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An Early American *Sleeping Beauty* from *Ballet Review* Summer 2015

Cover photograph by Costas: Wendy Whelan and Nikolaj Hübbe
in Balanchine's *La Sonnambula*.



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Cover photograph by Costas: Wendy Whelan
and Nikolaj Hübbe in *La Sonnambula*.



Catherine Littlefield as Aurora. (Photo: courtesy of the Ann Barzel Collection, Newberry Library)

Early American Annals of *The Sleeping Beauty*

Sharon Skeel

To the list of ambiguities and debates involving *The Sleeping Beauty*, I have one more to add: whether or not Catherine Littlefield and her Philadelphia Ballet Company were the first to produce a full-length version of this ballet in the United States. On February 11, 1937, at the Academy of Music, subscribers to the Philadelphia Forum, a local presenting organization, watched Littlefield's rendition in its full three-hour splendor, which included one prologue, three acts, eight hounds, eighty-five musicians, and one hundred dancers. It was original and credible, but was it the first, as Littlefield claimed?

About two months earlier, in fact, a semi-professional group directed by Russian émigré Mikhail Mordkin staged what was described as a complete *Sleeping Beauty* in Waterbury, Connecticut. Shortly afterward, this group formally became the Mordkin Ballet Company, the forerunner of Ballet Theatre. Mordkin's work was performed just twice: on December 19, 1936, for the Junior League of Waterbury, and then again on March 20, 1937 (more than a month after Littlefield's premiere) for the Scarsdale branch of the New York Junior League.

The original 1890 *Sleeping Beauty*, which premiered at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, with choreography by Marius Petipa and music by Tchaikovsky, was a prologue-three-act extravaganza. Anna Pavlova, Mordkin's former partner, gave Americans what were no doubt their first glimpses of the ballet. The repertory for her United States tour in 1910-1911 included the grand pas de deux from act 3, and, six years later, at New York's Hippodrome, she presented an abbreviated version of the full ballet, devised by Ivan Clustine, who likely derived his work from Petipa's.

The printed program for Littlefield's *Sleep-*

ing Beauty hailed it as the "first performance in America," an inaccurate assertion given Pavlova's prior – albeit limited – showings (as well as Mordkin's)¹ In another context, Littlefield qualified her claim by inserting the word "entire" and providing additional details: "The [Philadelphia Ballet] Company has many important engagements listed for the coming year, 1937, the foremost among which will be the American premiere of Tchaikovsky's entire ballet, 'The Sleeping Beauty.' . . . The ballet, which is in five scenes, is an entire evening's entertainment."

While critics at the time commended Littlefield's achievement, some also acknowledged that Mordkin's Waterbury staging predated hers. For these writers, however, Mordkin's complete production seemed in some way incomplete: it was given "without an orchestra" or as merely a "preview."

Indeed, Mordkin's *Sleeping Beauty* was a fairy tale with plenty of fairies but with only three princes, two pianists, no tutor, and no rats. In other words, it may have been full-length, but it was not full-scale, and existing evidence suggests it lacked the grandeur befitting Tchaikovsky's score and the ballet's own history. While Mordkin danced the role of the Black Fairy (Carabosse) and Dimitri Romanoff and Lucia Chase were Prince Désiré and Princess Aurora, Mordkin's advanced students assumed most of the other parts and Chase herself referred to the ensemble as a rehearsal group.

The performance, which included three acts and a prologue within act 1, began at 3 p.m. in the Junior League's auditorium and was to be followed by the League's Christmas dance. Reviews did not appear in the local newspapers. The printed program listed no costume or scenery designers, although posed photographs of Romanoff and Chase show his tunic and her tutu and rudimentary crowns on both their heads. On the backs of these photographs is written "The sleeping beauty (Mordkin after Petipa M)," which suggests that Mordkin's choreography reflected Petipa's in some way. Littlefield's, for the most part, did not.

Despite its departure from Petipa, Littlefield's *Sleeping Beauty* exceeded Mordkin's in capturing the bold spirit of the original. Publicity for the Philadelphia Ballet's production began five months in advance. A hint about its opulence surfaced in *The Dancing Times*: "One of Miss Littlefield's most important objects in Europe was to confer with designers regarding the costumes and scenery for her proposed production of Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty* . . ." In January the company presented a preview at a local school that included a pas de six, variations, and an excerpt from the grand pas de deux, the only portion of Petipa's original choreography that Littlefield retained. It had been taught to her by Lubov Egorova, with whom she studied during off-seasons beginning in the mid-1920s.²

Littlefield's *Sleeping Beauty* was in one sense her homage to Egorova, the former Mariinsky ballerina who had danced the role of Lilac Fairy in St. Petersburg and alternated as Aurora in Diaghilev's 1921 London revival of the ballet. Intelligent and musical, Egorova taught in Paris for more than forty years. "You know, Balanchine once told me that by watching her class he got inspired," George Skibine recalled. During the Philadelphia Ballet's 1937 tour to Europe, Littlefield arranged private lessons with Egorova for a dozen or so of her prized company members.

But Littlefield's *Sleeping Beauty* was more than just a tribute to her teacher. It was also a demonstration that her teacher's Old World ballet ideals of artistry, courtliness, and discipline could be embraced by New World dancers – that Americans could produce an iconic work and do it well. With her canny choice of *Sleeping Beauty*, Littlefield showed seriousness of purpose while exploiting her company's strengths: generous talent at the top and sheer numbers below (augmented by students from the Littlefield School). It would take almost three decades before another American company would replicate her feat: the Pennsylvania Ballet did it in 1965 and the Atlanta Civic Ballet in 1966.³

It could be said that Littlefield began pre-

paring for this challenge at least a decade earlier, after she returned to Philadelphia from New York – where she danced for Ziegfeld and studied with Luigi Albertieri – to assist her mother with ballets for two local opera companies. They found Littlefield a partner and formed a corps using students from their school, which had developed over the years from classes for neighborhood children and women's music clubs.

By the late 1920s, Littlefield had recruited William Dollar, Douglas Coudy, and Thomas Cannon to teach and perform, and was choreographing ballets independent of opera. Her marriage in 1933 to a wealthy lawyer provided the means to act on her longstanding ambition to form a company, and she launched the Philadelphia Ballet Company in October 1935.

Among the company's strongest dancers were Philadelphia-born Karen Conrad and Joan McCracken, whom Littlefield cast as the Fairy of Song and Fairy of Happiness, respectively, for *Sleeping Beauty*'s opening performances (on February 11 for the Philadelphia Forum and February 12 for the general public). Littlefield's younger sister, Dorothea, as the Fairy of Hope (Lilac or Rainbow Fairy), led the fairy retinue, which was praised by Albertina Vitak in a comprehensive review in *The American Dancer*: "The *Six Fairies* are all good dancers, and each had an outstanding solo in the Prologue, with highest honors given to Karen Conrad for her thrilling elevation and great style; to Joan McCracken for her airy movement and saucy beauty, and to Dorothy [sic] Littlefield for her graceful, flowing lines and beautiful poise. There were many points of technical proficiency divided among the six: one had exceptional *développé*; all could turn well, as witness they all did *fouetté sur la pointe* and circles of *coupé jeté* together, and all had good *petite batterie*. At times some of their costumes were unsuitable to the steps, or vice versa, with lovely Dorothy [sic] Littlefield, as Fairy of Hope, the most unfortunate in this respect."

Lincoln Kirstein, who attended the February 12th performance with George Balanchine,

Nicholas Kopeikin, and Elliott Carter, panned the costumes outright, writing in his diary, "The music alone almost carried it but only four boys and six girls danced while the stage was crowded with her pupils who seemed to have made their own horrible costumes." The costumes had been made, and in fact designed, by Philadelphia artist Lee Gainsborough (whose original name was Leon Ginsberg).⁴ Other critics applauded his work, and Vitak at least approved of his ensemble for Princess Aurora, an appropriately regal tutu/hooded cape combination.

Littlefield's husband was said to have invested \$10,000 in the production, according to *Time* magazine, a sum that purchased not only the costumes, but also the services of the prestigious Curtis Symphony Orchestra directed by opera specialist Boris Goldovsky, and flourishes such as a movable backdrop, giant spider web, and live hunting dogs to animate act 2.

Most observers appreciated the enormity and significance of the undertaking and especially the passion that drove it. Vitak, for example, asserted, "One must marvel at the energy and courage of Miss Littlefield for tackling such a gigantic task of choreography while keeping her own fine technique in condition to dance the strenuous stellar role. Interesting as a side light of character and an attribute no doubt responsible for this dual accomplishment in the face of almost insurmountable difficulties was her sang-froid when, soon after her entrance, one of Miss Littlefield's four partners failed to catch her in a twirl. She stepped out of her role long enough to bestow upon the culprit a gracious and understanding smile." In general, the critics' most common complaint, one evidently shared by Kirstein, was the company's lack of depth.

After the February performances, the Philadelphia Ballet presented *Sleeping Beauty* in its entirety just four more times (with some alterations) – in July at two different outdoor venues, Philadelphia's Robin Hood Dell and

New York's Lewisohn Stadium.⁵ Littlefield's more manageable *Aurora's Wedding*, however, became a fixture on the company's programs in subsequent years.⁶

Invaluable film footage taken by Ann Barzel at a Lewisohn Stadium rehearsal and during a 1939 performance of *Aurora's Wedding* reveals brief passages of choreography and impressive dancing, particularly by the Littlefields. As Princess Florine in *Aurora's Wedding*, Dorothea proves herself a true virtuosa, with extraordinary à la seconde extensions and masterful turns, while Catherine as Aurora sustains a pretty line in her cambré back and double pirouettes into fish dives, which, as scholars have noted, probably did not originate with Petipa, but with Nijinska in 1921.

Barzel's footage is silent, absent what Olga Maynard called "the heart of 'The Sleeping Beauty,' the fire that gives the jewel its color and light" – Tchaikovsky's glorious music. *The New York Times's* John Martin deemed it so essential to the *Sleeping Beauty* experience that Mordkin's use of two pianists in Waterbury instead of a full orchestra was the deciding factor, at least for him, as to whether Mordkin's or Littlefield's was the first complete production in America: "[Mordkin's staging] was without benefit of orchestra, . . . and with a work of this sort, the only authentic part of which is Tchaikovsky's score, this should perhaps give the decision to the Philadelphia performance."⁷

Balanchine danced in *The Sleeping Beauty* as a boy at the Mariinsky Theater and its sense of magic never left him. Seeing it in Philadelphia stirred his memories. Kirstein wrote, "Balanchine and Kopeikine [*sic*] were marvelous on the way home telling about it at the Mariinsky Theater: the squad of soldiers to move the trees, the fountains, etc." Littlefield's grand production so overwhelmed her brother that he began to cry as he watched from his box in the theater. Mordkin's no-frills *Sleeping Beauty* came before Littlefield's and included a full three acts like Petipa's. All that was missing was the magic.

NOTES

I am grateful to Mindy Aloff, Janis and Kristina Pulcini, David Vaughan, and Barbara Weisberger for their analysis and insights regarding the Ann Barzel footage. – S. S.

1. Additionally, Colonel W. de Basil's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo presented *Aurora's Wedding* in the United States prior to 1936.

2. In later years, when the company regularly performed *Aurora's Wedding*, Littlefield attributed both the grand pas de deux and the Bluebird pas de deux to Egorova.

3. In 1940 at the Carnegie Chamber Music Hall (now the Weill Recital Hall in Carnegie Hall), Mordkin apparently presented a new full-length *Sleeping Beauty*, which was more elaborate than his prior one, but danced exclusively by Mordkin and his students, among them Tanaquil Le

Clercq, Moscelyne Larkin, and Bambi Linn.

4. The printed program credits the execution of the costumes to Young & Gainsborough; McIlhenny.

5. Interestingly, Alexander Smallens, who conducted the July performances, had been Pavlova's rehearsal pianist for her 1916 *Sleeping Beauty* at the Hippodrome.

6. During these years the company was called the Littlefield Ballet.

7. *The American Dancer*, too, decided in favor of Littlefield, alleging in its September 1937 issue that Mordkin had made cuts to the score for the Waterbury performance, "which disqualifies his claim to being 'first' to present this ballet in its entirety in America. So, Catherine Littlefield really holds that honor."

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