

## PREFACE

**B**ALLET MAY BE venerable, but it isn't a museum art form. In the twenty-first century it has found a fresh lease of life, with excitement generated by new works and new choreographers. There's another chapter to add to the existing story of ballet's roots in sixteenth-century European courts, its development on the gaslit stages of the Romantic era, its reflections of the grandeur of Imperial Russia, and the adventures of the twentieth century. By the end of that century, there were fears of ballet's decline: a generation of major choreographers had died, leaving its future uncertain. Since then, however, there's been a burst of energy, with the emergence of leading names such as Alexei Ratmansky, Christopher Wheeldon, and even newer names such as Justin Peck and Liam Scarlett. Ballet is busy again.

So this is a good time for an overview of the art form, a time in which current works can be added to ballet's long history. That history is complicated. Where theatre or opera can confidently resurrect works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ballet has not been so lucky. For much of its history, dance works have been passed down from dancer to dancer in a movement equivalent of an oral tradition: there was no standardised, universally accepted notation, such as that for music. If ballets were neglected for a generation, their choreography was lost. If they were adapted or updated, the update was usually what survived. All art forms look at their past through the lens of the present; ballet does this more than most. In recent years there's been an attempt to reverse this, with companies going back to the roots of celebrated works, paying new attention to notation systems and recording works on film. The repertory is expanding in two directions: as new works are created, ballet is also rescuing and reconstructing apparently 'lost' works. If I had written this book fifteen

years ago, I wouldn't have included Frederick Ashton's *Sylvia* or Vasily Vainonen's *The Flames of Paris*. Both have now made successful returns to the stage.

The book is designed as a guide to ballet as it is now. Choosing which works to cover, I've focused on those I think readers are most likely to see onstage. That will vary around the world: though ballet is an international art form, it's also a local one, with choreographers often attached to particular companies. Over time, other companies will take up some of their best-known, most admired works. For instance, while New York City Ballet's repertory includes as many as seventy-five works by George Balanchine, its founder choreographer, some of those pieces are rarely performed, and are unlikely to be danced elsewhere. I have entries on Balanchine masterworks such as *Apollo* and *Agon*, which are danced by almost every major company, but not for the quirky *Variations pour une porte et un soupir*, which is fairly rare even at New York City Ballet.

With prolific choreographers, I've tried to pick a representative sample of their works – choosing the most popular, certainly, but also giving some sense of the artist's range: are they known for short works as well as those lasting a whole evening, for plotless and for story ballets? I've also aimed to cover ballet's history. Léonide Massine's 'symphonic' ballets, which were hits in the 1930s, have since fallen out of fashion. However, I've included an entry on *Les Présages*, the best known of these works, both because it is still revived and also because the genre of symphonic ballet does have a lingering influence, notably on the work of present-day choreographer Alexei Ratmansky. As the twentieth century progressed, the boundaries between ballet and 'modern' or 'contemporary' dance began to blur. Since many classical companies now dance works by Jiří Kylián, Nacho Duato and others, I've included those, too.

This book is arranged chronologically. Each chapter has an introduction, describing the development of the art form in a particular period, giving a broader context for the individual ballet entries that follow. The book is designed to be read either as a continuous history, or to be dipped into for particular ballets.

In some cases there are multiple versions of a ballet: scores such as Felix Mendelssohn's music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Sergei Prokofiev's *Cinderella* have been staged by many different choreographers. In most cases, I have written a single entry on what I consider to be the most influential staging of the work (often the earliest surviving production), ending with some discussion of other versions of the ballet. In a few cases I have written separate entries. Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Ashton's *The Dream* are both danced to Mendelssohn's music and based on

Shakespeare's play, but they have different titles: it's simpler to keep them separate. Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* actually has three separate entries. The productions, by Leonid Lavrovsky, John Cranko and Kenneth MacMillan, all had huge international success, helped shape or develop the companies for which they were created, and took a distinctive approach to the score and story. Their contexts, and their influence, are different and significant enough to earn individual entries.

Entries include details of choreographer, music, designs and first performances, with discussion of the ballet's context, theme or subject matter, choreography and impact. Russia did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1918, so its dates were out of sync with the western calendar, falling twelve days behind during the nineteenth century. For nineteenth-century Russian ballet premieres, I have used the local, 'old style' date.

Story ballets have a plot synopsis. A word about spoilers: ballet is usually relaxed about giving away the plot, with companies often including a synopsis in programme notes. What happens to the characters of *Romeo and Juliet* is unlikely to be a surprise to audiences, though the way the ballet is staged may still be unexpected. I will summarise and discuss plots – though, particularly with comedies, I've tried not to give away surprises or I've added warnings on individual entries where you might want to go in unspoiled.