



Shanghai Ballet perpetrates Coppélia

Description

Apollo's politically incorrect angels

By Robert Kilborn

Back in the late 80s and early 90s I managed one of Canada's leading modern dance companies, Vancouver's Anna Wyman Dance Theatre. In its prime, Anna Wyman rivalled Montreal's world class dance innovators La La La Human Steps, Compagnie Marie Chouinard, and O Vertigo. I loved representing the company, being a diplomat and a tough negotiator, hiring good people, raising money, overseeing performances, organizing tours, orchestrating events, and encouraging an esprit de corps worthy of the marines.

Equating dancers with the marines and other consummate warriors has something in it. Ancient Spartan military training for males began when boys were seven years old. The discipline was extraordinarily demanding, some would say brutal. Male and female ballet dancers typically begin training at eight or nine years old. The discipline is extraordinarily demanding, some would say brutal.

At Anna Wyman, I was shocked by how hard and how long the dancers worked. Every day, their sculptured bodies submitted to a formidably arduous tradition that began in the Renaissance courts of Italy and France. Professionalized in the 17th century, classical ballet has, remarkably, persisted. The world's great companies — New York City Ballet, Saint Petersburg's Mariinsky Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal — continue to set standards by which all other companies are judged.

Founded in 1979, the Shanghai Ballet is noted for its refinement and disciplined rigour. It first organized as a regional dance troupe in 1966. On foreign tours in 1977 and 1984, several of its dancers defected to the West. It has imported many talented choreographers to command its corps and direct its principals. The result is a repertoire that ranges from *The White-Haired Girl*, one of the classic opera-ballets of revolutionary China, to *Coppélia*, European ballet's great comedy.

Like *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Giselle* — also performed by the Shanghai Ballet — perennial favourite *Coppélia* (1870) centres the classical ballet canon (in Montreal, there's even a dance school named Ballet *Coppélia*). Adored for its humour, fantasy, and romance, *Coppélia* is also credited for introducing novel colours, in the form of ethnic dances, such as the Polish mazurek and the Hungarian czardas, into ballet. In addition, the ballet's charming and melodic music, by French composer Léo Delibes, introduced a new level of plot-assisting and theme-unifying expression into dance theatre. Delibes' ballet scores directly inspired Tchaikovsky to compose his own immortal ballet music.



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The story is simple: a young man, Franz, distresses his fiancée, Swanilda, by falling in love with a mechanical doll, *Coppélia*. The doll's inventor, Dr. Coppélius, inhabits a morally vague world of Frankensteinian longing: he yearns to bring *Coppélia* to life by playing Dracula with Franz's life force. In the ballet's source texts, *The Sandman* and *The Doll*, by E. T. A. Hoffmann, a late 18th early 19th century Romantic fantasist, the doll goes machine-mad, strangles, then beheads young Franz; in the ballet, a thousand flowers bloom as Franz grows worthy of, then weds, Swanilda. She, at one point, finds the key to the house of Dr. Coppélius, and, overcoming fear, tiptoes her balletic cohort into his wax doll laboratory. There, to the delight of both children and adults in the audience, a Benetton of Chinese, Turkish, Scottish, and other ethnically stereotyped automatons comes to life. I'm surprised that (to my knowledge) no politically correct cultural warrior has yet condemned *Coppélia* for racism or "cultural appropriation."

Each fairy tale is a magic mirror



*“Each fairy tale is a magic mirror which reflects some aspect of your inner world, and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity.” — Bruno Bettelheim, *The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 1976.*

I recently read a review of C Coppélia in a British newspaper, excerpted below. It was written, apparently, by a typically taste-, style-, and judgement-deficient member of the the above-mentioned politically correct, cultural warrior caste:

“Considering the fact that ENB [English National Ballet] boss Tamara Rojo has made a big deal of taking the company into new modern territory, and not wanting ballet to be seen as all fairy tales for little girls, it’s funny that she chose to programme C Coppélia, one of the oldest ballets in the rep and very much a childish fantasy.

Each fairy tale is a magic mirror which reflects some aspect of your inner world, and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity.

“C Coppélia is like the UKIP [United Kingdom Independence Party] of ballet (minus the racism): firmly planted in the olden days, in a chocolate-box world that never actually existed, with some questionable morals on the side. The story, from an E. T. A. Hoffmann tale, but with all the dark undercurrent exorcised, involves a young man who falls in love with the perfect woman, only to discover she’s a life-sized doll. The fact that he’s a two-timing cad who’s already engaged to someone else seems to be by the by. [. . .]

“C Coppélia is a frivolous show; it’s interesting as an example of 19th-century ballet but as a piece of theatre it’s inconsequential. This is a well executed production but hardly makes the case for ballet as a relevant, living art.”



Franz distresses his fiancée, Swanilda, by falling in love with a mechanical doll, Coppélia.

Wow! George Balanchine must be spinning a corps in his grave. Talk about a dully and insipidly moralizing worldview, and, for a dance reviewer, a profound and pathetic misunderstanding of an art form and its aesthetics, conventions, history, style, and attitudes. Coppélia condemned as a childish fantasy! A frivolous show! Inconsequential! What, are the classic fairy tales of art now pointless, verboten, haram? Should art exist to nullify imagination, to police thought, and to cobble together the most politically correct, socio-economically just society, with universal, obligatory, social housings of the mind? “Coppélia is like the UKIP of ballet (minus the racism): firmly planted in the olden days, in a chocolate-box world that never actually existed, with some questionable morals on the side . . . A two-timing cad who’s already engaged to someone else seems to be by the by.” I guess this reviewer’s vulgar moralizing would also condemn three-quarters of Shakespeare’s output.



In the 21st century, I suppose it's time to stop enjoying a lighthearted comic tale that portrays the eternal conflict between idealism and realism, art and life, featuring bright music and lively dancing. A tale in which the fantasy of the perfect woman, and perfect happiness, in the form of a fantastic wax doll, leads the hero back to his real love, and real happiness, that is, from immaturity to maturity.

No, that won't do at all.

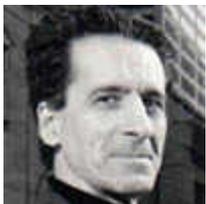
Images: courtesy of the Shanghai Ballet

Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal presents the Shanghai Ballet in Coppélia by Arthur Saint-Léon, Pierre Lacotte.

February 18-21 in Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier of Place des Arts, Montreal.

8 pm / Saturday 2 & 8 pm / Sunday 2 pm

Tickets, \$62-\$128. Call 514 842-2112 or visit pda.qc.ca



Robert Kilborn has written fiction, nonfiction, essays, articles, and reviews for the National Post, the Montreal Gazette, La Scena Musicale, Westmount Magazine, Cult Montreal, Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art (New York), and Tuck Magazine (London, England). He started out as a rock singer. At the University of British Columbia he read Literature, Philosophy, and Art History. He's been an English teacher, a restaurant consultant, a Don Draper, and General Manager of one of Canada's leading modern dance companies, Anna Wyman Dance Theatre.

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