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A Fairy Tale Fit for a Princess...

Monaco has a history of nurturing ballet. Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo builds on that history to make a name of its own.

The great tradition of dance in Monaco only holds meaning when it recalls, above all, its devotion to the tradition of modernity. It is not a nostalgic hold on a glorious past, rather is diligently shrouded in the discovery of new expressions.

–H.R.H. the Princess of Hanover (Princess Caroline)

The name Monte Carlo conjures up grandeur, wealth, and sunshine on the Côte d'Azur. In the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, its casinos were the playgrounds of royalty and mega-rich magnates of the Industrial Revolution. But two world wars later, the principality languished.



Then Grace arrived.

Everyone knows the story of how she and Prince Rainier II of Monaco met, fell in love and married. It was so romantic, an American actress

becoming a real princess, an echo of one of her last films, *The Swan*. The young and beautiful couple had three beautiful children and set about returning the principality to its former glory. Tourism and Grand Prix races continued to help, but Her Serene Highness Princess Grace wanted to renew cultural life in Monaco as well. She was interested in ballet and Monaco's connection to the dance world with the company founded by dance impresario Serge Diaghilev in the early 20th century.

Diaghilev had created a ballet company consisting of some of the best dancers from Russia and in 1911 the company was presented under Diaghilev's own name, and its residence became Monte Carlo. For 20 years Diaghilev and his collaborators—some of the most



important writers, composers (Stravinsky) and painters (Picasso) of the day, not to mention the choreographers and dancers (Nijinsky)—set the international ballet fashion, but at his death in 1929 the company dissolved. In 1936 a new company emerged: the Ballet de Monte-Carlo, but by the early 1950s it, too, had folded.

Princess Grace wanted to bring this tradition back and hoped to create a dance company, even, at one point, asking George Balanchine to help, but she died in 1982 before she could fulfill that wish for her adopted homeland.

It was her daughter, Her Royal Highness the Princess of Hanover (Princess Caroline), who followed her mother's wishes and, in 1985, Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo was reestablished to become the official company of the Principality of Monaco. Harking back to its original founder, the company even rehearsed in the Diaghilev studio. But it was slow to find success.

Then, in 1992, gifted choreographer Jean-Christophe Maillot was invited by Princess Caroline to join the company as an advisor, and the following year was appointed director-choreographer. The principality may have the feeling of a fairy tale, but Maillot says Princess Caroline, who took ballet lessons from the age of 4 until her late teens, wanted the company to "put the accent on the creation, to show that, even in Monaco, we can dare a little."

The princess has complete trust in Maillot, who, over the past nearly two decades, has gone from strength to strength. In December 2000, the company inaugurated its first ballet season in the new Grimadi Forum, having



outgrown the Salle Garnier at the Monte-Carlo Opera. Today, the company of 50 dancers presents a season in Monte Carlo in addition to touring internationally. Princess Caroline sits as president on the eight-person board of the company and every year hosts a fund-raising gala. But she is not one to meddle in the day-to-day minutia of the company. "I think once you put the structure of the ballet on its tracks, then you have to let the people who are in charge artistically make the decisions and have total freedom to do it," Caroline told *Town and Country* magazine.

The repertoire of the company is eclectic. In addition to works by Folkine and Balanchine, Maillot added contemporary choreographers including Twyla Tharp, Karole Armitage and William Forsythe as well as his own pieces.



But perhaps most interesting is what Maillot does with the classical works, to which he brings a unique perspective.

"My job is to show you what you already know but to present it in a different point of view," says Maillot. This is certainly true of *Cinderella*, which the company is bringing to Orange County. Maillot has given to his interpretation of the story some new ideas that aren't expected, but will be thought-provoking. There may not be fairy godmothers on stage, but you might feel their presence none the less. The stepsisters may be beautiful: How might that affect the prince's choice of bride? Audiences will be enchanted.

Maillot told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that he wants even a lady of 50 or 60 years old in the audience to believe she could be *Cinderella*: "I think

it's a wonderful theatrical reality that for two hours you can believe that life can be like that."

Maybe fairy tales really do come true.



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