

SHADES OF LIGHT AND DARK



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GEORGE OGILVIE

Dame Peggy van Praagh enlisted film and theatre director George Ogilvie to freshen up her Coppélia. She wanted the deft theatrical touch of a dramaturge to liven up her weary dolls. George approached the popular classic with care, encouraged dancers to act, as well as dance, and drew out the darker, Frankensteinian streak in Dr Coppélius. Helen Elliott finds out how George Ogilvie approached Coppélia, and gave it life.

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One day in 1979 Peggy van Praagh came to George Ogilvie and asked for his help. She was thinking of remaking the sunniest of 19th century narrative ballets, *Coppélia*. George was a theatre director and he had never directed a ballet. "I remember," George says, "being surprised and a little confused. I wondered what she wanted from me."

She wanted that elusive thing that all directors crave – the old made thrillingly new.

30 years later, to coincide with the centenary of Dame Peggy's birth, The Australian Ballet performs the *Coppélia* that she, George Ogilvie and stage designer Kristian Fredrikson presented to delighted audiences in 1979. Once again, in 2010, George was involved in the rehearsal process of this charming ballet.

During the '60s and '70s George and Kristian worked together on countless theatre and musical productions. Dame Peggy was an early mentor of Kristian's and through her he developed a particular love of ballet, and a thorough understanding of the rigours of ballet design. But although George had worked with dancers, and was familiar with ballet, his great passion and expertise was, and still is, drama. *Coppélia* was to be his initiation into an entire ballet production. "I later discovered that using a dramaturge was quite common in Europe, but it had not been done here at all," George says. "So this was a first time for the company and for me."

The story of the lonely Dr Coppélius and his obsession with his life-like doll, *Coppélia*, has a long history as an audience favourite. And Léo Delibes' tender score – which offers some of the most danceable ballet music ever written – is a favourite with performers. (Tchaikovsky thought that Delibes' score was better than his own *Swan Lake*.) Balanchine had a huge success when he and Danilova – a famous Swanilda – refashioned *Coppélia* for the New York City Ballet in 1974, but Australia did not have a fresh version. The old *Coppélia* looked dusty to 1979 eyes. Being the realist that she was (she was not a celebrated Swanilda for nothing), Dame Peggy understood her own too-intimate history with the ballet would hamper her vision to update it from the pleasurable hummable and danceable thing it was into something edgy and current.

"It was," says George Ogilvie, "an old-fashioned story ballet. So how to approach it as something new? Kristian, who was always erudite, brought to my notice the original E.T.A. Hoffmann story. It was wonderful! The character of Dr Coppélius was not a foolish old clown which Robert Helpmann had made him; he's a lonely, rather fearful figure."

When George talked with Dame Peggy about his rediscovery of Dr Coppélius she was pleased because she had Alan Alder in mind

to play him. Alan's serious dancing did not sit well with either clown or dodderer. While talking with George she realised she always had a more diabolical figure in mind. Alan recalls that he, too, had been reluctant to perform the doctor as a clown and in initial talks with Dame Peggy they swiftly came to a more intellectual interpretation. He also recalls "hours and hours of discussion before anything hit the studio." This reinterpretation of Dr Coppélius gave central steel to a ballet which had always been seen as sunny and comic.

Once the idea of a different Dr Coppélius was established Dame Peggy, George and Kristian started working in fanatical detail through the story. George saw that the psychological and emotional underpinning – for a man who believed he had created life – was huge. Equally, his distress when he realises he has been tricked by the clever Swanilda is painful. The profundity of the theme was echoed in the third act when the wedding takes place, a ritual that contains deep human joy.

George remembers his pleasure when he talked to the dancers about his view of the doctor's psychological state and also about the importance of ritual, especially in village life. What the young people were participating in, the words they said and sang, were the same words their parents and grandparents sang. For all the sparkle, the colour and surface gaiety, he wanted them to understand that the ritual is a solemn and central rite in the life of every villager; that traditional village celebration was a declaration of one of the most important moments in their young lives. Dancers, he believes, need to know more than technicalities. They need to know the psychology behind their steps. "If they have an understanding of that purpose, the audience will share their joy and exuberance." But it was the second act that George saw would illuminate the drama. The original *Coppélia* played with the contemporary mania for mechanical toys and in act two *Coppélia*, really Swanilda, appears to come alive. The success of this act comes from precision of balance between comedy, drama and dance.

George spent some years in Paris learning mime at The International Theatre School Jacques Lecoq so he realised something new: enhance the three threads but concentrate on the drama. There was very little dancing, apart from the *Coppélia* doll, which was why the dancer always had to be as expert at acting as she was at dancing. Kristian devised amazing dolls and George, master of mime, "choreographed the whole thing. But, please," he says, "keep in mind that this was not dance, but movement."

Dame Peggy was especially delighted with the comedy that George was able to elicit from the

dolls and from capricious Swanilda and not-so-clever Franz in their mischievous interaction with the poor doctor. George recalls: "The young dancers playing the dolls had a glorious time. Dancers are marvellous to work with; they are so willing. But you must talk to them so that they know how to do the steps with joy and purpose."

The dedicated, workaholic Dame Peggy had a reputation for being stern with the dancers and George admits that some were terrified of her. "Terrified! They were terrified because she was very imperious on the floor. She was wonderful with them but she insisted on great work. And she got it." Colin Peasley, who danced Dr Coppélius many times, comments that the British-born Dame Peggy had an unusual quality that non-Australians missed. He believes that she understood the relaxed Australian temperament and worked with it and not against it.

If the second act was George's the third act was pure Peggy. She had, says George, a "marvellous intuitive knowledge of music." The original score, woven with some complicated Hungarian folk dances (czardas) and a constant cross-referencing to Slavic folk melodies was something new to 1870 audiences but Dame Peggy discovered some Delibes that had never been used in the original score. The music was the link for some brand new choreography.

George remembers how the three of them would sit down at a table and talk, Fredrikson would draw, they would look at the story again and re-think. Delibes' score was played day and night in the Melbourne house that George and Kristian shared with another friend. It was, finally, the music that pulled the ballet together. "I found that the music was my master, totally, and it was the same for the others. Everything was controlled by the music. We just listened and listened to the music until it was embedded in our bones."

Kristian Fredrikson's design also played a central role in inspiring George and Dame Peggy. He lovingly made detailed models of every act, including the dolls. Dame Peggy was "ecstatic" George says. He believes Kristian was the genius behind the entire thing. "His ideas were so tight for this gothic fairytale."

Finally, though, it was Dame Peggy van Praagh's dedication and practical energy that invigorated the ballet. "Peggy's life was ballet," George says. "She had a sort of private life but ballet was everything. *Coppélia* was her opportunity to do something for the ballet that was lasting and she did. It was an amazing success. Her greatest success."

Helen Elliott is a writer and journalist