

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE

890 Broadway
New York, New York 10003
(212) 477-3030

MARIUS PETIPA

Marius Petipa, the “father of classical ballet,” was born in Marseilles, France, in 1818. He began his dance training at the age of seven with his father, Jean Petipa, the French dancer and teacher. Marius was educated at the Grand College in Brussels and also attended the conservatoire, where he studied music.

Although he disliked dancing in those early years, his progress was so great that he made his debut in 1831 in his father's production of Gardel's *La Dansomanie*.

In 1834 Jean Petipa became Maitre de Ballet at the theatre in Bordeaux and it was here that Marius completed his education. At the age of sixteen, he became premier danseur at the theatre in Nantes, where he also produced several short ballets.

In 1839 Marius left Nantes to tour North America with his father, and on their return visit went to Paris. The following year he made his debut at the Comedie Francaise, where he partnered Carlotta Grisi in a benefit performance. He continued his studies with A. Vestris and became a principal dancer in Bordeaux, where he appeared in *Giselle*, *La Fille Mal Gardée*, *La Peri*, and choreographed *La Jolie Bordelaise*, *La Vandange*, *L'Intrigue Amoureuse*, and *La Language des Fleurs*.

Petipa next went to Spain in 1845, to work at the King's Theatre. While in Madrid, he studied Spanish dance and choreographed *Carmen et son Terero*, *La Perle de Seville*, *L'Aventure d'une fille de Madrid*, *La Fleur de Grenade*, and *Depart pour la Course des Toureaux*.

Petipa returned to Paris as a principal dancer, but in 1847 left for Russia. He had signed a one-year contract with the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatre, but was to remain there for the rest of his life.

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As a principal dancer, Petipa often appeared with Fanny Elssler and was much acclaimed for his performances in such ballets as *Paquita* (which he restaged and in which he made his debut), *Giselle*, *La Peri*, *Armida*, *Catarina*, *Le Delire d'un peintre*, *Esmeralda*, *Le Corsaire* and *Faust*. Considered an excellent dancer and partner, his acting, stage manners and pantomime were held up as examples for many generations of dancers.

When *Giselle* was revived in 1850, Petipa made some changes in the Wilis scenes, which became the *Grand Pas des Wilis* of 1884. In 1854, he married Maria Sourovshchikova, a student in the graduating class of the Imperial School, who later danced in many of her husband's ballets. (Petipa's second marriage was to Lubova Leonidovna, a member of the Moscow Ballet, in 1882.) In 1854 he became an instructor in the school, while continuing to dance and to restage ballets from the French repertoire.

Sources differ on the first original work he staged for the Imperial Theatre: some state it was *The Star of Granada* (1855), others that it was *A Marriage During Regency* (1858). But all sources concur that his first great success was *The Daughter of Pharoah* (staged in six weeks), which resulted in his appointment as Choreographer-in-Chief in 1862 -- a position he held for nearly fifty years.

In 1869 Petipa became Premier Ballet Master of the Imperial Theatre. The value of his accomplishments is inestimable: he produced more than sixty full-evening ballets and innumerable shorter works and he is considered to have laid the foundation for the entire school of Russian ballet. The ballet repertoire in the Soviet Union is still based mainly on his works.

Among Petipa's greatest original works are *Don Quixote* (Minkus, 1869), *La Camargo* (Minkus, 1872), *La Bayadère* (Minkus, 1877), *The Talisman* (Drigo), 1889), *The Sleeping Beauty* (Tchaikovsky, 1890), *Kalkabrino* (Minkus, 1891), *Cinderella* (with Cecchetti and Ivanov; Baron Shell, 1893), *Swan Lake* (with Ivanov, Tchaikovsky, 1895), *Hotel de Cavalerie* (J. Arnsheimer, 1896), *Raymonda* (Glazunov, 1898), *Russes d'Amour* (Glazunov, 1900), *The Seasons* (Glazunov, 1900),

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Les Millions d'Arlequin (Drigo, 1900) and *The Magic Mirror* (Koreshenko, 1903).

He also restaged and choreographed new sections for such ballets as *La Fille du Danube* and *Le Corsaire* (both 1880), *Paquita* (1881), *Coppélia* (1884), *Le Diable a quatre* (1885), *Esmeralda* (1886) and *La Sylphide* (1892).

Those who felt the dramatic content of ballet should be strengthened began to oppose Petipa toward the end of his career. His noble classicism and consciousness of form was considered old-fashioned, and in 1903, at age 84, Petipa was forced to retire from the Imperial Theatre as a direct result of the failure of his ballet, *The Magic Mirror*. His last years were filled with bitterness and disillusionment because his beloved theatre had been taken away. He died in St. Petersburg in 1910.

Marius Petipa is considered one of the greatest choreographers of all time. He researched the subject matter of the ballets he staged, making careful and detailed preparations for each production, and then worked closely with the designer and composer. Petipa elevated the Russian ballet to international fame and laid the cornerstone for 20th Century ballet. His classicism integrated the purity of the French school with Italian virtuosity.

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2004/2005

Sources

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3. *Complete Book of Ballets, A Guide to the Principal Ballets of the 19th Century*, Cyril Beaumont, Putnam, London, 1937.
4. *Russian Ballet Master: The Memoirs of Marius Petipa*, Ed., Lillian Moore, Tr. Helen Whittaker, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1958.

Researched and compiled by Fran Michelman.