

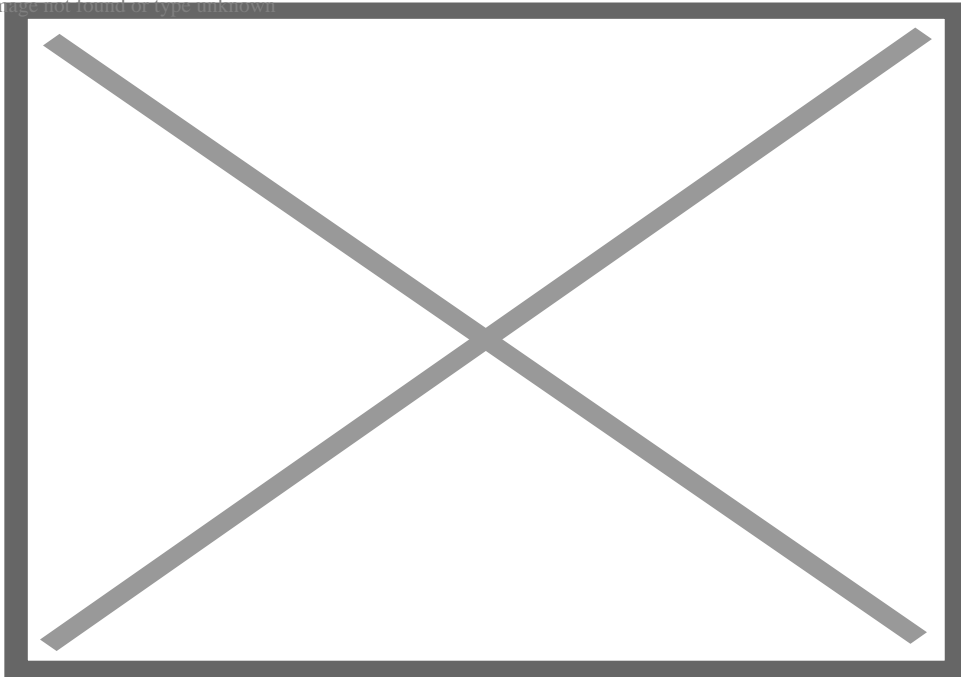
The New Criterion

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Clog heaven

by Jay Nordlinger

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Marcelo Gomes and friends in the Clog Dance. Credit: Rosalie O'Connor.

The American Ballet Theatre is now dancing its season at the Metropolitan Opera House. And one of the delights of this season has been *La Fille mal gardée*. What does that title mean?

Well, there's this girl who loves a boy, but her mother, a widow, wants her to marry another boy—a richer one—and she is trying to keep her daughter away from the one she wants. She is not especially good at this. Hence, the girl is *mal gardée*, badly guarded.

This ballet is easy to mock or sniff at: an old, corny, pastoral affair. Yet it has more charm, truth, and, yes, sophistication than most modern affairs.

Fille began life in 1789 (same year as the Revolution, which triggered so many of the world's sorrows). Choreographically and musically, it has had a long, tortuous history. To detail it would take more than a blogpost: it would take something like a booklet. Suffice it to say that ABT staged the 1960 version by Frederick Ashton. He could not have done a more winsome job.

And the music? Again, a booklet would be required, but Ashton asked John Lanchbery, the conductor at the Royal Ballet, to fashion a score based on Ferdinand Hérold, a French composer who lived from 1791 to 1833. Base aside, the score is a pastiche. As the orchestra plays it, you salute old friends.

You hear Rossini (including the *Barber* and *Cenerentola*). You hear Donizetti (*The Elixir of Love* —another countryside romantic comedy, come to think of it). You even hear a bit of Haydn (Symphony No. 85). You also get Martini.

Today, Jean-Paul-Egide Martini is best known for his song “Plaisir d’amour.” In 1961, the year after Ashton presented his *Fille*, the song was the basis of an Elvis hit, “Can’t Stop Falling in Love.” Martini’s nationality is a little hard to put your finger on. The name is Italian, of course, but he was born in Bavaria and had a French career. He was Continental, let’s say.

For me, and for many others around the world, the *pièce de résistance* of Ashton’s *Fille* is the Clog Dance. It is danced by the Widow Simone and four ballerinas. The widow, I should say, is danced by a man. It is the ballet equivalent of a trouser role. This adds to the fun of the Clog Dance, of course.

The dance has some tap in it. And some pointe. It is a weird, wonderful number.

“Weird and wonderful” would describe the music too. Also, it’s sly, goofy, saucy, delicious. Something to stick in your head, whether you like it or not. Who wrote it, by the way? As far as I can tell, Maestro Lanchbery arranged a piece by Peter Ludwig Hertel, a German who lived from 1817 to 1899. Hertel wrote an entire *Fille*, once upon a time.

The night I was at the Met, the widow was danced by Marcelo Gomes, the famed Brazilian, and his quartet of ballerina partners. This dance takes no more than three minutes. I doubt I’ll have more fun all year.

When I got home, I went on a YouTube jag, watching and listening to the Clog Dance. Incidentally, I interviewed Riccardo Muti, the Italian conductor, a couple of months ago. I had attended his rehearsal of Verdi’s *Falstaff*, which closes with an extraordinary fugue. I told the maestro that he had caused me to go on a YouTube jag, listening to various versions of the fugue.

“Do you ever go on YouTube jags?” I asked. He looked at me with some puzzlement and said, in Italian (the inflection matters), “No.” I wish you could have seen him, and heard him. Priceless.

One more note on *La Fille mal gardée*. The Ashton version closes with the rejected suitor—the poor rich man’s son—returning to an empty house, looking around, and retrieving his umbrella. I’m fairly sure—I would bet your money—that this pays tribute to the end of *Rosenkavalier*, where little Mohammed retrieves Sophie’s handkerchief.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.