

Giselle's ethereal second act is one of the most famous in classical ballet.



# ROMANCE IS BORN

There is no resisting the seductive power of this jewel in the ballet crown, writes **Vanessa Keys**

**I**t is two days after Christmas and the cobblestone streets that run in rivulets around L'Opera district in Paris are still awash in pale yellow fairy lights.

Carols play from every street corner and, outside the opulent Galeries Lafayette department store tourists jostle for prime position to view the vitrines de Noel. It's unadulterated madness and you can't help but feel the whole city has been hypnotised by the smell of roasted chestnuts.

Everyone, that is, except Paris Opera Ballet maître de ballet Laurent Hilaire, back early from the Christmas break and raring to propel the company into a prosperous 2013.

He is also the man who will lead the charge when the company travels to Sydney later this month to perform *Giselle*, arguably the world's most famous romantic ballet and without a doubt the jewel in the French ballet crown.

I've been invited into the inner sanctum of the historic Palais Garnier Opera House, the company's home and a rabbit warren of chandelier-adorned hallways and hollow staircases that seem to swing out of nowhere.

Snatches of piano music sound in the chilly air as studio doors swing back and forth and the soft pitter patter of pointe shoes

on hardwood floors echoes through the halls.

When I catch Hilaire during a rare moment of free time, he is a whirlwind of energy, roasting dancers for that evening's two simultaneous performances while trying to ascertain whether a male dancer who dislocated his shoulder on stage the night before will be well enough to perform.

"Tonight there are 21 dancers at the Palais and 26 at the Bastille Opera House," Hilaire explains, pointing to an intricate chart.

"Sometimes someone will dislocate their shoulder.

"You always have to be ready. Such is life."

This month's tour won't be Hilaire's first time in Australia – he danced a guest role in the

Australian Ballet's 2001 production of *Manon* – but it will be the first time he's masterminded a touring production of this scope and size.

"As a dancer I used to travel a lot," he says. "It is a challenge, yes, but dancing in front of a new audience makes it worthwhile."

"(*Giselle*) is the perfect ballet to present overseas.

## heartbreak of the jilted brides

Created in 1841 for the Paris Opera Ballet by a group of Gallic romantics – poet Theophile Gautier, composer Adolphe Adam and choreographers Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot – *Giselle* has been performed by the company no fewer than 760 times.

The version being presented in Sydney dates from 1991, when the ballet was re-staged by Eugene Polyakov and Patrice Bart.

"It is a wonderful version," Laurent Hilaire, the maître de ballet responsible for bringing *Giselle* to Sydney, says. "Especially the second act: very sensual, very feminine."

In the first act Giselle, a young village maiden, is being courted by Albrecht, a charming stranger who is actually a duke in disguise looking to sow a few wild oats before his



marriage. Despite warnings from her mother, Giselle pledges her eternal love to Albrecht. When his deceit is revealed, she dies of a broken heart.

Act two takes place at Giselle's grave where the Wilis, female spirits jilted before their wedding day who take revenge on men by dancing them

to death, rise from their graves and summon Giselle to join them. She declines and instead appears before a bereft Albrecht, who begs her forgiveness.

Dorothee Gilbert, who plays Giselle, prefers to draw energy from her character's strengths, rather than her obvious weaknesses.

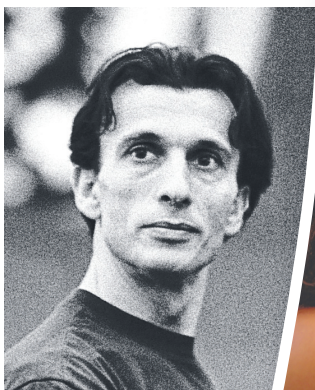
"She is very naive and fresh but she has a very good heart, so when she dies for him, she forgives him because she is pure inside."

Adds Hilaire: "Albrecht doesn't know it at the beginning that he is in love with her; he only realises it at the end," he says. "She dies for him. Can you imagine that happening right now, in your life? That's what I ask the dancers: 'Can you imagine being betrayed like that?' What a tragic thing to happen."

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Giselle is a cornerstone of the Paris Opera Ballet's repertoire and (below) Laurent Hilaire and Dorothee Gilbert who will be making the trip to Sydney.



"It is nothing short of a masterpiece. And the ballet's two acts are very different. It gives us a chance to really show everything that we are."

For Dorothee Gilbert, one of five female *etoiles* (the highest rank of dancer) who will take it in turn to play Giselle during the Sydney tour, the joy in dancing the ballet comes from the storytelling, rather than the steps.

"I love the acting," she says. "For that, I do dance. It's not for the steps. I've danced this ballet a lot and every time you perform you feel different things. It's all about feeling the moment."

Gilbert is all long limbs and wild, curly hair that she habitually twirls between her fingers when the correct English word escapes her.

Her spacious dressing room on the fifth floor of the Palais Garnier boasts stomach-churning views and an overflowing collection – hundreds – of brand new *pointe* shoes.

"I know, I know," she laughs, catching me with mouth agape.

"It's difficult because I never wear new *pointe* shoes for a performance. Class and in rehearsal yes, so one pair can sometimes last a week or so, depending on how many shows."

This will be Gilbert's first performance in Sydney, a moment which will be, no doubt,

bittersweet for the Australian Ballet. She was meant to perform in the company's 50th gala late last year but had to pull out due to her partner's injury.

"I was so disappointed," she says. "Because it is always nice to travel and dance with other people. It's very, very... uh, in French we say 'nourrir', which means to feed, to inspire you. I love seeing other companies dance."

The logistics of the tour are left mainly to Hilaire and the production staff – they have already marked out the Capitol Theatre's stage measurements in their rehearsal studio – but Gilbert likes to stick to a few hard and fast rituals of her own.

"On the day we perform, I like doing class in the morning and then I rest around 3pm," she says.

"I like to eat a bit of chocolate around 5.30pm and then I start preparations. I also like to eat pasta before a performance so wherever I am I will always find an Italian restaurant."

"I don't think I am brave enough to be trying kangaroo before my first performance. Maybe afterwards!"

● *Giselle*, The Paris Opera Ballet, Capitol Theatre, Haymarket; January 29–February 9, \$69–\$229, [ticketmaster.com.au](http://ticketmaster.com.au)



The *Willis* are spurned women determined to have revenge on the men who left them.