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opening extract from

The Barefoot Book of Ballet Stories

by

Jane Yolen, Heidi Stemple & Helen Cann

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For my five granddaughters so they can keep on their toes — J. Y.

For Sandra, who reminds me to dance with life every day — H. E. Y. S.

For my loving husband Matthew, who makes everything possible — R. G.



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Introduction

THE ORCHESTRA SWELLS, THE CURTAIN RISES, the audience looks on in anticipation. On the stage, dancers hold their heads up high, backs straight, and begin to move to the music. *Pas de chat, relevé, pas de chat* and turn. All those days and months and years of practice for this moment. This bit of magic.

Is there any form of dance more exciting than ballet? It makes us laugh, makes us cry, makes us catch our collective breaths as the dancer leaps high in the air and seems to hover there, as the prima ballerina spins effortlessly around and around.

Most ballets are performed wordlessly, and yet the audience always understands the story. It unfolds before us in pirouettes, in gestures both broad and small, in the *pit-pat* of *pointe* shoes across the wooden floor, in the swirl of a tutu and the quick flash of well-trained feet. The dancer *is* the dance and, sitting watching in our seats, we become part of it, too.

Most of us grew up knowing about ballet. Probably we thought that ballet has always been a part of the world of dance. In fact, people have danced since the earliest of times and for a variety of reasons: to celebrate, pray, give thanks, show joy or sorrow. But, while dancing has been part of human nature and culture for as long as we can trace, ballet is a relatively new art. It is a specific form of dance created for the stage and performed by highly trained specialists.

The earliest seeds of ballet were planted when Catherine de Medici brought a new dance form from Italy into France in the mid-1500s. This dance combined singing and recitation, the main subjects of which were mythological. A seed, but not yet ballet, which did not really begin until a century later, in the court of Louis XIV of France.

In 1661, King Louis XIV founded the Royal Academy of Dance in Paris. The king was a fine dancer himself, often playing a number of roles in each ballet performed. The ladies of his court made up the very first *corps de ballet*, but soon a school was established to train professional dancers.

However, the trademark of modern ballet — and the goal of every little girl learning the art — is the dance in *pointe* shoes. Yet *pointe* shoes are even newer than ballet. They only entered the ballet world at the turn of the nineteenth century. Before that, dancers danced in heeled shoes, which gave way to soft shoes. At first, dancing *en pointe* was performed as a sort of a trick, but then Marie Taglioni, the greatest ballerina of the early 1800s, showed how graceful and expressive it could be to dance a full ballet on the tips of her toes.

Anna Pavlova, probably the most famous ballerina of all time, was the first to place a shank and platform to fit inside her *pointe* shoes. She was not, like many of her contemporaries, an acrobatic dancer who could stand on her toes without any support. Her stiffened shoes were then thought to be a bit of a cheat but are now considered to mark the beginning of the modern *pointe* shoe.

The stories that ballets tell have changed, too, over the years. In the time of Louis XIV, they would have been drawn from ancient Greek and Roman mythology, adapted to show the king in a flattering light. By contrast, ballets of the early nineteenth century were based on romantic, sad tales of ghosts or spirits, the ballerinas clothed in floating white dresses. Towards the end of the century came the great storybook ballets, borrowing their themes from fairy and folk tales — *Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker* and *Coppélia*. Ballets conceived from the early twentieth century onwards are infinitely varied. Often no particular story is told on stage, and the dancers instead illustrate a mood or idea. But some ballets continue to tell stories, still taking their inspiration from age-old tales — ballets such as *Shiva Chung, Daphnis and Chloe* and Prokofiev's *Cinderella*.

So lean back in your seat. The orchestra has started to play, the curtain is up, the dancers have come on to the stage. To help you understand what you are going to see, to aid and amuse you, here are seven stories from the ballet. We hope you enjoy them from curtain rise to the final bows.

Jane Yolen and Heidi E. Y. Stemple

A Brief History of Classical Ballet

1581 *Le Ballet Comique de la Reine* ('The Comic Ballet of the Queen') is staged at the French court. It was commissioned by the queen, Catherine de Medici, who took part in it herself. Combining music, dance and a story, it was considered to be the first real ballet.

1661 King Louis XIV of France founds the Royal Academy of Dance in Paris and the first ballet to be performed in a series of scenes, like a play, is staged. Soon a school is established to train professional dancers — previously ballets were performed by courtiers and members of the nobility.

1726 Marie Camargo makes her Paris debut and shocks audiences by shortening her skirts to show off her leaps, unusually high for the time. Dancers were now more skilled technically and ballet was becoming more acrobatic.

1789 *La Fille Mal Gardée* ('The Badly Guarded Daughter') is staged in France, the first ballet to portray real people and everyday life. Country scenes and steps inspired by folk dancing were included in ballet from now on.

1832 *La Sylphide* is the first Romantic ballet to be performed, with the greatest ballerina of the time, Marie Taglioni — the first ballerina to dance *en pointe* — taking the lead. Ballets from this period were becoming more expressive, usually based on sad stories about ghosts or spirits. Ballerinas wore calf-length dresses and tights, which were introduced in about 1810.

1870 Marius Petipa takes over as director of the Imperial Russian Ballet and helps to develop a new kind of ballet, with choreographer and composer working much more closely together. Three or four acts long, these ballets were designed to show off the technical skill of the dancers, each act built around a *pas de deux* and solos for the leading male and female dancers.

On 25 May, *Coppélia*, with music by Léo Delibes and choreography by Arthur Saint-Léon, opens at the Paris Opera.

1877 On 4 March, *Swan Lake*, with music by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky and choreography by J. W. Reisinger, is staged for the first time at the Moscow Imperial Bolshoi Theatre but is considered a failure. Only after Marius Petipa re-choreographed the ballet some years later, in 1893, did it become a success.

1890 On 15 January, *The Sleeping Beauty*, with music by Tchaikovsky and choreography by Petipa, opens at the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, Russia. Highly successful both then and now, it came to be regarded as the high point of classical ballet.

1892 On 18 December, *The Nutcracker*, with music by Tchaikovsky and choreography by Petipa and Lev Ivanov, opens at the Maryinsky Theatre.

1909 *Les Sylphides*, with choreography by Michel Fokine and set to music by Frédéric Chopin, is the first 'theme' ballet — a ballet with no story — to be staged. The early twentieth century saw a move away from technical brilliance for its own sake, with design and music playing an increasingly important part. From this time onwards, while story ballets were still created, ballets were also based on more abstract themes.

1911 The Ballets Russes is founded by the great Russian director Serge Diaghilev and, with its bold and often shocking productions, dominates the ballet world for the next twenty years. Two of the greatest dancers of all time, Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky, performed for the company.

1912 On 8 June, *Daphnis and Chloe*, performed by the Ballets Russes with music by Maurice Ravel and choreography by Michel Fokine, opens at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.

1931 The Vic-Wells Ballet is founded in London, directed by Ninette de Valois and with Frederick Ashton as resident choreographer. This was the company that eventually became the world-famous Royal Ballet.

1934 The School of American Ballet is founded, directed by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine, one of the most influential choreographers of the twentieth century. He took classical ballet to its limits, making it faster and freer, and helped to bring it to a much wider audience.

1935 Under Communist rule in Russia, the Imperial Russian Ballet becomes the Kirov Ballet. It remains one of the foremost ballet companies of the world and has produced some celebrated dancers, including Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, both of whom defected to the West.

1945 On 15 November, *Cinderella*, with music by Sergei Prokofiev and choreography by Rostislav Zakharov, is staged at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow.

1986 *Shiw Chung*, with music by Kevin Barber Pickard and choreography by Adrienne Dellas, opens at the Asian Games, Culture and Arts Festival in Seoul, South Korea. This production showed how classical ballet from the West could be combined with dance forms and music of the East in a highly effective way. Borrowing from other dance styles and with the freedom to develop new dance techniques and positions, modern ballet can be about anything it chooses.



Coppélia

The Girl with the Enamel Eyes

Once, in a town in old Galicia, there dwelt a mysterious old man named Dr Coppélius who lived in a small, dark house on the city square. In all the windows and around the balcony on the first floor, deep green curtains were drawn tight against summer or winter, sunshine or rain. It was as if the house and Dr Coppélius himself were allergic to daylight.

The people in the town gossiped about the old man all the time. They said he was a magician, a sorcerer, an alchemist. But no one actually knew what he did. What they said was simply rumour, guesses, lies.

Now one day, Dr Coppélius limped out of his house, walking unsteadily with the aid of a cane. Anyone watching might have supposed a great sorcerer like Coppélius could keep himself from ageing, but in fact the old man was painfully bent over. Reaching the centre of the square, he turned and looked up at the balcony of his house. There, the curtains were drawn back to reveal a lovely girl with long blonde braids sitting in a chair, reading. This was the first time she'd ever shown herself. Indeed, this was the first time the deep green curtains had ever been opened.

'Coppélia!' he cried out. 'My lovely daughter!' He waved. Wrapped up in her book, Coppélia seemed not to notice him.

Strangely, Dr Coppélius was not concerned by her lack of response. He just rubbed his hands together, as if well satisfied, then went back into the dark house.

But someone else had noticed the girl on the balcony and heard the old man calling to her. That someone was Swanilda, a beautiful village girl with long, dark hair. She was glowing with happiness because Franz, her young man, had just asked her to marry him. So great was her joy, she wanted to share it with everyone she met, and so she waved to Coppélia on the balcony. But Coppélia never looked up from her book.

Swanilda tried again, and still there was no reaction. 'Snob!' she exclaimed and turned away. Just then she noticed Franz coming up the street. She was about to run to him when she saw that he, too, was waving. But not at her — at Coppélia, sitting so still, lost in her book.

Furious, jealous, stunned, Swanilda shook her fist at the reading girl. Then she hid behind a fence to see what would happen next. Franz waved at the girl again and then — gasp! — blew her a kiss. At this, Coppélia finally put down her book, looked up and waved back.

Swanilda's heart fluttered, stuttered, almost stopped. Is this a new flirtation, she wondered in despair. Or has Franz been false all the time?

All at once, old Coppélius appeared by the window leading on to the balcony. As if upset by Franz's attentions to Coppélia, he drew the dark curtains tight shut, hiding his lovely blonde daughter from view.

Weeping, Swanilda ran off towards her own house, certain now that Franz no longer loved her. Heartbroken, she suddenly noticed a butterfly alight on the ground before her. A butterfly! It seemed some sort of omen. Franz was like a butterfly, all right, flitting to all the bright flowers. He could never resist a pretty face. Swanilda carefully picked up the fragile creature, turned, and ran back up the street towards Dr Coppélius's house.

Franz was still standing below the balcony, gazing up as if transfixed. Hearing footsteps, he looked around and saw Swanilda coming towards him. Quickly pasting a smile of welcome across his face, he turned to her.

Maybe he still loves me, thought Swanilda. She reached out to him, but all he did was take the butterfly from her outstretched hands and pin it to his shirt. Such a cruel gesture, thought Swanilda. He doesn't love me at all!