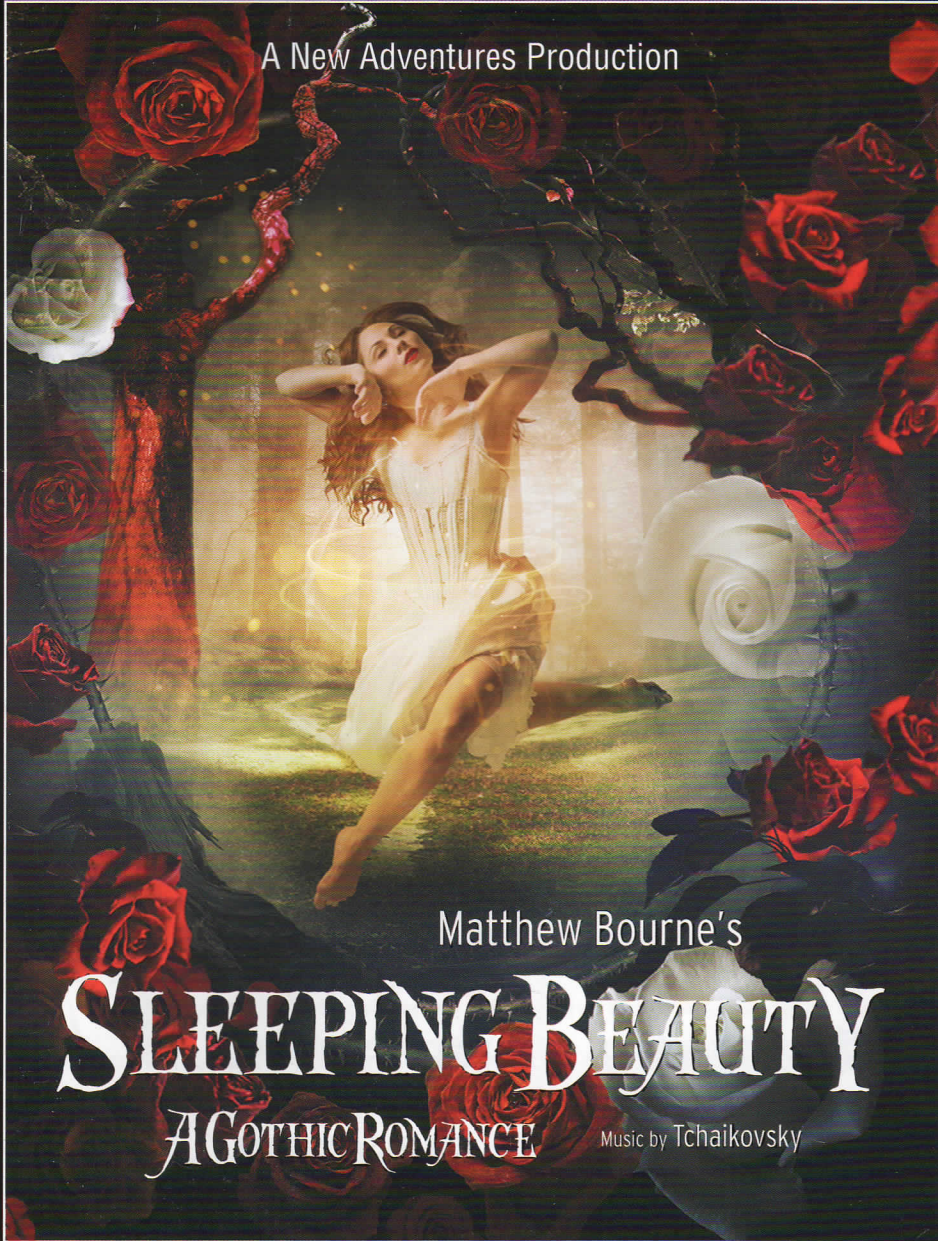


# CENTERSTAGE

DES MOINES CIVIC CENTER

A New Adventures Production



Matthew Bourne's


## SLEEPING BEAUTY

A GOTHIC ROMANCE

Music by Tchaikovsky

 **DES MOINES**  
PERFORMING ARTS

*Willis* BROADWAY SERIES  
AUTO CAMPUS



Matthew Bourne's  
**SLEEPING  
BEAUTY**

**The love story  
of a century**

By Gerard Raymond

**E**ven before the curtain rises on *Matthew Bourne's Sleeping Beauty*, you can be certain that his version of the famous Tchaikovsky ballet will be unlike any other; the English director and choreographer has a special knack for reimagining ballet classics. In his best-known 1995 creation, *Swan Lake*, the traditional corps de ballet of graceful ballerinas was replaced by a menacing ensemble of virile male dancers. A previous reinterpretation of yet another Tchaikovsky classic, *The Nutcracker*, cheekily relocated the setting of the perennial Christmas favorite to a Dickensian orphanage, and his version of Prokofiev's *Cinderella* was set in wartime London during the Blitz. "I am looking to tell a modern story to a wide range of audiences – ballet fans, theatergoers and cinema goers – and I set myself the task to try to tell a story that doesn't require any prior knowledge," says Bourne, describing his particular hybrid style of ballet and musical theater.

Audiences may have some memories of *Sleeping Beauty*, of



course – if not the traditional Tchaikovsky and Petipa ballet or the various versions of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French fairy tale on which it was based, then certainly from the beloved 1959 Walt Disney animated movie classic. Bourne, however, has created his own gothic romantic fantasy. “Tchaikovsky’s score is very melodic and beautiful, and has a darker side to it as well, but I had always been a little put off by the story,” says Bourne. For one thing, he explains, the love story in the original ballet is rather insipid: After a hundred-year sleep – the result of a curse laid at birth by an evil fairy queen – the princess Aurora awakes, meets this total stranger and immediately falls in love. “In fact, Disney actually saw that flaw in the story as well,” notes Bourne. “In his movie, Aurora meets a young man in the forest, who she thinks is a commoner but is actually a prince, and they have a sort of romance before the curse happens. Our take on the story is that he is her childhood sweetheart – an unsuitable partner because he is the Royal gardener,” he continues. “But then we had the dilemma of how he stays alive for her when she wakes up. Disney did away with that, but nobody really notices this.”

Bourne resolved the problem of the plot’s century-long time lapse by having a fairy, Count Lilac in this version, endow the young suitor with supernatural powers through a bite in the neck. “It is a Gothic fairy story so I didn’t think it was too much of a stretch to go to a story with vampires in it,” he remarks. He’s not far off the mark, really, since *Dracula*, Bram Stoker’s seminal novel about the undead, was first published in 1897, just seven years after the St. Petersburg premiere of Tchaikovsky’s original ballet. In fact, by fully embracing

Aurora’s hundred-year coma, Bourne found the look and style of his production. His story begins with Aurora’s birth in 1890, the year the ballet premiered, and then moves forward 21 years to 1911, when the princess comes of age and succumbs to the curse. When she is eventually woken up, it is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. “Because Aurora crosses time from one era to the next, I see her as a forward-looking young woman – almost a woman of the future,” the director explains.

As some commenters have noted, Bourne’s version of *Sleeping Beauty* is something like *Downton Abbey* meets *Twilight*. Beyond tapping into trends in popular culture, Bourne also offers us his own dance history lesson in the course of the evening: variations on the original ballet, an evocation of Isadora Duncan and period dance crazes from the Edwardian era, and a contemporary segment that throbs with dynamic and confrontational movement. “It was very rewarding to have this enormous span of time to play with, and the dancers need to be very versatile to capture all the different styles,” he notes. “*Sleeping Beauty* is a rite of passage, as many of these stories are, and Aurora has to get through a lot of trials to get her love in the end. There is eventually a happy ending – I won’t give it away – but there are many twists and turns along the way!”



Matthew Bourne

Gerard Raymond writes about theater, film, travel and culture, and lives in New York City.