Intoxicating visions

Mythical creatures often play a key role in fairy tales, folklore and ballets. Michelle Potter demystifies the supernatural world and explores our fascination with fairylore.

...the (Paris) Opera was given over to gnomes, undines, salamanders, elves, nixes, wilis, peris – to all that strange and mysterious folk who lend themselves so marvellously to the fantasies of the maitres de ballet.

These intriguing words came from the pen of the nineteenth-century French poet, writer and ballet critic Theophile Gautier. They were part of an article he wrote to farewell from the stage in 1847 the acclaimed ballerina of the Romantic era, Marie Taglioni. To his list of supernatural creatures we could of course add sylphs and fairies, and perhaps even hallucinatory visions, all of which make appearances in well-known nineteenth-century ballets.

Not only in Gautier's Paris but also in Copenhagen, St Petersburg, and across the ballet world of that century, the inclusion of mysterious creatures of fire, air, earth and water as intrinsic elements in a ballet was part of the revitalisation of the art form under the influence of Romanticism.

While many of the ballets Gautier would have known have disappeared from the repertoire, some, in particular *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*, have lasted into the twenty-first century. *La Sylphide*, first performed in Paris in 1832 in a version choreographed by Filippo Taglioni, presents us with the elusively beautiful Sylphide of the title and a bevy of her forest-dwelling sister sylphs. *Giselle*, first performed in 1841 (again in Paris) with choreography by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, is populated by creatures from a slightly darker spirit world: the wilis we know so well in *Giselle* are spirits of girls betrayed by men. They haunt the graveyard where they lure men to their death. From these ballets, and from their successors, our eyes are opened up to what Gautier was referring to with his 'strange and mysterious folk'.

Lisa Bolte in the 1996 production of *La Sylphide* Photograph by Earl Carter

La Sylphide, the work that is so often regarded as the epitome of the Romantic movement in ballet, was not the first ballet to introduce supernatural creatures, and they were certainly well-known in the literature of the time. Victor Hugo in particular wrote a series of odes and ballades in the 1820's in which he introduced a range of creatures including fairies, sylphs, peris and other spirit beings. But *La Sylphide* does provide us with a particularly good insight into the way this growing interest in the supernatural was being used to express new Romantic ideals. In it we are also able to glimpse something of the new emphasis on the poetic and the personal that was ushered in during the Romantic period when librettists, choreographers, composers and designers reacted against the rational and formal constraints of the art of previous decades and sought to express ideas that came directly from the heart of the artist.

La Sylphide is the story of James, a Scot on the verge of marrying his sweetheart, Effie. But while he loves his Effie, he is a man who dreams of a world beyond the homeliness of his material existence. We know this from the opening moments of the ballet. As the curtain goes up we see James asleep in an armchair. He is woken by the Sylphide. James is bewitched by her, and also by the promise of the entrancing world beyond the real that she represents. As the ballet progresses the Sylphide lures him away from the comfort of his earthly existence into the curious and enticing world that she and her fellow sylphs inhabit. But the outcome of their liaison is predestined. Man can never inhabit the space of the spirit world. Nor can supernatural creatures inhabit the human world, although they can appear in it. In the second act of *La Sylphide* James tries to capture his sylph with a scarf given to him by Madge, the witch. But in wrapping the scarf around her, James orchestrates his destiny. The wings of the sylph fall off, and she dies. James is left unable to turn his dream around and find what he yearns for, the balance between two opposing worlds.

Encapsulated in the story and its characters are many of the Romantic movement's most cherished ideals, in particular the notion that man has two sides to his being, the spiritual, represented by the Sylphide, and the material, represented by hearth and home and James' impending marriage to Effie. And from an interest in a mysterious world where man and spirit interact, one of the great, recurring themes of ballet developed: man's pursuit of an unattainable ideal exemplified by a being from another world. This theme is made clear in *La Sylphide* but carries on through the nineteenth century right up to the Lev Ivanov/Marius Petipa *Swan Lake* of 1895 in which Prince Siegfried pursues, ultimately in vain, the beautiful swan-maiden Odette. It perhaps even continues in semi-abstracted form into the early twentieth century with *Les Sylphides*, choreographed by Michel Fokine in 1909.

But supernatural creatures did not begin to appear in early nineteenth-century ballet and art of various kinds simply as a result of the search for new literary and artistic modes of Romantic expression. New economic and political conditions in Paris, an influential hub in the growth of Romanticism, meant that ballet audiences had become much more diverse. Following the 1830 Revolution, more and more working class people were filling the cheaper seats of the opera houses. Used to melodrama and vaudeville in the more popular theatres, they demanded – and were given by managers wishing to fill the coffers of the opera houses – not the classical art of the past but shows that would entertain and move them. Stories of spirits, ghosts and fairies again were the answer, at least in part.

Ballets became the vehicle for stories set in exotic and colourful settings where opulent lifestyles, opium dreams and seemingly barbaric customs held sway.

But as much as they turned to the supernatural, librettists for the ballet also turned to the apparently seductive world of the Orient for inspiration. Ballets became the vehicle for stories set in exotic and colourful settings where opulent lifestyles, opium dreams and seemingly barbaric customs held sway. Harem women, slave girls and temple dancers suggested not the unattainable ideal of the sylph but that of the desirable woman. Such female characters, whom American scholar Deborah Jowitt has called 'the sylph's more accessible cousin(s)', thrilled the public and beguiled imaginative minds. But as well, within the limits of the need to maintain a certain nineteenth-century sexual propriety, these women were potent figures who, if conquered by a man, would reinforce his masculinity.

Yet even in tales set in the exotic world of the Orient, where ballet's heroines were expected to be provocative rather than unattainable, the Romantic predisposition to juxtapose the material and the supernatural worlds was still noticeable. Marius Petipa's *La Bayadère* (1877) is set in India and, in a complex web of intrigue and deception, Solor, the hero, marries Gamzatti, the Rajah's daughter, instead of his true love, Nikiya the temple dancer. But, distressed at how the situation has unfolded, Solor turns to opium and, in a drugged state sees multiple visions of Nikiya descending a slope in the Himalayas. This is the well-known Kingdom of the Shades scene; the Shades are the Sylphs of *La Bayadère*. They transport Solor out of his worldly existence into a realm beyond the real and their appearance continues to reinforce the nineteenth-century division between the two worlds of the material and the spiritual or, in the case of Bayadère, the material and the insubstantial.

The Romantic movement had many faces, its influence was widespread, and the art that was produced was extraordinarily diverse. And it was again Gautier who, when describing the early, heady days of Romanticism in Paris, wrote: 'Everything sprouted, blossomed, burst out all at once. The air was intoxicating'. In this intoxicating environment, *La Sylphide* was hugely successful following its Paris premiere and has been continuously in the repertoire since then, largely in the version choreographed by August Bournonville in Copenhagen in 1836 rather than in its original French version. Its success was due to a variety of factors, not the least of which was the quality of the dancing of Marie Taglioni in the title role. She was the darling of the critics and public alike and praised for her grace and charm and her technical expertise. But the early success of *La Sylphide* also largely stemmed from the fact that it captured so many of the new artistic ideas and creative approaches that were in the air at the time, of which the introduction of new themes associated with the occult and the supernatural was especially significant.

La Sylphide really set the scene for the future growth of ballet into the twentieth century and beyond. Its sylphs made popular the balletic parade of mysterious folk from the supernatural world. Their legacy remains with us today.

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Top
Christine Walsh and the artists of The Australian Ballet in 1989 production of *La Sylphide*.

Right
Colin Peasley and Adam Marchant in the 1996 production of *La Sylphide*.