August Bournonville And Marius Petipa: Styles And Ballet Techniques

The objective of this essay is to compare and contrast two different choreographers named Marius Petipa and August Bournonville. This essay also aims to explore the distinctive styles, techniques and ballets these choreographers produced, and to investigate what made them individually unique.

Marius Petipa was one of the most influential figures of classical ballet, who choreographed many significant ballets that are still displayed today. He choreographed ballets such as: Don Quixote, which was premiered at Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow 1869. Unfortunately, this ballet “fell victim to a galaxy of revisions and alterations.” However, with his production of Giselle, he reimagined the ballet with Russian ballet legend Anna Pavlova in the titular role, and their rendition became a classic. Marius Petipa became a huge success, and worked closely with Tchaikovsky in his making of The Nutcracker. Nonetheless, “Tchaikovsky's instructions and Petipa's plan proved to be quaint, and was very different from Hoffmann's original story” Swan Lake was another ballet in his repertoire which made its world premiere at the Bolshoi Theatre on the 4th March 1877. This performance was not well received by the audience or critics, with many criticising the dancers, orchestra and décor.

On the contrary, August Bournonville also choreographed a numerous amount of ballets, however, many were based on observations he made while on tour. For example, Napoli which was made in 1842, was inspired by his trip to Italy; Bruges (1851) revealed his interest in Flemish art in the 17th century. One of Bournonvilles best known ballets was La Sylphide (1836) which was considered the precursor of classical ballet and “that is because of the care and attention to detail”. However, Bournonvilles adaptation of the production only came about when he wanted to revive Tagliani's version of the show with The Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen.

Both Petipa and Bournonville had a similar style when it came to ballet, but they also added their own individual and unique techniques. Petipa was able to identify the idea of Russian ballet being very expressive, despite him being French. He worked to incorporate Russian Folk dance into ballet as well as other dances inspired by fairy tales. In addition to this, his choreography was simple and clean with the same combinations repeated, and moulded into intricacy with less narration. Likewise, Bournonville, had very few lifts, and he paid special attention to arms, as he wanted them shaped round and held evenly. However, his choreography was characterized by Petit Allegros, which means fast at a brisk tempo. Its known for giving a dainty brilliance to dancers, which isn't as effortless as it seems! Simultaneously, he also wanted the eyes to be slightly lowered, so that the overall appearance was of graciousness, despite the movements being problematic.

While Petipa's ballets are traditional and long established, Bournonville's are more abstract. For instance, Ballet Le Conservatoire (1849) is the only surviving ballet to show classical dance exercises as practised in the classroom in the early 19th century. By creating a plot that starts off in a dance studio, Bournonville has made it possible to show off his delicate and very demanding exercises in their most purified form on stage.

One clear comparison that is illustrated between these choreographers is that while most of their ballets were victorious and successful, others were disapproved by critics and the audience! One of Petipa's ballets, “The Sleeping Beauty” was an enormous success, one of his and Tchaikovsky's most prosperous ballets. However, there were some who feared that the new genre- the ballet féerie would bring about the end of ballet, as at that time, ballet was usually associated with dramatic plots and character development. Tsar Alexander lll saw the ballet for the first time, and he simply remarked that the new ballet was “very nice.”

Nevertheless, The Nutcracker certainly did not meet the same level of success as The Sleeping Beauty. Many dismissed it as too grand a spectacle that lacked serious storytelling, and a subject to even be considered a ballet, as explained by the following review: “First of all, The Nutcracker can in no event be called a ballet. It does not comply with even one of the demands made of a ballet...” -spoken by Birzhevye Vendomosti 8 December 1892.

Equally, Bournonville also had many who were disappointed and disgraced by his ballets in the past and in the present. Within a modern production of La Sylphide performed by English National Ballet, The Guardian gave it a total 4/5 stars. Judith Mackral stated that “The English National Ballets La Sylphide is limited by one note performances...” A comment was also made expressing that “This is a work against which many ballets would struggle to compete with, although ENBs did not yet have the measure of it either.”

Both choreographers have had an enormous influence on the industry, that has permanently transformed the way we see ballet. Marius Petipa had the biggest impact on the formation of Russian Ballet. During his “reign” as ballet master, a decrease in male dancers was seen, as he focused mostly on female dancers and their role on stage. The function of a male dancer was transformed to that of a supporter for the ballerina in lifts and pirouettes; this stability and permanence was due to the courts requests and contrasted the previous “pursuit of attainable dreams” (Leach and Borovsky 190) The audience also called for more technological advanced, such as solos completely on pointe with much turning and balancing which is what we now see today! Historians agree that “both musically and choreographically, the Sleeping Beauty is the crowning glory of Russian nineteenth century ballet.

Additionally, August Bournonville was a creator of a distinct style who established Danish Style based on bravura dancing and expressive mime. In 1979, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Bourneville's death, the Royal Danish Ballet presented a week-long Bourneville Festival in Copenhagen that included performance of all of his existing ballets, lecture-demonstration programs art exhibits, special publications, and open classes and rehearsals of Bournonville ballets and techniques. This was attended by dance writers, Bournonville scholars, and ballet followers from many parts of the word! This demonstrates not only has he influenced people near him, he has inspired people all the way around the world that will carry on his techniques for generations. This contrasts tremendously to Petipa, as at the 100th anniversary of his death, he still remains a partially unknown figure. For an anniversary that is so important for the history of ballet, it is surprising there have been no conferences, no publication and no festivals dedicated to his memory, which makes me wonder, did he “forever change the face of ballet”?

Both of these choreographers equally inspire me, as they worked endlessly into making their productions exquisite to the audience members. They both had a vast amount of pride, dignity and respect for their career, and they were proud of the achievements they gained. While they

did face some opposition from critics, they strived to move past it and held their heads high. For years Marius Petipa “worked in the shadows” and nobody discovered his talent till later on. This exhibits his determination to fulfil his lifelong dream.

In conclusion, I believe August Bournonville is less of an influence than Marius Petipa because when exploring their works, Petipa's productions are still distinguished and well known, while many of Bournonville's have been lost in the shadows of time. Petipa has proved to the world that even though he was deprived of his success early on in his career, he eventually received the recognition he rightly deserved. In an industry so competitive, Petipa has shown beyond doubt that his legacy will remain in the hearts of ballet lovers today, tomorrow and always.