

All about *La Sylphide*: The ballet's history / *Trilby*, the original tale / Guangzhou Ballet

History / A cross-cultural journey spanning two centuries. **1832:** the dance world continues to be dominated by *ballet d'action*, a form championed by Paris Opéra ballet master Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810), who believed that the dancer's movements should advance the narrative. Paris, March 12, 1832: Filippo Taglioni, the other great dance master of the era, creates *La Sylphide* after Charles Nodier's *Trilby*, a story loosely based on a Scottish folktale. For the first time, the choreographer casts a woman — his daughter Marie — in a central role. Marie Taglioni dances the role at Europe's most glittering courts until 1847. Meanwhile, in 1836 Auguste Bournoville choreographs the ballet anew and stages it in Denmark to a different score, thereby creating "another *Sylphide*." By 1863, the work has disappeared from the repertoire. Fast-forward to **1972:** using Taglioni's notes and Schneitzhoeffter's score, Pierre Lacotte revives the piece for the Paris Opéra. **2007:** Zhang Dandan, dancer and Artistic Director of Guangzhou Ballet, stages Lacotte's version of *La Sylphide*.



Marie Taglioni, in the role of the sylph (1832), ushered in the use of pointe shoes.

The original tale / *La Sylphide*, or impossible love: *La Sylphide* marked the onset of the Romantic or "white" ballet that was to prevail from the early 19th century onward. Hoisted on pointe shoes and clad in frothy white muslin, ballerinas "floated" through the air suspended from steel wires, in so doing embodying the elements of fantasy, magic and "spleen" (melancholy) that pervaded German Romanticism, especially literature. The genre invariably contrasted two opposing realms, the earthly with the ethereal (think of *Giselle*, *Coppelia*, *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*), and, eschewing the Greek myths that had served as inspiration up to Noverre's time, based its narratives on reworked Nordic myths instead.

A ballet in two acts, *La Sylphide* was adapted from the Scottish folktale *Trilby*. It tells the story of young James, who believes he is loved by a sylph (a luminous, otherworldly creature) whom he alone can see. On the eve of his wedding, the sylph seizes the ring meant for James's bride-to-be and flees into the forest with her companions. James sets off in pursuit. In a glade, he meets the witch he had earlier chased from his house. Determined to have her revenge, she gives him a

magic veil, telling him he can use it to capture the sylph. But the veil is poisoned, causing the sylph to lose her wings and die. The ballet ends as a devastated James watches from afar as his former fiancée marries his rival.



Photo *Les Sylphides* by Guangzhou Ballet
Sylphs in the forest (Guangzhou Ballet)

Guangzhou Ballet / China's youngest ballet troupe: Directed by Zhang Dandan, herself a dancer of considerable renown, Guangzhou Ballet has earned an enviable reputation through its memorable collaborations with the Chinese National Opera and its rich repertoire that embraces both Western classics and original works based on traditional Chinese themes. China currently boasts some 300 professional ballet dancers and five professional ballet companies.

Founded in 1994, Guangzhou Ballet, based in southern China, quickly saw the wisdom of staging Western classics like *Coppelia*, *Anna Karenina*, *Swan Lake*, *La Traviata*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella* alongside traditional Chinese works, as well as incorporating elements of Chinese opera. One such production, an adaptation of an ancient Chinese love story, combines a violin concerto with a symphonic chorus, ancient instruments and Chinese theatre, cladding the performers in traditional Chinese costume rather than classic ballet attire. Zhang Dandan is adept at infusing the elegance of Western ballet with a distinctly Asian sensibility. On tour in the United States, Guangzhou gave eight performances that included classical works and a new piece based on Chinese tradition. Thousands thronged to see the tour, which was hailed by the critics for the grace and technical skills of the Chinese artists.

Together with Xinghai Conservatory of Music, Guangzhou University and the art school, the company founded Guangzhou Ballet Academy (also directed by Zhang Dandan) to train aspiring dancers wishing to pursue a career in ballet. International companies tend to appreciate Chinese-trained dancers and are hiring them on an increasing basis.



Known for its innovative approach, Guangzhou Ballet works closely with the Chinese National Opera and Chinese National Symphony Orchestra.