



A love story of the 19th century: Jules Perrot and Carlotta Grisi

Like other couples in the field of the performing arts Perrot and Grisi went on to be the creators of some of the most famous Ballets of their own time.

Among those which are still today very popular and performed : Giselle (1841), Esmeralda (1844) , Catarina or the Bandit 's Daughter (1848) and Le Corsaire (1858) .

She was sixteen when they met and he nine years older. He was struck by her beauty and grace to the point of asking her mother to be her own private ballet teacher. In a short time she became his muse and flourished in a highly technical "prima ballerina". They soon partnered on stage and became lovers. Though they never married, she remained his inspiration until the day of her retirement at 34 years of age.

“Giselle”, written by Theophile Gautier, also in love with Carlotta, was created at the Opera of Paris with choreography by Coralli. Perrot contributed for all her solos. Though a Frenchman he was actually never employed by the world renowned Parisian theatre. He taught there only in his old age.

Carlotta danced her pas-de-deux in Giselle with Lucien Petipa, brother of the more famous Marius who learned a lot from Perrot in the fifties when this one went to Russia in the last years of his career.

Perrot spent his most creative years working in London at Her Majesty’s Theatre. At that time big productions were organised and he was well paid every season for new Ballets. A journalist, balletomane and critic of his time described Perrot’s thoughts and personality with these words:

*“...a Ballet Master (as a choreographer was called in that century) had to be a true born poet for imagination, a painter of living pictures, a sculptor using plastic charm to shape the human bodies of the dancers, a ballet teacher who can give them life through the steps and last a musician because everything moves on beats and melody of music”.**

Carlotta, blonde and extremely beautiful came from a family of artists. Her sisters were opera singers and her cousins too. She also could sing very well. Her mother was a manager and always controlling her. Of course not too happy with her daughter’s affair with Jules. But wanting success and money from her. Therefore accepting the situation.

Jules, short and ugly, came from a simple family with no artistic background , just practical people trying to live decently. They were anyway supportive.

The fruit of their love was born on 8th April 1837 but immediately neglected by their unlimited ambitions to make a career in the performing art they loved.

Their little daughter, named Marie Julie, was to suffer all her life, remaining illegitimated, unrecognised and worse never mentioned by them. She died a few years after her mother, unmarried and rejected. It seems that Jules’s parents took some care of her.

The real offspring of their union was the magnificent bulk of choreography that Jules created for her and because of her, in a continuous line of new ballets. They were story ballets with lot of drama in them. Carlotta was always the main heroine, the ideal princess but Jules, being ugly, often created side roles for himself. Some comic and some dramatic. Very rarely he was the prince. In those days dance and mime were interlocked. A good dancer had to be a great actor too.



Among so many creations one struck me for various reasons: “ Lalla Rookh” (the tulip cheek) or the “Rose of Lahore”. It is almost completely erased from today’s

repertoire and the only production by Perrot on an Indian-oriental theme. It was based on a famous poem by Thomas Moore dated 1827 with music by his favourite composer Cesare Pugni with some selections from T. David's symphonic ode "The desert". Perrot was a violinist too, often playing while composing his choreography. Just remember that at that time classes were accompanied by violin and not by piano as in today's time.

Having to work on an Indian theme he needed suggestions therefore was introduced by his producer of the London's "Her Majesty's Theatre" to Dwarkanath Tagore. A ships' owner, a social man, great mind, he was the grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore. He gave his contributions to this ballet but died soon after in mysterious circumstances!

The plots is very romantic and has all the ingredients of the oriental atmosphere so much in demand in those days. Lalla Rookh is an Indian princess to be given in marriage to the young king of Bucharia.

The story is about her incredible beauty, her journey in a caravan from Lahore to Cashmere to meet her future husband and her falling in love with a poet chosen among her attendants to entertain her for the entire trip. Only in the last scene she and we find out that the poet is no other but the young king himself in disguise!!

Jules and Carlotta separated a few years after their child was born. She never married but had lovers and one son. He married late in life during his years at the Maryinsky in St. Petersburg and made a big family who later settled in France. He was a great inspiration for the young Russian aspiring dancers who in the next century will dominate the Ballet world and will travel to Paris, London and Milan to revive Ballet that had by then deteriorated since the days of the Grisi-Perrot couple. No-one from their families followed their artistry. They kept working together whenever possible until she decided to give up her career as a ballerina.

Giovanna Leva (February 2019)

* From "Jules Perrot" by Ivor Guest.

