

# BALLETS WITH SCOTTISH THEMES

In mid-February 2009, two ballets with Scottish themes were performed in one week at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. The Washington Ballet produced *La Sylphide*, one of the earliest ballets ever written, thought rarely performed, and the American Ballet Theatre danced *Brief Fling*, which premiered in 1990.



**Figure 1. James (David Hallberg) kisses the Sylph (Elizabeth Gaither).**  
*Photo by Carol Pratt.*

## ***LA SYLPHIDE***

In 1832 the first version of *La Sylphide* premiered in Paris, choreographed by Filippo Taglioni and loosely based on a story by Charles Nodier about a goblin and a fisherman's wife, but with the genders switched to a sprite and a farmer [1]. *La Sylphide* should not be confused with *Les Sylphides*, a ballet that did not premiere until 1907, has no plot and consists of many white-clad sylphs dancing in the moonlight, with the poet or young man dressed in white tights and black top.

In 1836 *La Sylphide* was choreographed anew by the Danish ballet-master August Bournonville, and this version has been danced by the Royal Danish Ballet ever since. Septime Webre, artistic director of the Washington Ballet, hired two people from the Royal Danish Ballet to stage the work—Sorella Englund, a retired ballerina who is now an instructor, and Thomas Lund, a leading dancer. Webre also asked David Hallberg, principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, to guest star. Sarah Kaufman, dance critic for *The Washington Post*, took 1-2/3 pages of the *Style & Arts* section [2] to laud this production. I went to see it on February 11th.



**Figure 2. Effie (Laura Urgellés) begs James to let Old Madge (John Goding, with staff) tell fortunes.**  
*Photo by Carol Pratt.*

The large stage of the Eisenhower Theater was decked out like the baronial hall of a Scottish farmhouse. On the left is a huge stone fireplace with James, the young laird, asleep in a winged armchair. At center rear the large doors open onto a forest and to the right is a large casement window. Overhead is a six-foot cartwheel candelabra. In the pit the 18-piece orchestra played the original music of Herman Severin Løvenskiold.

A sylph, or forest fairy, gazes lovingly at James and dances around his chair, but disappears when he awakes (Fig. 1). James questions his friend Gurn about the sylph, but Gurn denies having seen such a creature. James' bride-to-be, Effie, arrives with her mother and bridesmaids, who are in celebratory mood. A witch, Old Madge, shows up, whom James at first mistakes for the sylph. Effie and her friends beg Madge to tell their fortunes (Fig. 2). Madge tells Effie that James loves someone else and that Effie will be united with Gurn, so James has Madge thrown out of the house. When Effie and her bridesmaids go upstairs, James is left alone and the sylph reappears at the window (Fig. 3). Gurn sees them together and tells Effie, but the sylph disappears again and everyone dances. As the bridal procession forms, James gazes at the ring he is to place on Effie's finger, but the sylph snatches it, puts it on her own finger and rushes into the forest. James follows and Effie is heartbroken.



**Figure 3. The sylph reappears to James at the window of the baronial hall.**  
*Photo by Carol Pratt.*

Act 2 is set in the forest, where Madge and her cronies dance around a cauldron, from which Madge pulls a magic scarf. The fog lifts, the witches disappear, and James enters the lovely glade with the sylph, who eludes his embrace. Her ethereal sisters enter (Fig. 4) and perform their airy dances (which may have inspired *Les Sylphides*), James joins in and they all flee to another part of the forest. The wedding guests, searching for James, enter the glade and Madge convinces Gurn to propose to the weary Effie, who accepts. When they leave, James enters and Madge tosses him the scarf, which she says will bind the sylph to him so she cannot fly away. But when James does this, the sylph dies in his arms. The wedding procession, led by Effie and Gurn, crosses the bridge in the background and James collapses, lifeless.

This powerful, iconic story is told entirely without words by the dancers in a most direct and beautiful way. It is set in Scotland but has a message for us all. The hero, who apparently has everything, feels frustrated by the prospect of a conventional marriage and seeks instead to pursue his ideal concept of beauty. He succumbs to the idea of binding her to him by artificial means, which kills her. Meanwhile, his original betrothed appears to forget him fairly easily, and settles instead for a conventional life with her second choice. The hero, who has neither his ideal nor his second best, dies.



**Figure 4. The sylph and her companions dance for James in the forest.**  
*Photo by Carol Pratt.*

Sarah Kaufman raved about this one-hour performance in her review of 14 February [3]: "... this production ... accounted for one of the happiest Washington Ballet premieres in recent years ... David Hallberg ... performed

the leading role of James .. with enthralling sensitivity. It's been a long time since I've seen a ballet I wished I could watch all over again, right away, that pulsed with so much living detail that I hated each scene to end even as I was eager for the next one.”

**Figure 5. Rehearsal for *Brief Fling* in the Opera House at the Kennedy Center.**

Photo by Klea Scharberg  
([klea.scharberg@gmail.com](mailto:klea.scharberg@gmail.com)).



### **BRIEF FLING**

Twyla Tharp was born in 1941 in Portland, Indiana. In New York she studied with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham and joined the Paul Taylor Dance Company before forming her own company in 1971. In 1973 she created a dance for the Joffrey Ballet that is considered to be the first work to use both modern and ballet techniques. She created *Brief Fling* for American Ballet Theatre and it premiered in 1990.

This is a 27-minute collection of ten pieces danced by a lead couple in blue, two couples in red, an eight-member classical ensemble in brown, and a quartet in green. A commissioned score on tape by Michael Columbier with rhythm-box beats and wind tunnel sounds forms the base for an overlay of two tunes by Australia's most famous classical composer, Percy Grainger. "Country Gardens" and "Handel in the Strand" are both distinctly English, so we don't have anything very Scottish yet. Riding to the rescue comes Isaac Mizrahi [4], bad boy of New York design, whose costumes include elements of plaid, mini-kilts, sporrans and trews. One of the stocky male dancers, in boots, half-calf socks, mini kilt, bare chest and bonnet, exuded an air of highland hardiness, which infused a powerful sense of excitement (Fig. 5).

When this premiered in New York in 1990, I did not see it, but I lived in the same building on Roosevelt Island as Anna Kisselgoff, who had been the chief dance critic of *The New York Times* since 1977 (I don't think she and I ever met, but we may have spoken in the elevator without me knowing who she was. I launched a campaign to save a grove of 100-year-old London Plane trees and she signed a petition so I slipped a flyer under her door). Anna's review of *Brief Fling* on 10 May 1990 read: "There is no question that *Brief Fling* ... will be one of the major works of the season ... It is an admirably fierce and aggressive plunge into what a dance language can express within self-imposed limits" [5].



**Figure 6. Xiomara Reyes and Herman Cornejo in *Brief Fling*.**

Photo by Gene Schiavone.

I saw this in the Opera House at the Kennedy Center on February 18<sup>th</sup> and enjoyed the colorful variety, and in particular the dancing of the lead, Xiomara Reyes (Fig. 6). In her review in *The Washington Post* on 19 February [6], Sarah Kaufman called *Brief Fling* “Twyla Tharp’s breakneck fantasy in flannel” and agreed it was quite “flingy.”

I wrote this review in March 2009 and took the liberty of three times quoting Sarah Kaufman, dance critic of *The Washington Post*. So it was a special pleasure, a year later, on 13 April 2010, to read the announcement of the nationwide Pulitzer Prizes for Journalism. There were fourteen categories. The winner in the category of Criticism was—Sarah Kaufman—“For distinguished criticism, in print or online or both, ten thousand dollars (\$10,000). Awarded to Sarah Kaufman of *The Washington Post* for her refreshingly imaginative approach to dance criticism, illuminating a range of issues and topics with provocative comments and original insights” (<http://www.pulitzer.org/>).

#### REFERENCES

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2. Kaufman, Sarah, “The Bournonville Identity,” *The Washington Post*, 1 February 2009.
3. Kaufman, Sarah, “Sylphide: A Nuanced Triumph,” *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2009.
4. Misrahi, Isaac, NY Collections, Brief Fling, Winter 1990  
[http://www.isaacmizrahiny.com/collections/costume\\_design/64/costumes\\_brief\\_fling\\_winter\\_1990](http://www.isaacmizrahiny.com/collections/costume_design/64/costumes_brief_fling_winter_1990)
5. Kisselgoff, Anna, “Tharp Bends the Rules Again in Scottish-Inspired ‘Brief Fling’” *The New York Times*, 10 May 1990.
6. Kaufman, Sarah, “Few Sparks in American Ballet Theatre’s ‘Pillar of Fire,’” *The Washington Post*, 19 February 2009.

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