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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## Majestic Return - Significance of this Revival

Opera Bastille, 11.12.2025 [ENA]

This autumn the Paris Opera Ballet at the Opera Bastille marks the return of Notre-Dame de Paris, choreographed by Roland Petit — a cornerstone of mid-20th-century narrative ballet. First created for the Paris Opera in 1965, this production has become a landmark work in the company’s repertoire, blending theatrical drama, neoclassical technique, and a vivid visual and aural palette.

In re-staging this ballet, the company not only honors its own heritage but also deliberately places a work of emotional and historical weight at the heart of the 2025 season — testifying to its confidence in both dancers and production values. For audiences, this revival offers a powerful opportunity to rediscover a ballet that marries classical discipline with dramatic storytelling, enriched by a century-old literary legacy and mid-century choreographic brilliance.

Roland Petit’s choreographic language for Notre-Dame de Paris is a masterful fusion: it speaks the refined vocabulary of neoclassical ballet while embracing the theatricality and expressiveness of music-hall and dramatic narrative. This dual nature allows dancers to inhabit fully the souls of their characters — from the grotesque loneliness of the hunchback, to the fiery sensuality of the bohemian, to the religious torment of the priest, to the surface charm (or moral ambiguity) of the officer. The drama flows convincingly: each movement becomes expressive — not just technical — enabling the audience to grasp the emotional undercurrents of love, desire, fear, cruelty, hope, and tragedy.

The ballet transforms the stage into a living canvas of human longing and despair, consistent with the depth and darkness of the original literary source. The score by Maurice Jarre underpins the ballet’s emotional landscape with striking power. Rich in texture and vivid in timbre, Jarre’s music evokes a wide sound-world: at times reminiscent of the impressionistic colors of Debussy, at others the visceral rhythms of Stravinsky, Varèse or Messiaen. Such a musical backbone provides not only accompaniment but psychological depth to the narrative: the murmurings of the city, the clang of bells, the urgency of flight, the silence of fear, the roar of the mob.

In concert with the choreography, the music elevates each scene — from the grotesque revelry of the “Feast of Fools” to the intimate tenderness between unlikely lovers, to the terrifying mob and the tragic denouement. The result: a ballet score that feels cinematic in scope and operatic in its emotional reach. Visual design is integral to this production’s impact. Sets by René Allio evoke the grimy, labyrinthine

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streets of 15th-century Paris, but also the imposing spiritual grandeur of the cathedral — a duality that reflects the story’s tension between sacred and profane, compassion and cruelty.

Costumes by Yves Saint Laurent are nothing short of inspired. The designer’s own directive — to make them “as colourful as the stained glass windows of a cathedral” — yields a palette both luminous and symbolic. At the start, the corps de ballet appears in multicolour, reflecting the chaotic vitality of the masses; as the drama deepens, fiery reds echo desire and inner turmoil; finally, black swathes speak to doom, mourning and destruction as the murderous mob overtakes the cathedral.

Lighting design (credited to Jean-Michel Désiré) further amplifies the emotional journey — shadows deepen as night descends, the cathedral’s sanctuary glows, and the final betrayal and tragedy unfold under stark, harsh illumination. The result is a total theatre — a vivid immersion in mood, atmosphere, and storytelling. What elevates Notre-Dame de Paris above many narrative ballets is its uncompromising emotional honesty. It does not shy away from the darker shades of human nature — from cruelty to obsession, from social cruelty (mockery of the hunchback) to institutional betrayal, from love’s fleeting sweetness to irreversible tragedy.

The ballet’s 13 scenes sequentially build this tension: the initial mockery of Quasimodo at the “Feast of Fools,” his silent devotion to Frolo, the entrance of Esmeralda, the pursuit through the streets, the betrayal by Phoebus, the violent repression of the mob — culminating in a brutal, heartbreaking finale. For a ballet audience, this is not just beautiful movement — this is living theatre: the stage becomes a mirror of society’s capacity for both compassion and cruelty, of love’s fragility, of innocence destroyed. The tragic arc is Shakespearean in its gravity, yet rendered through the unique medium of dance. In this sense, the ballet becomes more than entertainment: it becomes a modern morality play, powerful and deeply affecting.

As someone who deeply values both classical technique and emotionally rich storytelling in dance, I find this revival of Notre-Dame de Paris to be among the most promising of the season. The combination of Petit’s dramatic choreographic voice, Jarre’s lush yet haunting score, Saint Laurent’s vivid costumes, and the full resources of the Paris Opera Ballet suggests a production of rare ambition and artistic integrity. What moves me most is the way the ballet embraces contrast — beauty and horror, love and despair, human kindness and monstrous cruelty — and does so through dance.

The tragic tale of Esmeralda, Quasimodo, Frolo, and Phoebus is more than a story; it is a testament to the power of dance to evoke empathy, to cast light on darkness, to demand emotional engagement.

In a contemporary world often numbed by spectacle or overwhelmed by speed, this ballet invites us to pause, to witness, to feel — and to remember that compassion, dignity, and humanity matter deeply. The 2025 revival of Notre-Dame de Paris at the Opéra Bastille represents one of the season’s most essential

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offerings.

It is a production of grandeur and subtlety, of technical excellence and emotional weight. For ballet lovers, it is a rare chance to see a mid-century masterpiece reanimated at full scale. For first-time attendees, it is a dramatic, sensory introduction to the power of narrative ballet.

In short: this is not merely a performance — it is a resounding artistic statement. I wholeheartedly encourage attendance, and I expect that this staging will leave a lasting mark on all who witness it.

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