ROYAL ALBERT HALL
Sir Kenneth MacMillan's
The Sleeping Beauty
English National Ballet

Producer: Ad Lib Productions
Director: Ross MacGibbon

Running Time: 2 hours 20 minutes
Venue: Captured at the Royal Albert Hall, London
Capture date: June 2026

With The Sleeping Beauty, we invite you into a world where time stands still – where magic, drama and romance unfold through every step and note. A world rooted in classical tradition, and still as captivating now as when it was first performed.

This is a journey through a timeless fairytale, brought to life by Pyotr Tchaikovsky's score and Kenneth MacMillan's exquisite choreography – a celebration of beauty, strength, and grace.

Anna Nevzorova as Lilac Fairy. Photo: Isabella Turolla

The story

ACTI

Aurora's Christening

The King and Queen are holding a celebration for the christening of their baby, Princess Aurora. Amongst their guests are her fairy godmothers who each give the child a magical gift: beauty, temperament, purity, joy, wit and generosity.

Before the Lilac Fairy can present the final gift, another fairy is seen approaching. It's the evil Carabosse, enraged because the Master of Ceremonies, Catalabutte, forgot to invite her to the christening. As revenge for being overlooked she curses Aurora to one day prick her finger and die. Unable to completely overturn the curse, The Lilac Fairy softens it, promising that Aurora will not die but rather fall into a deep sleep from which she will be awakened by a prince's kiss.

Aurora's 16th birthday

It is Princess Aurora's 16th birthday celebration and a series of princes arrive to seek her
hand in marriage. All sharp objects have been banned at court; when three women are found to have knitting needles the King sentences them to death for endangering Aurora's life. The Queen intervenes and persuades the King to spare their lives. The celebration resumes.

Aurora dances with the four suitors in turn, as she considers who she might marry. A mysterious cloaked guest arrives with a gift for Aurora: a spindle. Having never seen a sharp object before, Aurora dances with it, fascinated. She pricks her finger on the spindle and the hooded guest reveals herself as Carabosse, reiterating her curse before disappearing. To protect Aurora, the Lilac Fairy casts a spell over the palace and everyone in it, sending them
to sleep. At her command a forest covers the palace until the promised awakening.

English National Ballet dancers in Garland Waltz. Photo: Emily Nuttall.

ACT II

The Awakening

One hundred years have passed. Prince Désiré is hunting with members of his court. Feeling unhappy, he seeks solitude to reflect on the nature of love.

The Lilac Fairy appears and presents a vision of Princess Aurora to him. The Prince pleads to be guided to the place where she lies asleep. They journey together through the forest to the overgrown palace where, following a confrontation between good and evil, the Prince awakens Aurora with a kiss. The spell is broken and Carabosse and her attendants disappear.

The Wedding

The court celebrates the wedding of Princess Aurora and Prince Désiré. The guests include the fairytale characters Puss in Boots and the White Cat, as well as the Bluebird and Princess Florine, who all come to celebrate the happy couple. They're overjoyed when the Lilac Fairy arrives and gives her blessing to the marriage.

Awakening The Sleeping Beauty

Whether you're new to ballet or a lifelong fan, here's everything you need to know about this spellbinding production.

The Sleeping Beauty is one of ballet's most iconic and loved works. But beyond the fairytale we all know, is a world of enchanting choreography, rich history and technical artistry that's been captivating audiences for over a century.

Becoming a classic

The Sleeping Beauty was the first collaboration between composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and choreographer Marius Petipa. Commissioned by Ivan Vsevolozhsky, Director of the Imperial Theatres, the ballet was inspired by Charles Perrault's La Belle au bois dormant (The Sleeping Beauty). Vsevolozhsky imagined a lavish production set in the court of Louis XIV – one of the most visually opulent periods in French history. The original Beauty, structured in three acts and a prologue, was rich with spectacle, classical technique, and fairytale characters.

Premiering in St. Petersburg on January 15, 1890, The Sleeping Beauty was an instant success and became a fixture of the repertoire. After the 1917 Revolution, the work gained prominence more widely through the work of Russian emigrees. Ninette de Valois's 1946 production, starring the legendary Margot Fonteyn, cemented the ballet's place in British ballet history. Since then, The Sleeping Beauty has gone on to become one of the world's most widely performed ballets, with a range of different stagings and interpretations.

MacMillan's touchstone

In 1987, Sir Keneth MacMillan created his own production for American Ballet Theatre, inspired by the choreography of Petipa's original. As Lady MacMillan recounts: "he felt that The Sleeping Beauty was in the grand Russian tradition and should be faithful to that." He focused on sections including the Garland waltz, variations for Prince Desiré and Princess Aurora in Act II, the journey to the castle and the Awakening, and the Jewels divertissement. "If choreography already exists for a scene, one should keep it. When there are missing pieces in the choreographic jigsaw puzzle, then, of course, they have to be filled in" MacMillan said of his approach.

Throughout his life, MacMillan choreographed dozens of works, including six full-length ballets. Performed by leading ballet companies around the world, many of them gained the status of modern classics. His best-known works, such as Mayerling, Manon and Anastasia, are characterised by keen psychological insight, emotional intensity and drama. The Sleeping Beauty stands apart though – a significantly more traditional and light-hearted production.

Lady MacMillan explains this contrast: "[he] believed The Sleeping Beauty to be the most important ballet in the classical repertoire. He said he learned how to choreograph from it. He was inspired by the structure, and although he often chose not to use that structure in his own ballets, you could say it was his touchstone."

English National Ballet dancers as Fairies and Cavaliers.
Photo: Isabella Turolla

A gem of our repertoire

When joining the company, Artistic Director, Aaron S. Watkin, was surprised to discover MacMillan's lesser-known version: "I didn't even realise Kenneth had a Sleeping Beauty! People know him for Mayerling, Manon, Romeo and Juliet – but not this. We're the only company in the world currently performing this production, which gives it a unique and very special place in our repertoire." Originally mounted for American Ballet Theatre, MacMillan's The Sleeping Beauty was performed in the USA for 18 years, before moving across the Atlantic. First performed by English National Ballet in 2005, it remains a beloved fixture of the Company's programme.

Dressing Beauty

Tomatch the elegance of the choreography, MacMillan commissioned designer Nicholas Georgiadis to create the ballet's enchanting costumes. The two worked together on a number of productions across nearly four decades. In a 1987 interview with the New York Times, Georgiadis recounted the difficulty of designing costumes for a classic fairytale – managing audience expectations with historical accuracy and creative novelty, calling the production "one of the most difficult projects I've ever had to do".

Together, Georgiadis and MacMillan decided to set the ballet across the 17th and 18th

English National Ballet dancers as courtiers.
Photo: Emily Nuttall.

centuries. "There's more consistency than you could even get in a historical play," explained the designer. "I go from the Jacobean period to Charles I, 16 years later. Then in the third act, 100 years later, I move into the 18th century." Among his inspirations were painters Van Dyck and Tiepolo. The only character who breaks from the period is the evil fairy Carabosse, styled to resemble Queen Elizabeth I, with striking red hair, high forehead, and elaborate ruff.

Recreating the magic

At English National Ballet, Production Costume Manager, Gerry Tiernan, has worked on The Sleeping Beauty since its initial staging. "Making the costumes from scratch was no small feat – it takes about three weeks to create a single tutu." But sourcing the right materials was even harder. The costumes were all originally sewn in England, but in the 18 years between the American premiere and our staging, many of the original suppliers were no longer around. "Many of the costumes were designed in unusual shades" Tiernan explains, "so it was difficult to find matching fabrics. We had to dye the netting for the tutus in-house to get the right look."

The Sleeping Beauty features a huge cast, especially in its group scenes. Each

ensemble, from Mazurka couples to Garland Waltz, Fairy Cavaliers to court ladies, needs its own styling adding up to around 130 costumes per cast – plus wigs, shoes, and even prosthetics. It's a production of grand scale, unmatched in our repertoire.

Setting the scene

For the original staging, Georgiadis designed both costumes and sets. However, as Lady MacMillan explains, "it was felt that they weren't really appropriate for British audiences who expect something grander, so Peter Farmer was brought into to re-design them. Peter had a wealth of experience in designing beautiful sets and was well respected in the industry. He understood the intricacies of designing sets that, although visually striking, can be easily put up, stored and moved around, which is imperative when a production is going on tour. I'm delighted with his beautiful designs, as I feel they are sympathetic to the production and fit perfectly with the costumes."

Transforming tradition

The fairytale of The Sleeping Beauty has enchanted audiences for centuries, and in this production Watkin introduces some subtle changes to make it more accessible for today's audience.

"One of the first things I spoke about with Lady MacMillan," he explains, "was editing the ballet slightly to shorten it, without detracting from the incredible story and technique of the piece. We wanted to make it more resonant for modern audiences who might not be familiar with ballet. It's traditionally done in three acts, which we have cut down to two, divided into four scenes." Following the edits, Act I will consist of the original Prologue and Act I, and Act II will consist of original Acts II and III.

"This version is the result of truly collaborative effort", adds Lady MacMillan. "Aaron S. Watkin and Maria Seletskaya [English National Ballet's Music Director] involved the ballet staff - choreologists and coaches, as well as the production teams – costumes and sets. The entire work has been notated by the Benesh Notation which has meant that the edits could be made seamlessly. My hope is that the magic of this Sleeping Beauty will be appreciated by ballet aficionados, audiences new to classical Ballet, and also the very young - the loyal supporters of the future."

This careful restructuring is part of Watkin's broader vision. "I'm hugely passionate about classical ballet and I really want to contribute to its longevity. It's really important for us to perform these timeless pieces, but find ways to make them more relatable for today's audiences, so that they can be enjoyed for generations to come."

Where technique takes centre stage

With its lavish design, soaring score and intricate choreography, The Sleeping Beauty offers audiences plenty to enjoy. For the dancers, the piece is a serious test of skill and stamina: "it is one of the hardest technical full-length classical ballets to dance," Watkin explains.

> **My hope is that audiences seeing this production will experience first-hand just how extraordinary classical ballet can be.**

"It's probably the purest classical work you can find", he adds. "The challenge is to illustrate pure classical ballet without any affectations, really emphasising the clarity and precision of the movement. This is especially true of the English style of ballet."

The Sleeping Beauty has been casting its spell for over a hundred years and will undoubtedly continue to do so for many years to come.

Composing a Fairytale

Lavish, lyrical, and filledwith drama, the music ofTheSleeping Beauty is key to its fairytale grandeur. Read on to explore the fascinating story behind Tchaikovsky's composition and the creative partnership that brought the score to life.

The Sleeping Beauty was commissioned by Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the director of Imperial Theatres in Russia. A man of many talents, he sketched costumes and designed sets, and wrote libretti (storylines) to many ballets, including this one. Alongside his artistic prowess, Vsevolozhsky had an eye for talent – for The Sleeping Beauty, he brought together two major creative forces of the era: the Imperial Theatres' Ballet Master Marius Petipa, and composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky.
By that time, Tchaikovsky has already gained wide acclaim both domestically and internationally, going on triumphant tours around Europe to present his symphonies and operas. However, he was not an obvious choice for this particular project. Before The Sleeping Beauty, he had only composed one ballet – Swan Lake. At the time, the ballet received a poor reception, prompting Tchaikovsky to turn his back on ballet music for over a decade.

Eventually, he decided to return to dance, enthused by Vsevolozhsky's commission asking for music "in the style of Louis XIV". Tchaikovsky found the story "extremely likeable and poetic" and responded "I want to tell you at once that it's impossible to describe how charmed and captivated I am. It suits me perfectly, and I couldn't want anything better than to write music for it."

The creative process

After some delays due to his focus on finishing other compositions, Tchaikovsky worked closely with Petipa. Over several months, the choreographer provided him with detailed requirements and instructions as to what he needed for the music, and the composer entered an intensely creative period.

Tchaikovsky's letters and diaries reveal that the music often flowed out of him ("wrote the whole entr'acte to the Sleep scene without effort") but was sometimes more difficult to bring together ("Wrote the big Adagio in the second act, which was hard work!!!"). Once it was written, he engrossed himself in the instrumentation of the ballet – writing the parts for the different instruments. "Congratulate me: Today I finished an enormous ballet", he wrote to a music critic at the end of the process, "These arms have raised an entire mountain".

Musical motifs

The score is one that is grand, symphonic and serves the storytelling perfectly. The libretto was based on an already well-known fairytale by Charles Perrault, and the story was enriched by including characters from Perrault's other stories. These included Bluebird and Puss in Boots.

At the heart of the music are musical motifs for the Lilac Fairy and Carabosse, which can be heard throughout the ballet.

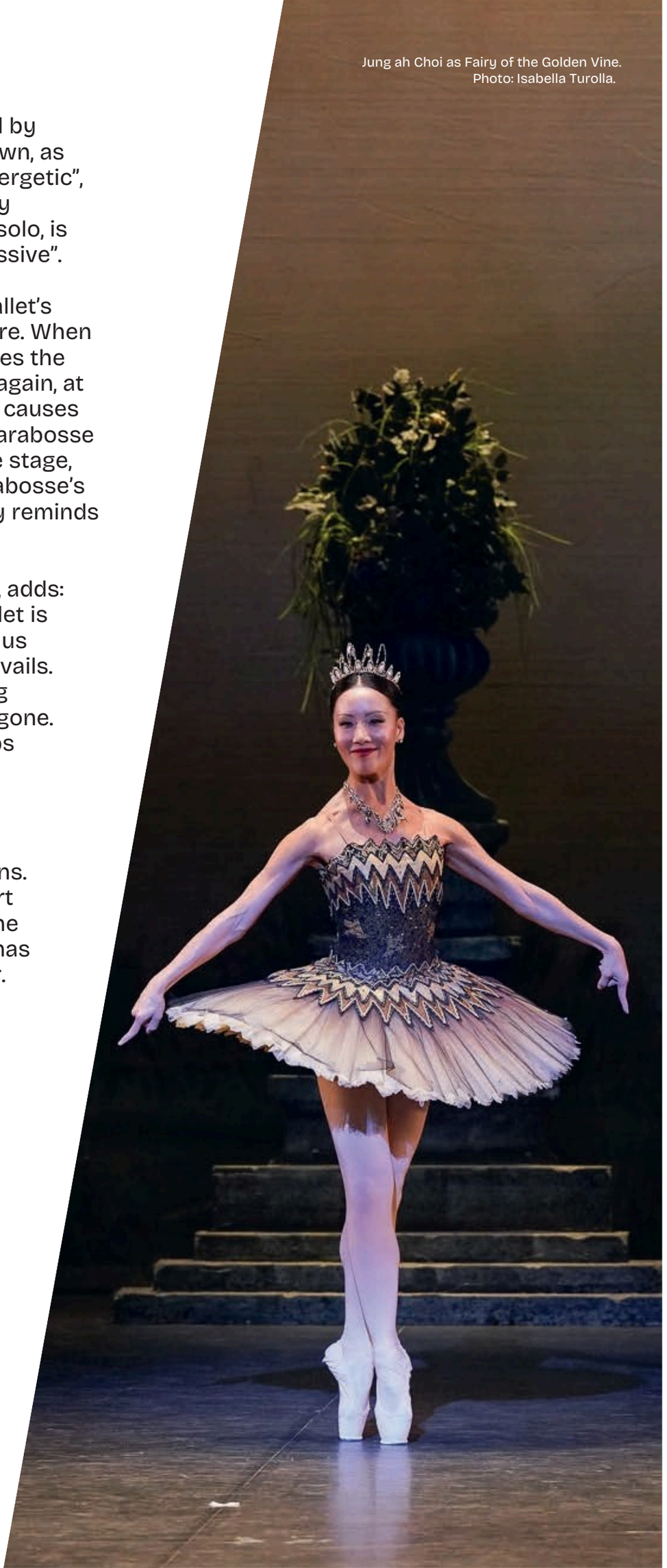
> **The two themes of conflicting forces of good versus evil, as represented by the Lilac Fairy and Carabosse, run throughout the music.**

The theme for Carabosse opens the entire score and has been described by Tchaikovsky's biographer, David Brown, as "patently violent and disruptively energetic", whereas the theme for the Lilac Fairy which follows, a flowing cor anglais solo, is described as "benign, sweetly expressive".

Tchaikovsky's appreciation of the ballet's drama is evident throughout his score. When Aurora pricks her finger, he introduces the opening of Carabosse's theme. And again, at the end of Act I, when the Lilac Fairy causes vines to grow over the palace and Carabosse has physically disappeared from the stage, her theme can be detected. It is Carabosse's moment of triumph and Tchaikovsky reminds the audience of this.

Maria Seletskaja, our Music Director, adds: "Given that the final chord of the ballet is in a minor key, the composer leaves us uncertain about which side truly prevails. I have always felt that the underlying thought is that Evil is never entirely gone. It is a devastating notion, but perhaps without Evil, how would we ever recognize Good?"

Tchaikovsky's music has, inevitably, been adapted for specific productions. Nevertheless, the rich, narrative heart of the score directs and enhances the work and reveals why Tchaikovsky has been proclaimed a genius composer. His works, touching, thrilling, and timeless, live on in the repertoires of countless music and dance companies around the world – including this one.



Jung ah Choi as Fairy of the Golden Vine.
Photo: Isabella Turolla.

The mesmerising mime

When The Sleeping Beauty premiered in 1890, mime played a much more significant role in ballet than it does today. The established language of gestures was used to tell the story, show emotions, and move the action along—all without saying a word.

135 years later, many of those original mime sequences are still performed in classical productions. But for today's audiences, the meaning behind the gestures isn't always obvious.

Here is a brief guide to some of the mime from The Sleeping Beauty: the conversation between the evil fairy, Carabosse, and the benevolent Lilac Fairy, which happens in Act I at Princess Aurora's christening.

Carabosse

"You listen to what I have to say"
Carabosse points to the Lilac Fairy, taps both of her ears twice and then gestures to herself. She then rolls the hands up her body lightly brushing from the throat up to the chin and out, as if the voice is coming up and out of the mouth, one hand followed by the other.

"The baby will grow up to have grace"
She points upstage to the left corner where the baby is in the crib, then measures the height of the child from toddler, to child, to fully grown adult. She then brushes down each arm from shoulder past the elbow to the wrist.

"The baby will grow up to be beautiful"
Carabosse repeats the first part, then circles her face with the back of her right hand.

"But wait!"
She points her left arm out to the King and Queen with her finger up to the ceiling, and walks around in circle, looking out to all the surrounding guests.

"The baby will grow up to have grace and beauty..."
She repeats the mime of grace and beauty...

"... but will prick her finger and die!"
... but then reveals a spindle and dramatically pricks her finger, swings her arms up and over the top of her head, ending with her arms crossed at the wrist in front of her waist with hands in tight fists.

Then Carabosse laughs dramatically using her whole body.

James Streeter as Carabosse. Photo: Laurent Liotardo.

Lilac Fairy's response

The Lilac Fairy steps forwards towards Carabosse and bows to her, respectfully. **"I love the baby. You want to kill her. Why?"** The Lilac Fairy gestures to herself, crosses both hands over her heart and points to the baby. Then she points to Carabosse and stabs herself in the chest. She opens her arms with her palms to the ceiling and shakes her head as though to ask a question.

"Wait! You listen to what I have to say"

She points to Carabosse, taps both of her ears twice, gestures to herself and repeats the mime for speak as demonstrated by Carabosse.

"The baby will prick her finger"

She points over to the crib and pricks her finger with an imaginary spindle.

Carabosse comes in and mimes "Die!" as before.

"Die... she will not"

The Lilac Fairy responds to Carabosse with the mime for "die" - closed fists crossed at the wrist at waist height – then steps back, shakes her head and gently sweeps her arms open with her palms facing down.

"The baby will prick her finger and go to sleep"

She points to the crib, pricks her finger and then lays her head on an imaginary pillow created by her arms.

"From over there will come a handsome prince who will kiss and save her."

Gesturing to the distance and then onto the stage, the Lilac Fairy faces the audience, gestures "one" and then circles the back of her face to signify "handsome". She blows a kiss then reaches to the ground with both hands and gestures upward, as if beauty will rise up.

"Go away!" (to Carabosse)

She then turns her back on Carabosse and flicks up her hand to dismiss her.

Artistic Director

Aaron S. Watkin

Born in Canada, Aaron S. Watkin graduated from the National Ballet School of Canada in 1988 and went on to enjoy a full career in dance, beginning with leading classical companies including National Ballet of Canada, English National Ballet and Dutch National Ballet, where he worked his way up from Corps de Ballet to the rank of Soloist. He was then invited by world-renowned choreographer William Forsythe to become a Principal Dancer with Ballett Frankfurt; following this, Watkin went on to join Nacho Duato's National Dance Company of Spain.

In 2002, Watkin was appointed Associate Artistic Director to Víctor Ullate Ballet in Madrid, Spain. Watkin was a Choreographic Assistant to William Forsythe, in charge of staging his ballets on dance companies throughout the world, including Kirov Ballet, Paris Opera and Dutch National Ballet, among others. Watkin was Artistic Associate Director of the annual Dance For Life AIDS Benefit Galas at the Cirque Royal Theatre in Brussels, Belgium. In 2006, Watkin was appointed Artistic Director of the Semperoper Ballett. During his seventeen-year tenure with the company, he created numerous classical full-length productions including The Sleeping Beauty, La Bayadère, Swan Lake, The Nutcracker (together with Prof. Jason Beechey) and his own creation of Don Quixote.

In August 2023, Aaron S. Watkin assumed the role of Artistic Director of English National Ballet. Alongside Arielle Smith, he has choreographed English National Ballet's new Nutcracker in 2024.

Creatives

Kenneth MacMillan
Choreography

Birthplace
Dunfermline, Scotland
(1929 – 1992)
Training
Sadler's Wells (now Royal Ballet) School
Affiliations
Dancer with Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet; Sadler's Wells Ballet at Covent Garden; Director of Deutsche Oper Ballet, Berlin (1966-1969); Artistic Director of The Royal Ballet (1970-1977); Principal Choreographer of The Royal Ballet; Associate Director of American Ballet Theatre; Artistic Associate of American Ballet Theatre and Houston Ballet
Created works
Somnambulism; Dances Concertantes; The Burrow; Le Baiser de la fée; The Invitation; The Rite of Spring; Las Hermanas; Romeo & Juliet; Song of the Earth; Concerto; Anastasia; Manon; Elite Syncopations; Requiem; My Brother, My Sisters; La Fin du jour; Mayerling; Isadora; Gloria; The Sleeping Beauty; Valley of Shadows; The Prince of the Pagodas; Winter Dreams; The Judas Tree and Carousel

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Music

Birthplace
Kamski-Votkinsk, Russia (1840 – St. Petersburg, Russia 1893)
Training
Qualified as a lawyer in St. Petersburg
Affiliations
Resigned his government post in 1862, Moscow Conservatoire (teacher), Composer and conductor (Russia, Europe, USA)
Created works
Operas including Eugene Onegin, The Queen of Spades. Ballets including Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker
Other info
Recipient of Order of Vladimir (1884), Member of the Académie Francaise (1892), Honorary Doctorate in Music from Cambridge University (1892)

Nicholas Georgiadis
Costume Design

Birthplace
Athens, Greece
(1923 – 2001)
Training
Slade School of Fine Art, London
Affiliations
Royal Opera House, La Scala, Paris Opera, National Ballet of Canada, Zurich Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Frankfurt Opera, Greek National Opera, Royal Court Theatre and The Old Vic.
Created work
Designs for ballet include Danses Concertantes; Romeo & Juliet; Manon; Mayerling and The Prince of the Pagodas for Kenneth MacMillan. Swan Lake; The Nutcracker and The Sleeping Beauty for Rudolf Nureyev.