

**“MAGNIFICENT AND TERRIFIC AND DIABOLICAL”:  
RECONSTRUCTING ROMANTICISM IN *ROBERT LE DIABLE*  
(ABSTRACT)**

by

**Karen Eliot and Valarie Mockabee**

“It was magnificent and terrific and diabolical and enchanting and everything else fine... The diabolical music and the dead rising from their tombs and the terrible darkness and the strange dance unite to form a stage effect almost unrivalled.”<sup>1</sup> Such was the judgement of one young American observer—soon to become Mrs. Henry W. Longfellow—who witnessed a performance at the Paris Opéra of one of the most popular opera productions of its day, Giacomo Meyerbeer's 1831 *Robert le Diable*. If dance history texts tend to refer only in passing to the ballet of the “lapsed nuns”—citing it as a precursor to the much more well-known ballet, *La Sylphide* (1832)<sup>2</sup>—the “Ballet of the Nuns” in Act 3 of the opera clearly left its imprint on audiences of the nineteenth century. Choreographed by Filippo Taglioni, the ballet featured daughter Marie Taglioni as the spectral abbess Héléna: it was a ballet which presaged the quintessential elements of Romanticism, and it was performed by a ballerina whose signature style and technique were to transform forever the way ballet is viewed, idealized, taught and choreographed.

This project to reconstruct the notated ballet from Act 3 of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*, as notated by Ann Hutchinson Guest in 1985, aligns notation, dance history and ballet technique in an effort to determine stylistic, aesthetic and technical details of Romanticism. What was it about this so-called first of the “white ballets”<sup>3</sup> that so electrified audiences and left such an indelible memory? Further, what can be uncovered through notation that might enable dance historians to come closer to a kinesthetic understanding of the Romantic ballet? How can we use notation to teach our students and ourselves history through the body?

Collaborators Karen Eliot and Valarie Mockabee will present their reconstruction of “The Ballet of the Nuns” as performed by a group of ballet students from the Ohio State University Department of Dance, in video and lecture format. Eliot brings her eight years of teaching ballet and dance history at OSU to this project, while Mockabee contributes her six years of teaching ballet, notation and repertory. This joint research project is designed to enable students to combine learning in many areas of dance at once: ballet technique, Labanotation and dance history are integrated into one holistic experience. The project to reconstruct *Robert le Diable* serves to model an interdisciplinary teaching and learning forum which provides ourselves and our students with a deeper and more embodied understanding of the history of classical ballet.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Guest, Ivor. *The Romantic Ballet in Paris*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966, 112.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Au for example describes the relationship of the two works in this way: “The scenario of *La Sylphide* was written by the tenor Adolphe Nourrit, who had played opposite Marie Taglioni in Giacomo Meyerbeer’s opera. . . . Although Nourrit wrote the scenario while the opera was still being rehearsed, he may have been influenced by this scene [of the dead nuns] which took place in the mysterious moonlit atmosphere of a ruined cloister.” See, Au, Susan. *Ballet & Modern Dance*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988, 49.

<sup>3</sup> See Knud Arne Jurgensen’s “Historical Background” in Guest, Ann Hutchinson and Knud Arne Jurgensen, eds. *Robert le Diable: The Ballet of the Nuns*. Language of Dance, No. 7. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1997, 5.