancers. As Michelle Potter reflects on the impact of the previous 'Beauties' on Australian dance culture, she finds this new production to be their worthy and timely successor.

In the first production of Marius Petipa's ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*, the fairies who attended the christening of the Princess Aurora grouped themselves around her cradle and said, in mime, to Aurora's parents, "Your little child will grow up to be a beauty and we will protect her."

We know this from historical material that has been preserved in Russia about that production, which premiered at the Maryinsky Theatre, St Petersburg in 1890. We also know of course that what happens in *The Sleeping Beauty* is a little more complicated than that! But the idea of growing up permeates most versions of *The Sleeping Beauty*, even when it isn't precisely stated in a mime sequence. Aurora begins the ballet as a newborn baby, grows into a beautiful and joyous young girl, celebrates her coming of age with the most exquisite dancing and then, after her sleep of 100 years, meets the man of her dreams. It is beguiling to consider in how many ways we can see this growing up process expressed throughout the ballet.

But we need not only look at the idea of growing up in a literal manner. It is not only something that happens as the story unfolds onstage, choreographically, musically and through the narrative. *The Sleeping Beauty* has been part of our dance culture in Australia for more than half a century. Audiences have grown up watching it. Australian dancers have grown up performing it, and indeed, ballet in Australia has grown up through the various productions that our companies have staged over the decades.

It was the pioneer director Edouard Borovansky who first brought this evening-length ballet to Australian audiences. He produced it for his Borovansky Ballet and named it *The Sleeping Princess* rather than *The Sleeping Beauty*. This was the name Serge Diaghilev, the famed Russian impresario, had used when he presented his production in London in 1921 (based on the Maryinsky version of 1890). We cannot be sure why Diaghilev used this title, but he is reputed to have said that none of his ballerinas was a beauty! Many also think he did it to distinguish his production from the popular *Sleeping Beauty* pantomime productions of the time. Pantomime was clearly not what Diaghilev had in mind with his extraordinarily lavish, though financially disastrous, production. But Borovansky followed Diaghilev's example, and the first Australian production of the work opened to much critical acclaim in Melbourne, December 1951.

Borovansky's production was performed many times in Australia during the 1950s and in 1959 it was the work in which one of Australia's most acclaimed ballet partnerships was born. During a Sydney season of Borovansky Ballet's *Sleeping Princess*, Marilyn Jones, then aged just nineteen, was partnered for the first time by Garth Welch. Jones and Welch went on to forge one of Australian ballet's most illustrious and artistically satisfying dance partnerships, which continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Their partnership beyond dance produced two sons: Stanton, choreographer of this new production of *The Sleeping Beauty* and his brother, Damien, a Principal Artist of The Australian Ballet who is cast as the Prince. Almost a fairytale in itself!

With the establishment of The Australian Ballet in 1962, the Borovansky Ballet production of *The Sleeping Princess* fell out of the repertoire. It was not until 1973 that audiences were reintroduced to the evening-length work in a new production by the company's artistic director, Peggy van Praagh. Her *Sleeping Beauty*, directed by her Co-Artistic Director, Robert Helpmann, was chosen for The Australian Ballet's debut performances in the newly completed Sydney Opera House. But again chance was to play a role in the growth of Australian ballet through *The Sleeping Beauty*, as it had done in 1959 when the Jones-Welch partnership was born. The van Praagh *Sleeping Beauty* was the vehicle for guest appearances by a dancer who would go on to make a singular mark on the growth of ballet in Australia and who would produce her own version of *The Sleeping Beauty* for The Australian Ballet. In 1974, with two of The Australian Ballet's most revered Principals, Lucette Aldous and Marilyn Rowe, injured and unable to dance in scheduled performances of *The Sleeping Beauty*, Maina Gielgud was invited to Australia as a guest artist to appear as Aurora.

Gielgud was subsequently appointed Artistic Director of The Australian Ballet and took up the position in 1983. Her own production of *The Sleeping Beauty* premiered in 1984 (at the opening of the newly constructed State Theatre in Melbourne) and performances of it marked the opening of The Australian Ballet's new Melbourne home at Southbank in 1988. Also in 1988, Gielgud's *The Sleeping Beauty* featured in London on The Australian Ballet's Bicentennial tour. It was a magnificently large-scale production that was unable to fit on the stage of the Sydney Opera House until 1993, when the set was modified to allow Sydney subscribers to see it on their beloved home stage. Again *The Sleeping Beauty* was a formative influence in the careers of many of The Australian Ballet's star dancers, from Christine Walsh, who was the opening night Aurora in the Gielgud production, to David McAllister, who was the Cavalier to the Fairy Miettes-qui-Tombent on that same opening night.

Ballet in Australia has grown up through the various productions of *The Sleeping Beauty* that our companies have staged over the decades

Stanton Welch and Steven Woodgate in rehearsal for the 1991 season of Maina Gielgud's *The Sleeping Beauty*. Stanton and Steven are now Artistic Director and Ballet Master respectively at Houston Ballet. Photography by Chris Köller and Nanette Carter

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Lisa Bolte

For Australian ballet audiences *The Sleeping Beauty* has long been a favourite work; no wonder given its place in our history over the past half century. But for a dancer whose career has been touched by *The Sleeping Beauty*, how does it feel to have danced the role of Aurora, and to have grown as an artist through successive performances? Lisa Bolte, Guest Principal Artist in Stanton Welch's innovative new staging of *The Sleeping Beauty*, danced the role of Aurora in 1988, first in Melbourne, then in London at Covent Garden on the Bicentennial tour. At the time of her first performances in the leading female role she was just 21 years old and a Coryphée with The Australian Ballet.

"It was really the inception of my career," she says. "When I stepped onstage as Aurora in 1988 I knew I had to hold the ballet together for three acts. The company was relying on me. It was my first big challenge as a dancer. I was lucky that I was partnered by Steven Heathcote in my first shows and my partnership with him grew from that time. At first I relied on his expertise. I looked up to him. But as I matured I was able to see the partnership in a more equal way.

"Later I had a lot of coaching from a wonderful American teacher and coach, Jürgen Schneider. He helped me make the work my own in an honest way. He helped me grow into it. And when Maina was leaving the company in 1996 I danced the *Rose Adage* from Act One at her farewell gala. My four Princes that night were four of Australia's top male ballet dancers: Gary Norman, David Ashmole, Steven Heathcote and Paul de Masson.

We were there for such a special reason and when those four men came onstage dressed so elegantly in tuxedos I felt like I was the luckiest person in the world. Now I am back to take the role of the Queen Mother in Stanton's production. *The Sleeping Beauty* has been an integral part of my career. I have grown up in the company dancing it."

"Your little child will grow up to be a beauty..." said the fairies in 1890. Now in 2005 we can look back on Borovansky's child, van Praagh's child, Gielgud's child with the pleasure of proud parents. We can say that we loved them, but that we also love that they have grown up and given birth to *The Sleeping Beauty* another time.

This new and beautiful child, Stanton Welch's child, has been created by a choreographer whose parents' partnership began in *The Sleeping Princess*. What's more, he is a protégé of Gielgud, who nurtured his career as a choreographer and who appointed him Resident Choreographer in 1995.

How lucky we are to have had the opportunity to watch the process whereby this beautiful classical work and the artists who have staged it and performed it in Australia, have grown and matured. We can perhaps say of this new 2005 production "our little child has grown up to be a beauty."

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