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Caeli L. Koizumi

Loyola Marymount University, caeli.koizumi18@gmail.com

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Fairies that Fouetté and Princesses that Promenade:

Examining the Allure of the Fairytale Ballet Through Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty*

Caeli Koizumi

Dr. Jill Nunes Jensen

History of Dance Theater

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## Fairies that Fouetté and Princesses that Promenade:

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“Once upon a time” is a phrase that evokes images of dancing princesses, devious wolves, and magnificent balls. This simple phrase is recognized across generations as a hint to the literary work that follows it. Oral tradition indicates that “once upon a time” precludes the fantastical story that is to come: the fairytale. Fairytales are iconic literary works that combine elements of the supernatural with selected cultural influences. Each tale has widely recognized plot points, yet it is often the rhetoric, symbols, and scenes of these narratives that are repeated over time in various re-imaginings. In the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Marius Petipa transformed iconic fairytales into evening-length ballets. Though other choreographers, such as Michel Fokine, also utilized fairytales and folklore to create choreography, Petipa's fairytale ballets are arguably the most popular ballets in professional companies today. Of these works, ballet historian Vera Krasovkaya considers *Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* to be the pinnacle of Petipa's career.<sup>1</sup> Their continuing popularity demonstrates the allure of the fairytale in ballet history. Not only have these ballets endured throughout dance history, but also contemporary choreographers still draw upon fairytales to create new works, such as Alexei Ratmansky's *Whipped Cream*. Critics agree that *Sleeping Beauty* (1890) is Petipa's most profound ballet, and is an exemplary representation of the qualities of a fairytale ballet that perpetuate the popularity of this form.<sup>2</sup> The fairytale and ballet each highlight progressive hierarchical structures, reminiscent of European monarchies, create a world where the mundane

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1. Vera Krasovkaya, “Marius Petipa,” in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 160.

2. Krasovkaya, “Marius Petipa,” 160.

and the fantastic intermingle, and emphasize entertainment based on diversion. These attributes work cohesively to form the foundation of the fairytale ballet genre.

In 1890, Marius Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* premiered at the Maryinsky Theater and, according to dance historian, Tim Scholl, would hold a special esteem as one of the surviving ballets of nineteenth-century Russia.<sup>3</sup> *Sleeping Beauty* is not only a product of Ivan Vsevolozhsky, director of Imperial Theaters and the designer of the libretto and costumes for the ballet, but also marks the first collaboration for Marius Petipa and Pyotr Tchaikovsky.<sup>4</sup> Much of *Sleeping Beauty*'s acclaim resulted from the joint genius of these three artists. The creators of *Sleeping Beauty* also involved the *ballet-feerie*, a nineteenth century French theatrical genre where fantasy and spectacle take the place of the mundane.<sup>5</sup> The Russian ballet community feared the "flashy" use of the *ballet-feerie*, yet the novelty and innovation of *Sleeping Beauty* would astonish audiences in later years.<sup>6</sup> Yet, what is truly captivating about the fairytale ballet is not how it "takes the place" of the mundane, but how it maintains the integrity of the mundane that the concept of *feerie* builds upon. *Sleeping Beauty* exemplifies this principal directly. Dance scholar Laura Katz Rizzo articulates the captivating quality of the *Sleeping Beauty* narrative in her comment, "The universal interest in the tale and its telling, as well as the story's longevity, are testaments to the compelling and archetypal truths of the story's theme, narrative, and characters for the protagonist is a symbolic figure on a journey of transformation."<sup>7</sup> Rizzo testifies to the allure of the fairytale ballet as a sensation for both the literary and dance nature of

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3. Tim Scholl, "Preface" in *Sleeping Beauty: A Legend in Progress*, ed. Tim Scholl (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) vii-viii.

4. Scholl, "Preface," vii.

5. "Ballet-feerie," Larousse: Dictionnaires de Français, accessed April 19, 2017, [http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/ballet-f%C3%A9erie\\_ballets-f%C3%A9eries/7697](http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/ballet-f%C3%A9erie_ballets-f%C3%A9eries/7697)

6. Tim Scholl, "Sleeping Beauty," in *International Dictionary of Ballet*, ed. Martha Bremser (Detroit: St. James Press, 1993), 1309.

7. Laura Katz Rizzo, *Dancing the Fairy Tale: Producing and Performing the Sleeping Beauty* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015) 142-143.

the work. In addition, this is the first of the lasting fairytale ballets that demonstrates Petipa's famous use of *divertissement* and the classic formation of the grand *pas de deux*, elements that not only provide examples of the structure of the classical Petipa ballets, but also attest to its ability to enthrall audiences.

Though the theatricality of *Sleeping Beauty* has certainly perpetuated its popularity, the narrative and choreography of the ballet illustrate a progressive hierarchy, which allows for their characters to move through the rankings. The presence of this theme invites audiences to appreciate an idyllic social climate within the premises of classical ballet. Margaret Fleming-Markarian traces symbolism through the characters, variations, and even props of Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* in her text, *Symbolism in Nineteenth-century Ballet: Giselle, Coppélia, the Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake*.<sup>8</sup> She astutely highlights that, "The image of the Princess Aurora as a divine monarch, creating a paradise for her people, harks back to eighteenth-century Russia and the reigns of Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine."<sup>9</sup> Through this analysis, Fleming-Markarian illustrates how the role of the benevolent monarch is embodied in Princess Aurora. Rizzo comments, "The training of Petipa's dancers, then, as well as the staging of his ballets, directly reflected the high value placed on order, control, symmetry, and equilibrium both at the Maryinsky Theater and in tsarist government bureaucracies."<sup>10</sup> Yet, the fairytale narrative does not forbid the characters from moving within the ranks. It is often the case that a peasant girl or young maiden that has fallen victim to an evil sorcerer will fall in love with a prince and ascend to the royal court. This is often marked by a grand wedding scene or ball. The fairytale happy ending reflects the culmination of the characters' progression to the social apex. Though Aurora

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8. Margaret Fleming-Markarian, "Sleeping Beauty," in *Symbolism in Nineteenth-century Ballet: Giselle, Coppélia, the Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake*, ed. Margaret Fleming-Markarian (Oxford: Peter Lang AG, 2012), 121.

9. Fleming-Markarian, "Sleeping Beauty," 193.

10. Rizzo, *Dancing the Fairytale*, 31.

is born royal, she falls victim to a sleeping curse, which could be considered her descent from royal acclaim as the kingdom stalls while she sleeps, and is then awakened by the prince to assume her throne. This shift from monarch to markedly an individual without any association exemplifies social transformations made possible by fairytale literature.

Petipa's implementation of progressive hierarchy in his ballets manifests in the choreographic arrangement of *Sleeping Beauty*. Scholl explains that, "The *Sleeping Beauty* remains in the repertoires of the world's great ballet companies because of the challenges and opportunities it presents to companies, dancers, and audiences. The choreography offers a complete syllabus of academic and character dance styles."<sup>11</sup> This means that the number of variations and solos within *Sleeping Beauty* reflect the ranking of the dancers themselves, which is made possible by the ballet libretto. From Princess Aurora's variation, to the variations of the fairies (which reflect a system of ranking within themselves from the Lilac Fairy to the Fairy of Generosity), and the solos and duets in the divertissement, Petipa has arranged a ranking order in his choreography. Yet, the dancers are not limited to the roles they play; one dancer might begin as members of the corps de ballet member dancing the mazurka, they may progress within the company and eventually become a principal dancing Aurora's Rose Adagio. The dancers are not relegated to their first role once they have been placed, but are afforded the opportunity to move through the progression of the choreography.

Furthermore, the steps of the choreography also intertwine within the ballet to reflect the looseness of Petipa's stratification. This interweaving of the choreography is demonstrated through Aurora's appearances. Rizzo explains:

Aurora performs solo variations in all three acts of the ballet, the only character with this much solo stage time. Her variations contain the thematic score of the

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11 Scholl, "Sleeping Beauty," 1309.

entire ballet, and they draw on choreographic material in the (female) fairy variations from the prologue of the ballet ... in her first act variations, Aurora begins with balances in first arabesque and attitude derriere ... goes on to perform rond de jambe en l'air en dehors with her gesture leg while simultaneously hopping on pointe ... Finally, she completes her variation with a manege of pique turns en dedans. This material is inherited from her godmother's prologue variation and incorporates the movements of her matriarchs ...<sup>12</sup>

The manifestation of the fairies' choreography in Aurora's solos choreographically represents the interchanging of status. Though a principle dancer normally dances Aurora and dancers ranked slightly below her in the company perform the fairies, the appearance of their choreography in Aurora's marks the significance of their roles, thus moving them up in status. Scholl also describes the diversity of the choreographic styles in *Sleeping Beauty*; there are virtuoso academic variations like Aurora's wedding variation, character dances such as Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, and larger numbers derived from social dances such as the Mazurka.<sup>13</sup> This variety of choreography has a hierarchical structure based on technical difficulty, yet each of the dances appears at the wedding. Since the social dances are adapted from peasant social dance, but are given a position of esteem in the ballet as a part of the grand wedding scheme, this indicates each dancing group is significant despite stratification in the ballet.

Experts on literature, Val Scullion and Marion Treby, separate the fairytale into two genres: "compact" kind, pioneered by Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers, whose "carefully constructed simplicity works as an implicit guarantee of their traditional and authentic status,"

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12. Rizzo, *Dancing the Fairy Tale*, 19.

13. Scholl, "Sleeping Beauty," 1309.

and the “complex” kind, inaugurated by French female writers between 1690 and 1715.”<sup>14</sup> The fairytale ballet encompasses both genres. The divertissement in fairytale ballets is meant to entertain the audience and act as a palette cleanser from the grandeur of the other pieces, which portrays the simplistic fairytale style of Perrault and the Grimm Brothers. These are the “classic” fairytales that embody themes of hope and elegance that entice and resonate with audiences. On the other hand, Aurora holds the role of victim, ascending monarch and symbol of purity, while facing an impending marriage, which must be reflected in her dancing. Rizzo analyzes the



popular image of Carlotta Brianza, the first Aurora, and analyzes the delicacy and power of the character simultaneously embodied in the ballerina. In the image (pictured left)<sup>15</sup>: “Her right leg is straight and long, the arch of her foot en pointe a graceful yet powerful curve ... She is a vision of delicacy and elegance, calmly floating on balance, caught in a perpetual state of independent flight.”<sup>16</sup> The fairytale ballet princess must be regal and strong, while maintaining the daintiness required of a

princess. Aurora depicts the complex character of Scullion and Treby’s second genre of fairytale that must be playful and self-conscious.<sup>17</sup> The trials of marriage, falling victim to uncontrollable circumstances, and the pressure to act as symbols of purity and grace are concepts that apply to young women throughout history. The references to social themes are subtly embedded in the ballet to create a sense of familiarity and empathy, captured within the ballet aesthetic.

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14. Val Scullion and Marion Treby, “Devilish Dynamics: Fairy Tale, Dream, Art, and Dance in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘New Year’s Eve Adventure,’” *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies* 278 (2014): 292.

15. “Carlotta Brianza as Princess Aurora (1890,” The Marius Petipa Society, accessed April 22, 2017. <https://petipasociety.com/the-sleeping-beauty/the-sleeping-beauty-carlotta-brianza-as-princess-aurora-1890-2/>

16. Rizzo, *Dancing the Fairy Tale*, 158.

17. Scullion and Treby, “Devilish Dynamics,” 292.



The complexities of *Sleeping Beauty* do not end with the characters. Fleming-Markarian's analysis of symbolism in *Sleeping Beauty*, traces choreography of the ballet and relationships within ballet in a religious context. She dissects a number of variations from the ballet, such as the Bluebird variation, which she connects to the symbol of the peacock in Christian imagery that represents Resurrection.<sup>18</sup> The appearance of the Gold and Sapphire fairies after the prince and princess's marriage duet in Vsevolozhsky's libretto invoke the images of Christ and the Virgin Mary through the way which the fairies represent light and reverence.<sup>19</sup> Christianity was and is a prevalent aspect of European culture; it was a driving force of political and social happening. Its manifestation in the fairytale genre portrays the ability of the literature to become a lens for relevant themes of the time. At this point in history, the presence of Christianity was crucial and thus, these themes were included in the nuances of the fairytale. And, the relevancy of the fairytale persists. In her review, Kate Guthrie explains: "The producers of *Sleeping Beauty* hoped to chart a middle ground for national culture, attracting a broad audience for high art without undermining its elite cultural status."<sup>20</sup> Much like the progressive hierarchy involves social mobility, symbolism within the ballet is applicable to individuals of various walks of life and in various periods of history.

Perhaps most identifiable, the fairytale ballet ultimately brings forth diversion. At the beginning of her article, Therese Hurley, analyzes Tchaikovsky's quote, "Ballet is the most innocent, the most moral of all the arts. If that is not so, then why do they always bring children to the ballet?"<sup>21</sup> She then utilizes the composer's own words to illustrate the power of the music

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18. Fleming-Markarian, "Sleeping Beauty," 179.

19. Ibid., 191.

20. Kate Guthrie, "Awakening 'Sleeping Beauty': The Creation of National Ballet in Britain," *Music & Letters* 96 (2015): 447.

21. Therese Hurley, "Opening the Door to a Fairytale World: Tchaikovsky's Ballet Music" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marion Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 164.

in a fairytale ballet to extend the ease and frivolity of watching one of these works. As Tchaikovsky artfully notes, the ballet is enjoyed by children for the appeal of the classic fairytale, not for the heavy-handed themes it conveys as a result of extensive analysis. Children can enjoy the embodiment of their favorite tales, while adults escape to the ballet to revel in the grandeur. The purpose of the fairytale is to transport the audience to an ethereal world where light and grace are paramount, while the balletic design inspires awe in its viewers. The synthesis of fairytale and ballet creates an experience for the audience that combines childhood wonder with an opportunity to escape the trials of the outside world.

Various scholars concurred with the point that the fairytale represents light and joy that patrons seek out. Dance scholar, Stanley J. Rabinowitz, explores this purpose of the fairytale ballet and concludes that the fairytale is the quintessential literary form for classical ballet because its rhetoric is built on an intent for beauty and romance, much like aesthetics of classical ballet.<sup>22</sup> The fairytale offers the chance for audience to escape to a beautiful world that is supported by the design of the classical ballet aesthetic. One of the most iconic choreographic moments of *Sleeping Beauty* is the promenade in the Rose Adagio. In this part of the dance:

She [Aurora] gently steps to pointe on her long, straight right leg, lifting her left leg in attitude derriere. When a prince offers his hand to the princess ... She gently places her hand on his and lifts her left arms above her head ... The prince then walks around her, continuing to hold her hand, slowly rotating her body in a full circle ... Aurora then displays even more fortitude by releasing the prince's

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22. Stanley J. Rabinowitz, "Myth and Fairy Tale" from *Against the Grain: Akim Volynskii and the Russian Ballet in Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 14 (1996): 37.

hand ... Aurora remains suspended on balance while one man steps away from her and another approaches.<sup>23</sup>

In this moment, the audience is awe-struck, as the princess remains gracefully composed within this impressive demonstration of strength. These portions of the ballet, where the dancers seemingly defy the humanly possible, enrapture the audience. The characters within the ballet depict the most desirable virtues, Aurora being one of purity and strength, which cause audiences to flock to see them come to life. The fairytale ballet acts as an outlet for audiences to become enchanted by the romanticized notions that the ballet libretto encompasses.

Fairytale ballet creates a world for the people, a world that is much like their own, but diverted by fantasy and romance. Many of the fairytale narratives that were transformed into full-length ballets took place in the courts of princes and princesses, with choreographic and narrative structuring that allow the character to progress through the divisions that are in place. Through complex characters that depict both elitist and common personas, themes applicable to all audiences, and variations on classical ballet that diversify the choreography, the fairytale ballet integrates commonplace elements with a fantasy world. Nevertheless, it is often the idyllic nature of the fairytale ballet that captivates the audience. *Sleeping Beauty* enchants audiences by creating a fantasy world with all of the abilities of a fairytale ballet: to lift its characters to the pinnacle of social standing, to address cultural instances through Aurora's heroism, and to enthrall the audience through extraordinary and virtuosic demonstrations. Thus, the fairytale ballet endures, mystifying audiences and fortifying its place in ballet history.

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23. Rizzo, *Dancing the Fairy Tale*, 160.

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