

GISELLE



BALLET ARIZONA
IB ANDERSEN | ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Giselle's story

Act I: It's autumn in the German valley where Berthe (BEHR-teh) lives with her daughter, Giselle (zhih-ZEHL). Autumn means the grape harvest; one of Giselle's favorite times of the year because the celebrations it brings give her opportunities to dance. Berthe often reminds Giselle that she was born with a weak heart and shouldn't exert herself, but Giselle loves to dance more than anything.

Near the cottage where Berthe and Giselle live is the home of Loys (loyz), a farmer who is new to the valley. Loys has been courting Giselle, and the girl is convinced they'll get married one day. This makes another man in the village furious: Hilarion (hah-LAH-ree-on), the local forester and gamekeeper, wants to marry Giselle himself, and he doesn't trust the mysterious newcomer, Loys. Hilarion cautions Giselle against getting involved with Loys, but she ignores his warning.

The villagers are preparing for their harvest celebration when the Duke of Courtland and his hunting party enter the village. In the group is the duke's daughter, Bathilde (bah-TEEL-deh). As the villagers welcome the nobles, Giselle proudly tells Bathilde she is engaged to Loys (though the farmer hasn't actually asked her). Bathilde reveals that she is also getting married, and in a gesture of friendship gives Giselle one of her necklaces. The duke and Bathilde go home with Giselle to rest before the festival. Hilarion stays behind and sneaks into Loys' cottage, where he finds a sword bearing a royal crest. This is not something a peasant farmer should own; it is the sword of a nobleman.

As the villagers' celebration begins Giselle is crowned Queen of the Harvest. But Hilarion interrupts the festival to expose Loys' deception to the villagers and the duke's party. Bathilde is stunned. She reveals to everyone the man they know as Loys is actually Count Albrecht, her fiancé. Grief overwhelms Giselle. Her heart breaks, and she dies in Albrecht's arms.

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Natalia Magnicaballi and Ginger Smith will play Giselle



Astrit Zejnati and Ross Clarke will play Albrecht

Giselle's story, continued...

Act II: At Giselle's grave, in a forest glade beside a lake, Hilarion grieves late into the night. In his hands is a cross he carved himself. Suddenly, at midnight, the clearing is filled by Wilis (WIIH-leez), dangerous spirits left behind when young women were rejected by their lovers and died before their weddings. Tonight they gather to welcome Giselle to their number. The terrified Hilarion runs away, fearing the legend he's heard: that the Wilis and their queen, Myrtha (MEER-tah), seek revenge by luring men into a horrible dance, not releasing them until they die of exhaustion.

Albrecht arrives at Giselle's grave, wishing for forgiveness and to be near her. The Wilis have vanished, but Albrecht is amazed when Giselle's ghost appears to him. She leads him away from the glade and into the forest as they hear Hilarion returning. This time Hilarion is entrapped by the Wilis, who dance him to exhaustion and, at Myrtha's command, drown him in the lake. The queen then sends the ghosts into the forest to hunt Albrecht.

Magically drawn into the Wilis' circle, Albrecht faces the same gruesome fate as Hilarion, and though Giselle's love diminishes Myrtha's power over Albrecht, the queen is able to force the couple to dance on and on into the night. When Albrecht finally collapses, Giselle helps him hold on to life until the church bell announces the dawn, and the end of the Wilis' power. The spirits vanish, Giselle returns to her grave, and only Albrecht remains, sorrowful and alone.



Natalia Magnicaballi and Ross Clarke- *Giselle* photo Tim Fuller

middle school/high school close-up:

Ghosts, girl power, and égalité*

It's the perfect story for a screenplay: [*Act I*] Naïve young girl gives her first love to a man who leads her on and deceives her; leaving her crushed and abandoned. [*Act II*] Fortune turns against him, placing his fate in her hands. [*finale*] Her goodness wins out over her thirst for revenge, and he is spared. [*curtain*]

This is *Giselle*, not to mention any number of plays, books, films, and shows since. You can probably think of some yourself. If the plot seems familiar, it's because the characters are universal. Like Giselle, we've all had passionate hopes and felt blind devotion. We can envy Albrecht's fortunes in life and love, and share his relief at being saved from an unthinkable fate. The story is so familiar that today, it might seem quaint. But when it was written in 1841, Giselle's story was considered revolutionary; even around a time called the Age of Revolution.

Revolutionary on two fronts: Along with the 1832 ballet *La Sylphide*, *Giselle* signaled a revolution in the fine arts. These ballets and other works like them were at the vanguard of Romanticism, a bold new movement. Throughout the eighteenth century the Enlightenment had reigned the arts just as it had learning. New discoveries in science and mathematics led thinkers to the conclusion that the universe was governed by formulas and processes, and the concept was carried over into dance, music, literature, and theater. Artistic expression during the Enlightenment emphasized structure. A story didn't need to be good, necessarily, as long as it followed the rules. Ballets of the 1700s had been pleasant-enough — golden-age tales of gods and goddesses come to earth, interacting with mortals — but they weren't realistic. They weren't expected to be; just to follow the rules.

As a new century began, however, audiences had lost interest in the mythologies of dead civilizations. They wanted their own their experiences and emotions played out realistically onstage, in new works that valued mood over method. The Enlightenment gave way to Romanticism, and Romanticism judged art less by how it looked or sounded, and more by how it made people feel.

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***égalité:** The most famous demand shouted by rebels during the French Revolution (1789 – 99) was “Liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort!” — “Liberty, equality, brotherhood, or death!” The first three words still appear on the French •1 coin, pronounced LEE-behr-teh, eh-GAH-lih-teh, frah-TEHR-nih-teh.

Ghosts, girl power, and *égalité*, continued...

Theophile Gautier, a French poet, felt the tales of Wilis would make an ideal ballet plotline under the new rules of Romanticism. True, the Wilis were mythical; but they were homegrown myths. They were found throughout European folklore in various guises with varying names and powers, so they would be familiar to audiences. Gautier asked Jules-Henri Vernoy to write the libretto (the script) for his new ballet, and Vernoy cast the Wilis as spirits left behind by young girls who were cast aside by their lovers and died before their wedding days. Rising from their graves in shimmering, ghostly wedding gowns, they seek revenge by seducing any young man into a fatal *pas de deux* (pah deh DÜ — dance for two people), dancing him to death before sunrise. Some of the folktales of Wilis compare them to vampires: Dependent on the life force of men for their continued existence, they steal it through their deadly dance rather than by drinking their blood.

Renowned choreographer Jean Coralli created most of the dance. The first Giselle was Carlotta Grisi, a young dancer renowned for appearing nearly weightless onstage, which secondary choreographer Jules Perrot used to emphasize the ghostly effect. The music was written by Adolphe Adam. A “house composer” who was sort of the John Williams of his day, Adam is best remembered for creating the challenging Christmas hymn “O, Holy Night.”

As much as this Coralli/Perrot/Adam collaboration was a revolutionary piece of art, it was a revolutionary piece of social commentary. The 1700s weren’t called only the Age of Enlightenment; this was the Age of Revolution. When the curtain went up on *Giselle* in 1841 the ashes outside the theater had barely cooled after revolutions all over Europe. The people who had risen up against the monarchies resented the aristocracies that remained, and you see that resentment in *Giselle’s* characters. The heroine is poor, simple, pure; cherished by her farmer-family neighbors. Her lover, the wealthy aristocrat, is conniving and not to be trusted. Albrecht’s love for Giselle may be real, but he pursues it through lies.

With the terrifying Wilis at the center of the tale, Giselle became a parable for its time: The peasant girl’s sacrifice saves the nobleman. Purity comes to the aid of privilege. Giselle’s choice glows with the very spark that ignited the Age of Revolution — the spark of *égalité* — that says nobility is inherited because of humanity, not because of family.