

LA SYLPH-FEVER

How Marie Taglioni and La Sylphide took 19th-century popular culture by storm. By Caitlyn Lehmann.



The 1832 version of *La Sylphide* ushered in something wholly unprecedented – a new era for ballet in which the Romantic spirit, style and stardom came together as never before. In Marie Taglioni, the ballerina who created the role of the sylph, those elements fused to create an indelible impression of magic, mystery and ethereal loveliness.

Born in Sweden and raised in Paris, Taglioni possessed a distinctive physique with long arms and a slight stoop, and, as a child, a decided look of skinniness. Years of rigorous training, first in Paris and later in Vienna, produced the suppleness, elegance and effortless technique for which she would later be renowned. In Vienna, she submitted to a particularly gruelling regime of exercises under the supervision of her father, and gradually honed a style that was to become her own.

When Marie returned to Paris in 1827, her assurance and stamina – joined to harmonious lines and a notable lack of stage mannerisms – was a revelation to her contemporaries. At a time when dancers were preoccupied with attention-seeking *tours de force*, Taglioni revealed a “wonderful lightness, an absence of all violent effect”, and, as Lady Blessington added, “a modesty as new as it is delightful to witness in her art”. As one French critic tellingly wrote, her graceful style “is Romanticism applied to dance”. In *La Sylphide*, the novelty of Taglioni’s style became the basis for an intense and truly poetic vision. As the Sylph, she teased the senses and transported the audience, her dancing “the most aerial that can effected by mortal feet.”

Taglioni’s personal triumph ensured *La Sylphide* would be the ballet for which she was always remembered. It elevated the already admired dancer to pan-European celebrity. Like a modern musical blockbuster, the *La Sylphide* “experience” bound audiences from Dublin to St Petersburg. Taglioni made her final appearance as the Sylph just two weeks before her retirement in 1847. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, countless productions inspired by *La Sylphide* also sprang to life in cities left unvisited by Taglioni herself, most notably in Copenhagen, where the version of *La Sylphide* now most commonly performed was created by the great Danish choreographer August Bournonville, in 1836. Sydney audiences caught their own glimpse of *La Sylphide* when the pas seul was danced there in 1837. A complete version was produced in Melbourne in 1845.

As Sylph and woman, Taglioni became a byword for propriety, fleetness and refinement as she repeatedly criss-crossed Europe. Her fame spread, too, with the help of lithography, which made the dancer’s image more accessible than ever before. Yet, however much her reputation was built on the adulatory reviews of male critics, it was Taglioni’s appeal to women that made her truly a household name. While gentleman race-goers called their horses “Sylphide” and “Taglioni”, women coiffed their hair *à la Taglioni*, donned Sylphide-inspired fashions, and read a range of popular fiction in which aristocrats intrigued in their opera boxes while performances of *La Sylphide* were in progress.

Bourbon advertising label for La Sylphide Bourbon
AM Bininger & Company, New York, 1860
Getty Images/Buyenlarge



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In London, Taglioni returned for four successive years to reprise her famous role, sparking a veritable bonanza for high-end retailers. The English lady of fashion could avail herself of the *gauze sylphide*, *tissu sylphide* (“new and very pretty for walking bonnets”), *satin sylphide* (described as “exceedingly soft and brilliant”) and the rose-coloured *mousseline sylphide*; she might add to these purchases with an ivory-handled “La Sylphide” parasol or the “turban Sylphide” (“adapted to very youthful features”). By 1835, there was also Madame Saint Anton’s “Corset Perfectionne Sylphide”, promising “perfect ease and comfort” and a “sylph-like” figure for the wearer. Free from steel and whalebone and “precluding the necessity of tight lacing”, the corset was available from Madame’s showrooms in London and Paris and was, so the advertisement ran, all the rage with the *haut ton*.

Princess Victoria of Kent, the future Queen Victoria, was perhaps too young to be trying the latest innovations in corsetry, but Taglioni was as familiar a name in the royal household as that of any duke or general. A regular visitor to the opera house, the Princess frequently recorded her impressions in her journal, appraising Taglioni’s “inimitable” performances with the sincerity of a veteran. The 13-year-old princess owned a Sylphide doll and later received “a very pretty print of Mdlle. Taglioni” for her sixteenth birthday. After winning a bet with the King at Ascot Races, Victoria was also given a horse, which Queen Adelaide christened Taglioni. “I am delighted with her,” Victoria wrote, “she is tall and slender ... and of a dark chestnut colour.”

There are touching descriptions of Victoria playing Sylphide-inspired dress-ups with her young relations. After luncheon one Sunday, the family dressed Victoria’s three-year-old niece, Eliza, in a short-sleeved gauze dress and pink stockings, and gave her a wreath of roses to wear and “wings like Taglioni”. Eliza’s older brother, four-year-old Charles, was outfitted to match, “like a Scotch-man with bare legs and a plaid dress.” The children “danced about very funnily”, Victoria wrote approvingly.

Like so many Romantic ballets, the appeal of *La Sylphide* lies within its exquisite deceptions. For all its harmless prettiness and airy fantasy, the ballet taps deep anxieties and conflicting – very adult – desires. In the early 19th century, it spoke to the vogue for wan Gothic heroines, to women who imagined themselves as creatures of faint heart and delicate dispositions. But it resonated, too, with women frustrated with bourgeois morality, who saw in the Sylph a spirit that loved freely, a creature that expressed the most natural passions without fearing stigma or retribution. Often described as a ballet that evokes the Romantic (male) artist’s quest for the unobtainable, *La Sylphide* is existentialism for women, with its explorations of individual desire, love as a force of concord and disorder, and its probing of the boundary between the real and the supernatural.

Today, *La Sylphide* is also more immediately recognised as the prototype *ballet blanc*. Its scenic groupings of women in diaphanous tutus popularised the “white” aesthetic that was imitated in France and in opera houses all over Europe. As the French critic and author Theophile Gautier remarked, “After *La Sylphide* ... the Opéra was given over to gnomes, undines, salamanders, elves, nixes, wilis, peris – to all that strange and mysterious folk who lend themselves so marvellously to the fantasies of the *maitre de ballet*.” As the rage for supernatural ballets progressed, the spirit of Romanticism was sometimes lost amid the countless imitations, burlesques and fairy extravaganzas that *La Sylphide* spawned. But later masterpieces also came to life, including *Giselle* (1841) and *Swan Lake* (1877), which not only offered their own moonlit visions of unearthly women, but successfully reproduced that essential Romantic paradox of pleasure-in-pain through their portrayals of foiled desires, unreachable beauties, and love that bloomed beyond the grave.

As for the young Victoria, she too had something of a brush with Romanticism’s wayward charms. The lovely Taglioni, that chestnut mare of which the princess was so fond, hid unruly tendencies of her own. Taglioni was turned out for life. Taglioni was “not safe”.

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Opposite: Marie Taglioni in *La Sylphide*, c.1831
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