

Giselle

AUDIENCE GUIDE

Step back in time to experience Michael Pink's *Giselle*, a classical favorite reimaged into the haunting setting of war-torn Europe. This thought-provoking iteration features a musical arrangement by Gavin Sutherland on Adolphe Adam's iconic score as well as modern choreography from Michael Pink with respect to Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot's original choreography.

Giselle asks questions about life, death, and forgiveness between people in opposing hierarchies; therefore, the production has been re-set in countless ways. For example, choreographers Mats Ek placed *Giselle* in a psychiatric facility, Akram Khan in a factory, and Frederic Franklin in 1840s Creole Louisiana.

Michael Pink's *Giselle* first premiered at England's Northern Ballet Theater in 1996. It aimed to preserve the traditional choreography while transferring the story to a European ghetto during World War II. Even in this recognizable setting, Pink purposely keeps the soldiers' uniforms nondescript, beckoning the audience to contemplate how this event reoccurs throughout history and how we must acknowledge our past to ever move forward.

This production is rated 16+ due to scenes of gun violence and other potentially distressing imagery.



Lahna Vanderbush. Photo Rachel Malehorn.

Giselle

HISTORY & PARTNERSHIPS

Giselle came from a period of romantic ballets, an early 19th-century style characterized by a focus on emotion, storytelling, everyday life, and supernatural themes. Giselle also emerged in a post-French Revolution society, meaning that anti-nobility themes were popular to portray in art.

The first production of Giselle was staged in Paris in 1841, and the show itself was designed for the Italian ballerina Carlotta Grisi. The plot follows a combination of a prose passage in *De l'Allemagne* by Heinrich Heine alongside the poem *Fantomes* by Victor Hugo. In this first iteration, the story is set in the German Middle Ages and follows a wealthy married nobleman Albrecht as he courts the naïve peasant Giselle.

Giselle saw great success in a revival by Marius Petipa in 1884 and from there has continued to be reimaged with new themes and backdrops.

Milwaukee Ballet is proud to partner with Violins of Hope—Wisconsin and Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra for this production of Giselle.

Violins of Hope is an organization that has collected instruments owned and played during the Holocaust, which they are bringing to the Wisconsin community for a five-month residency of educational and cultural programs, exhibits, and performances from September 2025 to January 2026. A violin from this collection will appear onstage during Milwaukee Ballet's upcoming performance.

Learn more at <https://violinsofhopewisconsin.org/>



Giselle

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

A searchlight scans the barricade for movement as a figure dashes through the shadows. **Hilarion**, a prisoner in the ghetto, has returned with food, which he leaves at **Giselle's** doorstep.

As the morning dawns, **the community** faces another day, finding little joys within their horrific environment. Concerned for her daughter's health and safety, Giselle's mother **Berthe** goes out alone as Giselle stays home to work on embroidery that provides for her family.

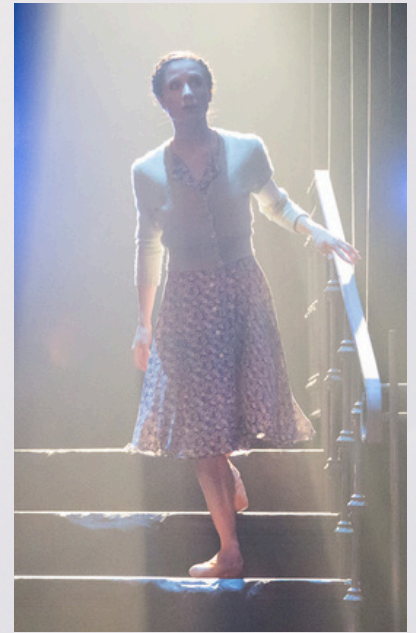
Albrecht, a guard outside the ghetto, has noticed Giselle, and discards his uniform for shabby clothes that match what the community is wearing. Albrecht finds Giselle and gifts her a necklace, leading her to fall for this newcomer.

Hilarion, bewildered by this relationship, grows suspicious of Albrecht. Upon seeing the necklace, Hilarion fights Albrecht, while street musicians play to divert unwanted attention from **the soldiers**.

Giselle's mother is concerned to see her sickly daughter dancing and persuades her to rest. As the antagonism grows between Albrecht and Hilarion, a bugle call signals that guards are on their way to check identity papers. Albrecht slips out of sight before they arrive.

The community is herded together for a search by guards in preparation for the arrival of **Bathilde**, the daughter of a high-ranking soldier—and Albrecht's fiancée. Among the shabby stalls and dilapidated buildings, the only thing that catches Bathilde's eye is Giselle's embroidery and necklace. Bathilde makes Giselle entertain her through dancing, but eventually moves on.

The community attempts to restore normalcy and continues their music after Bathilde's departure. However, Albrecht's concealed uniform is discovered and Hilarion's suspicions are proved correct. His betrayal devastates the weak Giselle, leading to her death.



Luz San Miguel. Photos Nathaniel Davauer and Mark Frohna.

Giselle

SYNOPSIS



ACT II

With no time to mourn the death of Giselle, the community is separated from their belongings and executed by a firing squad. Their home, once full of life and music, now stands as a mass grave for the innocent souls of the ghetto.



Albrecht's guilt over the death of Giselle moves him to return to the community, only to find the bodies of the individuals who once populated it. Albrecht breaks down as his actions overwhelm him, and at this moment, the spirits of the murdered community—the **Wilis**—return to haunt him.



Albrecht is frightened as he begins to understand that these souls died due to his actions. His only hope against the vengeful souls is the love he had for Giselle, whose spirit protects him.

Dawn breaks. Albrecht has survived the night. Now, he faces the consequences of his actions: living with his choices and deciding how he must move forward.

Giselle

CHARACTERS



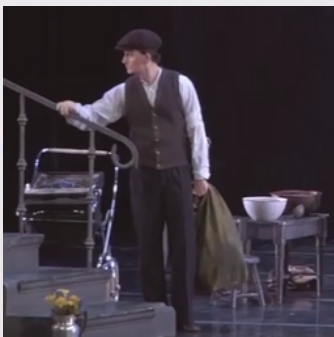
Giselle

A naive and sweet girl from the ghetto, susceptible to physical and emotional heartache.



Albrecht

The persistent and duplicitous soldier engaged to Bathilde but in love with Giselle.



Hilarion

Giselle's headstrong protector who is madly in love with her.



Berthe

Giselle's mother and caregiver who looks out for her daughter above all else.



Bathilde

Albrecht's fiancée and the daughter of an affluent soldier.



The Community/ The Wilis

The friends and family who live and die alongside Giselle.