

Synopsis of *Giselle*

A Romantic era ballet in two acts

This performance is approximately two hours, including one 20-minute intermission.

Act I

The young Count Albrecht arrives at a small village with his attendant, Wilfred. Albrecht has been disguising himself as a peasant and visiting this village to court Giselle, a beautiful peasant girl. To conceal his royal identity, Albrecht hides his sword and other noble apparel in a cottage.

Today is the day of the village's Harvest Festival. Villagers begin their morning chores, including Giselle's mother, Bertha. She catches a young couple near her cottage—rumor has it they may soon get engaged. A gamekeeper named Hilarion greets Bertha. Hilarion has long been in love with Giselle, and Bertha approves of the match. As the villagers disperse, Wilfred and Albrecht return. Wilfred tries to dissuade Albrecht from courting Giselle, but to no avail.

Giselle is coy and shy, but she truly loves Albrecht. When Albrecht comes to see her, she finds a nearby daisy and plucks its petals to determine if Albrecht loves her in return. "He loves me, he loves me not." According to the daisy, Albrecht does not love her—but Albrecht secretly plucks an extra petal to put the game in his favor and tells Giselle that she must have counted wrong the first time. They dance to celebrate their love.

Hilarion returns to the cottage and sees Giselle and Albrecht together. Angry at his rival, Hilarion professes his love for Giselle, but he is rejected. The two men fight. Hilarion grabs his knife, and Albrecht reaches for where his sword would be—something only a nobleman would carry. Hilarion notices this and lowers his blade, but he leaves deeply suspicious of Albrecht.

The other villagers arrive at the cottage, and Giselle introduces Albrecht as her beau. Giselle loves to dance, but her heart is weak. When Bertha returns and finds Giselle dancing, she pleads with her daughter to stop. Bertha reminds Giselle that her health is at risk. Too much excitement could strain Giselle's heart and kill her. Bertha escorts Giselle back into their cottage to rest. Albrecht is left outside, where he hears the horns of an approaching hunting party. Wilfred ushers Albrecht towards the forest to hide. Hilarion decides to investigate Albrecht's suspicious behavior by breaking into Albrecht's cottage.

The peasants greet the visiting hunting party, which includes the Duke and his beautiful daughter, Bathilde. Bertha and Giselle offer the nobles drinks. Giselle and Bathilde talk, finding they have much in common. They are both in love, and Bathilde tells Giselle she is engaged. Bathilde is charmed by Giselle and gives her a beautiful necklace. Giselle gets the young couple from her village to dance for Bathilde, as well as some of her other village friends.

The hunting party will move on, but Bathilde wants to stay and talk with her new friend Giselle. The Duke leaves a horn at the cottage to blow to summon the party back when Bathilde is ready to rejoin them. Bertha and Giselle welcome Bathilde into their cottage. Meanwhile, Hilarion has found a nobleman's sword in Albrecht's cottage. He runs to Giselle's door to share his discovery, but the hunting horn catches his eye. Hilarion realizes it carries the same royal crest as Albrecht's sword. Hilarion decides to wait for the Harvest Festival to begin so he can expose Albrecht in front of the whole village.

The peasants call Giselle out of her house to crown her Harvest Queen. Albrecht has returned for the celebration. At the height of the party, Albrecht swears his love for Giselle, but Hilarion bursts in and separates them. He shows Giselle the sword and blows the hunting horn, insisting that Albrecht is really a nobleman.

The hunting party returns, and Bathilde and Bertha come out of Giselle's cottage. Bathilde recognizes Albrecht and takes his arm. She asks why he is dressed as a peasant, and he passes it all off as a joke. Albrecht can no longer conceal his identity from the village. Not only is Albrecht a Duke, but he is also engaged—to Bathilde!

Giselle is distraught. The shock is too much for her weak heart. She becomes hysterical—the ballet's famous "mad scene." She rips Bathilde's necklace off and her hair comes undone. She grabs Albrecht's sword from Hilarion and waves it wildly, even stabbing herself before Hilarion can rip the sword away. Heartbroken, Giselle finally collapses into Albrecht's arms and dies.

Intermission

Act II

Bertha and Hilarion have buried Giselle, and they are mourning at her grave. Because of the violent and tragic circumstances surrounding her death, she has been buried deep in the forest on unhallowed ground. Night falls, and Hilarion sees glimpses of ghosts in the forest. He warns Bertha that they must leave, and they hurry away.

The Queen of the Willis, Myrtha, arrives, summoning her sisters. The Willis are the ghosts of young women who were betrayed by their lovers. Many of the Willis were left at the altar, and all died jilted in some way. None can rest in peace. Instead, they haunt the forest at night, taking revenge on any man they find by forcing him to dance until he dies of exhaustion. Myrtha beckons Giselle's spirit to join their sisterhood.

Albrecht, full of guilt and remorse, arrives at the gravesite to mourn. He lays lilies at the grave and senses Giselle's ghost. She comes out to dance with him. Though for moments he can hold her, she keeps slipping away into vapor. He chases her ghost into the woods, determined to beg her forgiveness.

Hilarion has been captured by the Willis. They dance him towards Giselle's grave, but nothing can save him now. Led by the ruthless Myrtha, the Willis keep Hilarion dancing until he finally dies.

The Willis find Albrecht in the forest and sentence him to the same fate. Giselle still loves Albrecht deeply, so she pleads with Myrtha to spare his life. Unfortunately, Myrtha and the rest of the Willis are unmoved. Giselle knows if she takes part in Albrecht's death, she will have to join the Willis, cursed to haunt the forest forever. Instead, to save his life, she decides to dance with Albrecht and share the burden of the Willis curse. As the day breaks, the Willis disappear, as well as Giselle, who can now rest in peace. Albrecht, left alone in the forest, is humbled by Giselle's tremendous act of forgiveness and heartbroken as he realizes he has lost his one true love.