



MADLY, TRULY

Changing perceptions of mental illness are reflected on the ballet stage. By Caitlyn Lehmann



Valerie Tereshchenko in rehearsals for John Neumeier's *Nijinsky*. Photography Lynette Wills

Until the 20th century, "to go mad" was an acceptable catch-all to describe the onset of any one or combination of mental disorders - conditions as diverse as epilepsy and dementia, addiction and schizophrenia.

With contemporary neuroscience continually refining the nuances of mental illnesses, "madness" has become something of an anachronism. Across literature and the arts, however, it remains powerfully evocative. It exists as a romanticised and theatricalising concept, central to our understandings of King Lear's demise, the self-mutilation of van Gogh, the adventures of the aloof Don Quixote, and, of course, the creative "death" of Nijinsky. But it is also responsible for fuelling stereotypes and cliché. Madness on stage rarely evokes the complex and onerous reality of mental illness.

Yet, for Nijinsky, who experienced the onset of psychosis just as the 20th century began, the categories of madness and mental illness come together in ways that have elevated his celebrity and humanised his achievements. Nijinsky, after all, is the tragic genius, widely remembered as "the dancer who went mad". He is equally the man who lived another 30 years after his initial diagnosis, cared for in institutions and by his wife Romola, before dying - very untheatrically - of a misdiagnosed kidney complaint.

In fact, by the time of Nijinsky's death in 1950, representations of irrationality and mental disorder in ballet had undergone a revolution, to which Neumeier's ballet *Nijinsky* is heir. Although Nijinsky's appeal as a subject for theatrical representation still plays on historical notions of poetic genius, exotic otherness and "fate" familiar from the Romantic age, the compilation of a ballet that focuses on Nijinsky's experience of madness, his sexuality, relationships and possible traumas, takes its cue from an altogether grittier, more abrasive set of insights associated with developments in 20th-century psychology.

Today, the dearth of ballets depicting pathological madness before Nijinsky's time may seem surprising, considering that *Giselle*, with its famous mad scene at the close of Act I, is often regarded as the exemplary 19th-century classic. However, while literary and musical Romanticism laid emphasis on poetic insanity and creative transports, *Giselle*'s delirium, provoked by heartbreak and betrayal, is unusual among a plethora of balletic happy endings. The ballet heroines of the period are, by and large, a robust lot, sweetly impetuous, full of virtuous feeling, and only occasionally moved to violence on a very bad day.

Nevertheless, *Giselle*'s madness encapsulates the 19th century's deep uncertainties about the causes of mental disturbance. The ballet's mad scene, a ballerina's great dramatic test piece, locates the richness of its interpretative possibilities in the ambiguity of its causes. Each time *Giselle*'s hair loosens and her feet refuse to point, the question is





renewed: is her madness precipitated simply by her failing heart and the shock of deception? Or was the peasant girl hiding a fragile disposition from the outset?

Certainly in 1841, when *Giselle* premiered, scientific opinion held that madness was due to external causes - physical or invisible - which the religious- and artistic-minded extended to include supernatural or diabolical influences as well. In the 1840s and 1850s, educated citizens followed lively debates about hypnotic influences and electromagnetic energies, which attempted to explain physical phenomena through the existence of a "life force" or "vital fluids". Fanny Cerrito's ballet *Gemma* (1854), which puts its heroine into an altered state of consciousness, is suffused by this cheerful entanglement of science, pseudoscience and Romantic thought. Gemma, a countess, is seduced by a dissolute marquis with a penchant for alchemy: roses are magnetised and guests are menaced by the marquis's "satanic gaze"; Gemma herself spends much of the ballet hypnotised. Finally, the wicked marquis is sent toppling over a bridge and Gemma duly rescued by her lover.

Hypnotism was, indeed, a common tool of 19th-century investigations of madness. It was used most famously in Jean-Martin Charcot's explorations of female "hysteria" at Paris' Salpêtrière, where Charcot, dubbed "the Napoleon of the Neuroses", used hypnotism with obliging asylum inmates to show that mental illness could have psychological rather than physical causes. Inspired by the charismatic Charcot, one young Austrian physician abandoned medicine for neurology. Sigmund Freud would throw artists and intellectuals into a tailspin with his bold theories about the workings of the unconscious.

Psychoanalysis, the name given to Freud's theoretical approach, is now regarded more as a 20th-century cultural phenomenon than a psychological treatment, but it served to radically reshape portrayals of madness and mental illness across the arts. His theory of an unconscious mind - a repository of desires, unspoken wishes and traumatic memories - offered compelling, dramatic possibilities which theatrical dance embraced through a far more vigorous interest in character portrayal. Building both on the innovations of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and the vogue for Freud after World War I, ballet conclusively broke its traditional associations with story-telling, exotic locales and picturesque display, upending its popular perception as inoffensive art.

Freud would become an unlikely touchstone for a new generation of choreographers eager to tackle subject matter that was unsettling, ambiguous and focused on underlying motives and emotions. Among these were a number of peculiarly harrowing one-act ballets, created during the peak of psychoanalysis' professional prestige in the 1940s and 1950s, which channelled sexual frustration as a catalyst for violent madness. In 1945, Antony Tudor, today regarded as a pioneer of the "psychological ballet", produced *Undertow*, depicting a hero "frustrated in his infantile love for his mother" (as *Life*



Vaslav Nijinsky in Michel Fokine's *Petrouchka*. Photography The Australian Ballet Archives, supplied by Arts Centre Melbourne, Performing Arts Collection

magazine put it), who commits an "inevitable" murder. In Agnes de Mille's *Fall River Legend* (1948), unrequited love and religious repression became motives for the Lizzie Borden axe murders. Even a ballet as 'yee-haw' American as *Billy the Kid* (1938) took on an Oedipal tinge when choreographer Eugene Loring cast the same woman as the gunfighter's mother and sweetheart.

Partly because of their overtly Freudian treatments, many of these ballets have, as the choreographer Christopher Caines acknowledges, become "ever more ever more difficult to revive successfully as the hothouse atmosphere of the so-called 'psychoanalytic 40s' recedes in cultural memory." Yet, they also paved the way for some of ballet's finest and most sophisticated character portraits, including those in the works of Kenneth MacMillan and John Neumeier. The best of MacMillan's ballets, like his 1978 masterpiece *Mayerling*, move far beyond the lurid titillations of sexual guilt and latent desires to confront the encroaching complexities of relationships, social context, addictions and alienation. Neumeier charts a parallel course in major works such as *Nijinsky* and *Death in Venice* (2003), though with a narrower focus on individual subjectivity through the use of

flashbacks and characters-as-observers.

The Freudian impulses behind the psychological ballet have endured, too, through demand for stagings of classical ballets that give psychological depth to typically two-dimensional characters. Mat Ek's radical re-take on *Giselle* (1982), for example, integrates madness directly into the established narrative by removing Giselle from the willis' embrace to the confines of a mental asylum. Graeme Murphy adopts similar measures in his 2002 *Swan Lake* for The Australian Ballet, in which the fragile Odette is relegated to a sanatorium and the ballet's lakeside scenes become her hallucinations.

Neumeier's *Illusions - like Swan Lake* (1976), which unfolds *Swan Lake's* traditional action as flashbacks in the life of Ludwig II, the "mad" King of Bavaria, is among the outstanding retellings of this sort. Similarly, in *Nijinsky*, Neumeier addresses madness not merely as a theatrical prop, but as a real-life peeling away from reason, with all its disorientations and blurred boundaries. For Neumeier, Nijinsky is an ordinary man experiencing an extraordinary state of mind, raging against the distracted and receding world around him.

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