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## Reconciling *Giselle* (*Giselle Aussöhnen*) Freya Vass-Rhee, Dramaturg

The process of developing David Dawson's *Giselle* was deeply tied to the idea of reconciliation in its multiple senses. The overarching theme of the work, the reconciliation of Giselle and Albrecht through love, was echoed throughout the course of bringing David's vision for the work into accord with the traditional version.

In our first meetings, David explained his conception of the production and the changes he planned to make. Viewing *Giselle* as a universal story of pure love, he envisioned the ballet as occurring in a timeless, placeless setting, with the first act taking place over the course of a single day. The action of the performers would be natural rather than historically stylized, with the dancers acting and reacting much as they do in their daily lives. Later additions to the score by Minkus were to be removed in favor of the sweetness of Adolphe Adam's music, as well as to facilitate a smoother flow between the ballet's sections. Cherry blossoms would fall during the first act, offering a metaphor of beauty lost at the height of perfection. There would also be no recourse to large-scale, technical devices to create theatrical illusion in the second act. With regard to the principal characters, Giselle would be lively and robust, instead of a frail, shy girl with a weak heart. Her energy, desire, and passion would be a match to Albrecht's, as well as to that of the spurned Hilarion, whom David imagined as Giselle's fond companion since childhood. The character of Berthe, Giselle's mother, would be eliminated, as would Myrtha, the queen of the Wilis. The Wilis, in turn, would not be the murderous, jilted phalanx of folklore.

The divorcing of the narrative from its traditional historical setting had several ramifications, chief among which was the loss of the class differences underpinning Giselle and Albrecht's ill-fated romance. The traditional Albrecht is caught up in an irresolvable situation: as a duke, he is bound by class to marry another noble. His love for the peasant girl Giselle is thus doomed from the start, and his disguising of his identity has been viewed as a flight from this impending reality. David also chose to set the first act on the day of a wedding festival rather than at harvest's end, replacing the traditional peasant *pas de deux* with a wedding *divertissement*. The image of the wedding reflects Giselle's innocent, heedless dreams of a perfect union, set out of time.

When the class difference is removed, however, three fundamental elements remain at the root of the traditional story: that Albrecht betrays Giselle by not disclosing his past; that Giselle finds herself unable to enter into a pure emotional union with the man she loves; and that Albrecht is unable to act to soften the psychological blow of his betrayal. In David's story, as in the original, Giselle discovers that Albrecht has a history which she is unable to comprehend. The rush of events at the end of Act 1 leaves no time for resolution. Faced with a sudden burden of new knowledge about the man she has fallen so deeply in love with, and confronted with the presence of the woman in his past, the "weakness" of Giselle's heart is exposed; her life is lost before any opportunity for rectification can be realized.

David's cherry blossoms provided a more productive metaphor than we had initially imagined. Strongly linked to Japan and China, this former symbol of the Samurai symbolizes feminine beauty, transience, and the grace of a brief life lived fully. In our version, cherry blossoms became more than a symbol of ephemerality and beauty, of the springtime of love and of death at the pinnacle of perfection. Albrecht showers Giselle with the fallen blossoms during their first pas de deux, a white, obscuring curtain of innocent desire. Later in the mad scene, red cherry blossoms mark Giselle and portend her death.

The jettisoning of class distinction also brought a need to define the character of Bathilde and to establish the motivation for Giselle's admiration of her. This set the *coterie* of nobles in motion away from the traditional, richly costumed walk-on figures. Our Bathilde retains the beauty, charisma, and charm described by Gautier in his letter to Heine, as well as her enchantment with Giselle and her desire to surround herself with beauty. Here again, the symbolism of flowers offered productive ground. Lilies, the flower traditionally seen in the second act, have numerous symbolic connotations across cultures and time periods: the Christian flower of purity and virtue, the pagan symbol of fertility, the flower damned with a phallic pistil by Venus at her birth, and a Freudian sexual image. In more recent symbolism, the Japanese anime/manga genre of *yuri* (lily) or *shōjo-ai*, offers the implication of romantic love between women.

We were excited by the ambiguities offered by the larger history of *Giselle*. Marion Smith points out in "What Killed Giselle?" (*Dance Chronicle*, 1990) that in spite of extensive research, uncertainty remains regarding Giselle's actual death in the premiere version. In Théophile Gautier's libretto, she dies of a broken heart, whereas in Gautier's letter to Heinrich Heine published shortly after the work's premiere, she stabs herself fatally in the heart before Albrecht is able to snatch the sword away from her. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo's 1938 production, with Alicia Markova in the principal role, brought back Giselle's suicide on the sword of Albrecht, and many productions over the years have a frail Giselle who dances until her heart gives out. Smith makes a case for the broken-heart theory by pointing out that though Giselle is a robust young girl in Gautier's original conception, her weak heart appears in the later version of his libretto. An intriguing chain of Smith's footnotes thickens the mystery. Smith suggests that Gautier may have changed his mind shortly before the premiere and advised Grisi to perform a suicidal ending. She further notes, however, that dance scholar Ivor Guest, arguing for Giselle's suicide, remarked that "[t]he incident was arranged so as to be over in a flash, and perhaps the audience was intended to be left in some doubt" about what happened.

David initially envisioned the second act as taking place within the psychological "forest" of Albrecht's mind. The "snow-white Wilis who waltz pitilessly the whole night long" provide a visual image of the shifting, unstable nature of memory, grief, and mourning. Through the image of the Wilis, we were also drawn to the superstitions about the afterlife which mark our waking and sleeping hours. Modern lore on ghosts holds them to be spirits trapped on the earthly plane by intense, unresolved emotions at the time of

death. Doomed to reappear over and over again, they re-enact the motions of trauma unless these emotions can be resolved.

Finally, we discovered that we shared a mutual dissatisfaction with the ballet's traditional and more recent endings. Gautier's letter to Heine offered the technically difficult and largely neglected vision – for which Adolfe Adam claims credit in his unpublished *Memoires* – of Giselle disappearing into the ground as weeping flowers cover her. Through this hauntingly beautiful image, we link our reconsideration of Giselle's eternal fate to Freud's thoughts on the transience of mourning.

The resulting work, set to David Coleman's sensitive new arrangements of Adam, resonates with the history and textures of this most celebrated of Romantic ballets, offering a tale of love and loss, of memory and mourning, and finally, of hope.