

ATLANTA BALLET

GENNADI NEDVIGIN · ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

La Sylphide

Music by Herman Severin Løvenskjold

Choreography by August Bournonville

Production and Additional Choreography by Johan Kobborg

La Sylphide, an enchanting ballet in two acts, premiered twice in the 1830s. In 1832, Filippo Taglioni choreographed the original version. Danish ballet master August Bournonville choreographed a second version in 1836, which premiered at the Royal Danish Theatre. Bournonville's version of *La Sylphide* is one of the oldest ballets performed today, scored by Herman Severin Løvenskjold with Bournonville and Lucile Grahn dancing the principal roles. The Royal Danish Ballet has danced Bournonville's *La Sylphide* since its inception. Johan Kobborg, choreographer and principal dancer with the Royal Danish Ballet, presents his production and additional choreography of one of Bournonville's most legendary works to Atlanta Ballet audiences.

Johan Kobborg on the Bournonville Method

One of the obvious stylistic differences that separates Bournonville from most of today's classical choreographers is the use of intricate, speedy and precise footwork that is present throughout this ballet. Bournonville saw dance as an expression of joy, and therefore the dancing is often seen through quick variations, and solos for both female and male performers. For storytelling and drama, Bournonville would use mime. It is rare that one comes across adagio dancing in his ballets and if so, it is still dancing to show pleasure and harmony, inside and out. The fast and delicate steps were a feat in itself, and the upper body was often kept calm as to not distract the spectator's eye from the feet and arms and upper body were used solely to compliment rather than enhance. I think both dancers and audiences of today are used to focusing much less on feet, as the spaces, stages and distances we now have to cover, generally demand longer larger lines, and movement that travels and covers more space horizontally than vertically. There are two major challenges today – staying true stylistically to Bournonville, while making the ballets generally minimalist style that we are reworking fit and make sense in a larger space.

Johan Kobborg on *La Sylphide*

August Bournonville's *La Sylphide* is the Jewel of Danish ballet. It's the one ballet that everyone dreams of performing in Denmark.

I was fortunate that when I first started creating this production in 2005, some original music had been found recently. The libretto described scenes in the ballet that I was not used to seeing or dancing, but suddenly I had the music used in those scenes. The scores even had Bournonville's own scribbles on them, so getting the right action to the right notes was suddenly a possibility. I ended up not using all of the found music, as some scenes would have ended up too long and the flow of the performances would have suffered.

I love the fact that you can grow and develop as an artist over time and change the way you think of and perform the roles within this ballet. I still make small changes to characters and some of my own choreographic additions, as it is

important that the piece works for the specific company and its individual dancers. They are the ones that need to bring the piece to life and make sense of the story and its characters.

The ballet and the characters can be interpreted in so many different ways, and the audience might create their own story and version of what they are seeing. Some will see a female shaped Sylph, others might see the Sylph as a representation of something bigger or better for James. Perhaps an urge for something different or perhaps everything plays out in James' mind. The possibilities are endless.

Most people don't believe in fairies, winged creatures and witches any longer, so making the ballet work today, not as a piece history that belongs in a museum, but as relevant theatre in 2019 is a challenge for both the stager and the performers. Making sense of it all is perhaps what I enjoy most about working with this ballet.

I think that for any piece of art to survive for so long, it needs to have a core story that on some level is still relevant. I think to some degree we can all relate to the story of James. Not to run off on our wedding day, but the desire for happiness, the constant questioning we as humans do. The what if? Am I making the right choice? We all dream, we all have goals and desires, and I think we all question the choices we make in life. As James learns, once you reach a dream it can no longer exist.

With Bournonville it's not about acting, but reacting. Even when you think you might have a character all worked out, you might suddenly find yourself on stage and in front of another dancer, who's way of doing his or her role, makes you question everything you thought you knew about your own character. That's when you have to rethink and rework your own interpretation. That's when magic happens. That's when ballet is alive and well, and able to move and enthrall people. Today and for decades to come.

August Bournonville choreographed premiere:

November 28, 1936, at the Royal Danish Theatre, Copenhagen, Denmark