

Bournonville: A Danish Way of Dancing

Amy Watson, Kristopher Sakurai, Cecilie Lassen, Femke Mølbach Slot, Nicolai Hansen and Susanne Grinder in the third act of *Napoli*.



Harry Larsen and Else Højgaard from a 1933 production of *The Conservatory*.



Two hundred years after his birth, Bournonville remains a giant in the history of ballet. His modest, disciplined choreography achieves the

illusion of an apparently unending flow of movement supported by incredible lightness, brilliance and ease. By William Anthony

CHOREOGRAPHER AUGUST BOURNONVILLE WAS A LEADING figure of Denmark's Golden Age, the extraordinary blossoming of Danish culture that took place during the first half of the 19th century. Along with Hans Christian Andersen whose bicentenary he shares, Bournonville transcends nationality to join the ranks of internationally recognized artists.

As a choreographer, he created a repertoire of ballets that, along with the poetry of Adam Oehlenschläger and the dramas of Johan Ludvig Heiberg, formed the core of the Royal Theater's repertoire during the Golden Age and beyond. As director of the Royal Danish Ballet for nearly 50 years, he consolidated the company's position as an indispensable part of the Royal Theater and raised the social position of dancers. His legacy of repertoire, style and moral belief about the profession of a ballet dancer has had a decisive influence on ballet around the world. His extraordinary sense of theater continues to delight audiences at home and abroad.

Coincidence dictated that Bournonville, the son of a French father and a Swedish mother, was born in Denmark and that his work would be preserved for 150 years, while the ballets of his contemporaries disappeared.

Thomas Lund makes it look easy in the third act of *Napoli* at the Third Bournonville Festival.



Carl Bloch's 1876 portrait of August Bournonville.

August's father, Antoine, agreed with his countryman, the legendary dancer Gaétan Vestris, who claimed that a dancer's career is the greatest in the world, but the life of a dancer at the end of the 18th century was in reality a hard one. After dancing up and down the continent of Europe, Antoine thought that he had finally found a home in the court of the Swedish king, Gustav III, where he was a favorite of both king and court. In 1792, while appearing as a guest artist in Copenhagen, Antoine was shocked to learn that his patron and friend had been assassinated. The French dancer, deciding that a return to Stockholm was unwise, cut his losses and accepted a contract as a dancer at the Royal Theater. He might have become a worthy but minor footnote in ballet history but for his greatest contribution to the dance world: he was the father of August Bournonville.

Gitte Lindstrøm, Thomas Lund and Gudrun Bojesen in a recent production of *The Conservatory*.





August was born in 1805 and grew up in the theater, performing children's roles in plays and comic operas. He was an avid reader and a student of music and art. He entered the ballet school at the age of eight and was taught by his father and Vincenzo Galeotti. When he joined the company at 15, he was immediately given a scholarship to travel to Paris for six months where he studied with the celebrated dancers Auguste Vestris and Pierre Gardel. He returned to Denmark and remained there as a member of the Danish Ballet for four years, after which he returned to Paris, became a member of the

Paris Opera ballet and toured Europe. During his time in France and England, Bournonville made the acquaintance of many of the theatrical, literary and musical luminaries of the time. This experience outside Denmark was crucial to his formation as an artist.

Bournonville absorbed the French style before the advent of French romantic ballet, during which the ballerina replaced the male dancer as the center of attention. In Denmark, as in Russia, male dancers retained their prominence beside the ballerina. Elsewhere in Europe by 1850 the male dancer had become an endangered species.

August, with an international career firmly in his grasp, made a guest appearance in Copenhagen in September 1829 that changed the course of his career and the history of Danish ballet. In addition to appearing as a dancer, the returning son also staged three ballets. As a result of his success, he was offered the positions of first solo dancer and ballet master. August was ambitious, energetic, intelligent and quite confident in his ability to lead the company. In 1830 he accepted the offer, bringing with him a sophisticated view of the world as well as a technique that far surpassed the level of other Danish dancers.

By 1830 ballet in Denmark had already enjoyed a long tradition, pre-dating the founding of the Royal Theater in 1748, which developed as home to ballet, opera, drama and orchestra.

The early ballets were small and mostly made by foreign ballet masters

(Facing page top) **Anna Tychsen** and Hans Bech from the Second Act of "La Sylphide," taken around the turn of the century. (bottom) **Godrun Bojesen** as the Sylph and Thomas Lund as James in *La Sylphide*. (This page) **Margrethe Schanne** and Flemming Flindt are seen in this 1960 performance of "La Sylphide."

with foreign soloists and a Danish corps de ballet. When the Italian Vincenzo Galeotti arrived in Copenhagen in 1775 the ballet began to flourish. He trained Danish soloists, improved the corps de ballet and created a repertoire of more than 50 ballets. An exceptional choreographer he incorporated the latest trends, which called for ballet to be more than a technical display and for the dance and drama to combine as a unit.

Antoine had already been acclaimed as a dancer throughout Europe by the time he joined the Royal Danish Ballet in 1792. His exceptional technical ability and his charisma as a performer made him a favorite with the Copenhagen public. When Galeotti retired as director in 1816 (although he continued to dance until well into his 60s!), Bournonville was appointed ballet master. Unfortunately, he lacked organizational skills and leadership abilities. The company declined under his direction, and he resigned in 1823. After another six years of inferior management under Pierre Larcher, the company that August founded in 1829 was in a deplorable state. He understood that his main task would be to build a repertoire of audience-pleasing works and to bring the corps de ballet up to the level that his ballets required.

While he was motivated by professional ambition as well as genuine Danish patriotism, his engagement to a Swedish woman, Helene Frederikke Håkansson, was another deciding factor. Their marriage lasted nearly 50 years and produced seven children, two of whom pursued artistic careers.

BOURNONVILLE'S EXPERIENCES ABROAD SHAPED HIS WORK, but his very Danish outlook on life and art was equally important. He was heavily influenced by contemporary Danish artists, and his work reflected the artistic and social currents of his time, particularly those of the Danish middle class. The Royal Theater was the humming center of Denmark's intellectual activity. Its auditorium functioned as kind of a club where Copenhagen's artists spent most of their evenings. Still, it is significant that the majority of the audience came from the middle class.

Bournonville was serious about art and his beloved country, but most of all he was a great man of the theater. He understood his middle-class, bourgeois public, and he knew that his first job was to entertain. This mixture of theatrical craft, French ballet style and Danish cultural values gave birth to the Bournonville style.

Bournonville explored many genres in the more than 50 ballets that he created. He followed the trend of the time in his use of Nordic myths and folktales in such ballets as *The Valkyrie*, *The Lay (Ballad) of Thrym* and *A Folk Tale*. He made ballets in an exotic mode, such as *Abdallah*, *Napoli* and *Far from Denmark*. In others, such as *Kermesse in Bruges*, he worked in the field of poetic realism. With *La Sylphide*, he introduced French romanticism to the Danish ballet stage, and with *Konservatoriet (The Dancing School)*, he celebrated his training in Paris during the 1820s.

In the late 19th century, Denmark was outside the mainstream of



American Caroline Cavallo in the second act of *La Ventana*.

European activity. As a result, the Danish ballet remained isolated from the development, decadence and rebirth of continental ballet. After Bournonville's retirement in 1877 and death in 1879 his ballets constituted a kind of monotheism at the Royal Theater that was hardly challenged until the 1930s. There was simply no heir apparent to Bournonville the choreographer. As a result, his ballets formed the core of the Danish Ballet's repertoire and were preserved in step, gesture and style. While the waves of history washing over Europe were no more than ripples by the time they reached Scandinavia, they were sweeping away the work of Bournonville's contemporaries in the centers of continental ballet, especially Paris.

Bournonville ballets mix drama and comedy, pantomime and pure dancing, wonderful character roles, dancing children and national dances. The result is often described as pure joy pouring over the footlights. While his career as choreographer ran parallel with the rise and fall of the romantic ballet, he rejected, personally and professionally, French romanticism's preoccupation with world-weariness and disintegration. He gave most of his ballets happy endings, and while striving to entertain, he also wanted "to elevate the mind, and to refresh the senses."

The Bournonville style is a model of modesty, courtesy and discipline. It features fleet footwork in combinations of steps, some of which are no longer practiced outside Denmark. Movements of the arms are used as gestures of generosity and welcome. Bournonville wanted the dancing and mime to look natural and effortless. His choreography achieves the illusion of an apparently



From *Far From Denmark*, ca. 1910

unending flow of movement supported by incredible lightness, brilliance and ease.

Often when we see Bournonville's work, we are surprised at how different they are from the ballets that epitomize the Russian classical ballet such as Tchaikovsky's ballets, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*, choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov in Russia during the 1880s and 1890s.

The Danish master's ballets use movement vocabulary, spatial patterns and connections between the steps that are unique to his period. In the Russian classical template, sequences often end in a pose or a virtuoso step followed by

a run to the starting point of the next sequence. In Bournonville, there is no running from corner to corner; the dancing is continuous. The tightness of Bournonville's construction is hard because it requires endless forward motion, but the dancers benefit because they are never left just standing there. In Bournonville, unlike the Russian style, there are no long, languorous preparations for turns. Jumps and turns are almost always a preparation for the next step.

These ballets challenge the dancers to make the movement continuous even in stillness. They need to be light while maintaining a feeling of weight, a viscosity, like heavy cream going over the edge of a glass. Bournonville's style is a model of the use of *épaulement*—the way the upper body is turned and inclined to give the basic ballet positions shading and plasticity. The choreography demands that the body move contrapuntally with itself, different parts moving in isolation from each other and yet in harmony; the legs absorb the shocks, and the arms are free to express a flowing melody. While the goal is lightness and speed, the ballets are extremely demanding.

Gudrun Bojesen is a leading dancer with the Royal Danish Ballet, admired as a quintessential Bournonville dancer, a picture-perfect representation of the master's own style. She agrees that dancing Bournonville is hard. "It's a matter of strength. You have to have extremely powerful legs. The center of your body has to be a shock absorber, so that the legs can be as powerful as possible and the upper body can be relaxed and flowing. Bournonville is definitely the style where you sweat the most," she says. "Physically, it's extremely strenuous. The women do the same kinds of jumps as the guys. You can't just rest on your pointe shoes and trust your balance."

While dancing Bournonville is fun, Bojesen says the break between the second and third acts in any of his ballets is not fun. "You're hurting, and there's no more strength in your feet. In Bournonville, the footwork is very, very active. Originally Bournonville's ballerinas didn't wear pointe shoes. They were wearing soft-soled shoes, so they could point their feet more easily. By the end of the second act, there's no more calf muscle or metatarsal left. It's all just one, big cramp."

BOURNONVILLE'S BALLETS MIGHT HAVE DISAPPEARED IN THE early 1930s when influences from the dance world outside of Denmark were beginning to be felt, but they were rescued by director Harald Lander and Bournonville veteran dancer Valborg Borsceni. Together, they restaged the Bournonville ballets, cutting passages that no longer seemed interesting. Certain ballets were simply dropped from the repertoire and disappeared. While these seem like draconian measures, they gave the Bournonville ballets, which had begun to appear dated, a new lease on life.

After the Second World War, dancers started traveling abroad and returned with new influences. The world first noticed the Danish treasure in the early 1950s when British critics were invited to Denmark to advise on the feasibility of foreign tours that started in the mid-1950s. As the company began to enchant the rest of the world with Bournonville's ballets, the genie was out of the bottle. As a matter of course, the company opened itself to influences that would necessarily affect the style that had been protected. Danish dancers and their public demanded the experience of contemporary dance, both ballet and modern dance. Under these influences, the dancers started to change the way they approached their training and performance, and alterations crept into the style. Bournonville continued to be considered a national Danish treasure, but the preservation of his ballets was treated with varying levels of seriousness over the years.

Today the question becomes, how authentic are these productions? Do they really preserve the original form and, even if they do, is it a good idea?

Most of the original choreography has been certainly look different than they did in Bournonville's lifetime. We can see from turn-of-the-20th-century film clips that the technical demands are the same (Bournonville was always hard to do), but today's dancers simply look different, move differently and can do much more. Their increasingly intense physicality is at odds with the limits imposed by a style that is 150 years old. So where do we draw the line? At the classes organized by Bournonville's successor, Hans Beck, at the turn of the 20th century? In the 1930s when Lander staged the ballets in the form in which we know them today? In the late 1940s after the ballet had woken up to international standards but before the arrival of the great Russian teacher Vera Volkova, who had a hand in changing the style?

Ballet is the most fragile of arts, and there is a constant fear that the Bournonville repertoire will go astray. Ballet conservation is always the victim

of human foibles and changing tastes. Although what we are seeing today is as authentic as possible, it is important to remember that it has been constantly refracted through the prism of changing theatrical fashion.

Thomas Lund, along with Bojesen, is considered one of the ideal proponents of Bournonville's style. Asked if he feels that the style has been lost, Lund laughs, "You never know because we don't know what it used to look like. For sure it didn't look like it looks today."

THEN SERIOUSLY HE SAYS, "I DON'T THINK WE HAVE LOST IT. I think we have gotten much more into the details because of all the interest from outside. The older generations just danced it. They never questioned if the style would be lost." He recounts a story about Ulla Poulsen, a leading ballerina during the 1920s and 1930s. "When they asked her what she had been told about her characterization as the Sylph, she said, 'They just told me to sit in the window, smile and look pretty.'"

Lund continues: "Today, as international interest in the style is increasing, we go into the whole psychological side of each little bit. We think more about the details and how to preserve them." He points to the First Bournonville Festival in 1979 as a turning point. The entire Bournonville repertoire was performed over the course of a week to intense international interest and acclaim. "The huge outside interest made us think more carefully about how we were preserving things for the future."

If we accept that too much has changed in the world to expect a recreation of the Bournonville style as it was performed 70, 50 or even 20 years ago, then we have to ask whether the company is preserving the spirit of Bournonville. The answer is yes. During the 1980s and 1990s, a handful of Bournonville experts died, leaving a younger group of custodians unprepared to take over the responsibility of restaging the ballets. And a series of unfortunate directorships weakened the company's morale and cohesion. The Third Bournonville Festival in June 2005 proved that the company has recovered and is dancing the Bournonville ballets as they are danced nowhere else in the world.

Ballet director Frank Andersen is aware of the criticism that has been leveled at the company while bearing in mind its tremendous responsibility to preserve a unique inheritance, the 10 or 12 ballets (depending on whether you count several fragments as ballets) that exist.

"The Royal Danish Ballet is extraordinarily fortunate to have the Bournonville tradition," he says, "but finding a balance between tradition and what today's audience expects is difficult. My idea is to place Bournonville in the center and work outwards from there. We are dancing with bare feet and in boots. We are dancing in wooden shoes and character shoes. We are in soft ballet shoes and on pointe. We are mastering all of these styles because it is demanded of us by the audience and the critics."

For Andersen, it is a question of keeping the ballets fresh as audience's

tastes change and young dancers demand to use the full range of their physicality. But for him it is also a question of remembering what has been passed down, dancer to dancer, over the generations. He tries, along with his trusted colleagues, to communicate not only steps but an attitude, an atmosphere, perhaps an insight into Denmark's history and culture.

"As for securing the future, I am taking steps with the company in that direction right now," he says. "I think it's important to give people the space to learn how to do this. So I'm starting out with Lis Jeppesen, Thomas Lund, Petrusjka Broholm, Heidi Ryom, Eva Kloborg, Martin James and Christina Nilsson. They're all proving to be valuable ballet masters who are able to carry the torch."

In the end, it's not so much a question of authenticity as legitimacy; the Royal Danish Ballet has dedicated itself to the preservation of Bournonville's unique heritage. The Royal Danish Theater is really the only place in the world where these ballets could have survived. Denmark is the land that shaped Bournonville and his aesthetic expression, and it continues to shape the dancers in whose muscles the ballets live.

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Harry Larsen, Poul Witzansky, Kirsten Ralov, and Else Hojgaard in this 1933 photo from the last production of "The Conservatory."