

MARIE & EMMA

Amid the 19th-century artifice and seduction of the Paris Opera, two women redefine a spectacle to create an art.

MARIE & EMMA is a documentary about an extraordinary chapter in the history of ballet. In 1832, Marie Taglioni rises above her physical limitations to create the ethereal Romantic image of the ballerina, astounding the Parisian public by being the first to dance effortlessly en pointe. She becomes a celebrity and retires with a fortune. Her protégé, 20-year-old Emma Livry, is ballet's next big star. Like Marie, she has the ability to transcend the physical and magically transport her audience. But Emma becomes most famous for a ballet whose story mirrors a real-life tragedy, one that stuns the dance world and marks the end of an era. MARIE & EMMA explores the rise and fall of these two ballerinas: their public triumph, personal suffering, and ultimate legacy.



MARIE & EMMA

Creative



Ben Pierce

Director
Producer
Designer

Ben Pierce is a television producer, designer, independent filmmaker, and dancer. His dance films have been featured at the San Francisco Dance Film Festival and in Christopher Wheeldon's productions. His latest film, *Metal Man*, is an official selection of the 2014 Mill Valley Film Festival. Ben's scenic and costume designs for both live performance and film include numerous collaborations with the San Francisco Ballet and Royal Danish Ballet. Prior to becoming an independent filmmaker, Ben studied film production at San Francisco State University and worked for six seasons producing and shooting feature stories for *SPARK*, the Emmy-winning KQED Public Television production showcasing the Bay Area arts scene. He then developed *BUZZ*, an arts program for KAET (Phoenix Arizona Public Television), for which he garnered a regional Emmy and a Cine Golden Eagle award. Ben danced with American Ballet Theater and with the San Francisco Ballet, where he was a Principal Dancer from 1996 to 2003. A career highlight for Ben was interpreting the role of Albrecht in *Giselle*, the Romantic era's most iconic ballet.



Claire Sheridan

Producer

Claire Sheridan is on the faculty at Saint Mary's College of California. She created the undergraduate dance program there, directed it for twenty years, and then founded LEAP—the national Bachelor of Arts degree program that serves professional dancers. Claire has produced more than 150 dance concerts and musical productions for university and professional theatre. She has also worked internationally as a guest teacher and lecturer for The Saint Petersburg Conservatory (Russia), Cambridge University (England), Charles University (Prague), The National Institute of Advanced Studies (India), and at academies and colleges in Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Palestine, Bosnia, Bangladesh, South Africa, and the Ukraine.



Muriel Maffre

Associate Producer

Muriel Maffre is Executive Director at the Museum of Performance + Design in San Francisco. Her extensive ballet career culminated at San Francisco Ballet where she was a Principal Dancer for 17 years. Since retiring from the stage, Muriel has been involved in dance education and public humanities, which included a Lecturer in Dance position at Stanford University 2009-2013. She is Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters (France), a Gold Medalist from the Paris First International Ballet Competition, and the recipient of two Isadora Duncan Awards for Outstanding Achievement in Individual Performance. She is a Graduate from the Paris Opera Ballet School and the Paris National Conservatory of Music (1st Prize, Honors). Muriel holds a B.A. in Performing Arts (honors) and an MA in Museum Studies.



MARIE & EMMA

Story

It is the Romantic Age in Paris, a time of profound social upheaval and radical ideas. There's a new and restless spirit in the air. A disenchanted public searches for a way to express its sense of yearning and passion, and in 1832, Marie Taglioni holds the key.

In a swirl of intrigue and glamour at the Paris Opera, Marie brilliantly embodies the Romantic Age through the art of ballet and becomes an international celebrity. Her protégé is Emma Livry.

Marie and Emma are unlikely stars. As a child, Marie is written off as “deformed” and told to give up dancing to become a dressmaker. Emma is the illegitimate daughter of an 18-year-old ballet girl and a French diplomat. Neither dancer is very pretty, which is an impediment to achieving success on the stage. Yet through pure determination and grueling physical training, they both rise to become icons of 19th-century beauty and spirituality.

It is Marie who first creates the ethereal image of the ballerina, with a white calf-length tulle skirt, bun at the nape of the neck, and the remarkable ability (required of every ballerina since) to dance effortlessly on the toes. Her fame is extraordinary; there are Taglioni caramels and paper dolls. Russian fans even take to cooking and eating one of her slippers after a performance.

Marie uses ballet technique to express human emotion, rather than to do tricks, and it is a revelation to the audience. However, after her retirement in 1847 and subsequent move to Italy, the standards of ballet at the Paris Opera begin to deteriorate. The hyper-focus on the ballerina means that male dancers, who are unable to compete with the magic of pointe, are reduced to mere *porteurs*. Ballet devolves into kitchy, erotic, and sensational attractions with females playing men's roles *en travesti*.

But then Emma arrives on the scene. Her first contract with the Opera is drawn up when she is only 16, and the choice of her debut role is courageous, even reckless. Emma will dance the lead in *La Sylphide*, Marie Taglioni's signature role. Other young dancers have already tried and failed in the part, but on October 19, 1858, amid much publicity and fanfare, a trembling Emma steps on the stage at the Paris Opera as the Sylph.



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Story

Her performance is a triumph. With her airborne elegance, Emma is not like the other dancers who are preoccupied with acrobatic stunts and provocative poses. She, like Taglioni, is an artist, and her debut inspires the public and gives new impetus to ballet in France. Marie immediately decides to return to Paris to coach Emma and choreograph a new ballet for her. *Le Papillon* (1860) casts Emma as a young woman who is changed into a butterfly by a wicked fairy. Attracted by a flaming torch, the butterfly burns its wings—and the spell is broken.

November 15, 1862: Emma warms up in the wings at the theater. When the moment comes, she shakes out her skirt for her entrance. The movement of air causes a gaslamp flame to reach out, and almost instantly she is enveloped in a column of fire. To the horror of the live audience, Emma runs across the stage, then falls to her knees to pray as others struggle to extinguish the flames. Out of modesty, she clasps the smoldering fabric of her costume to her torso; her thighs, waist, back, shoulders, and arms are extensively burned.

Emma is taken by stretcher to her home, where her frightful suffering lasts for months. While she fights for her life, a somber pall falls over Paris. Citizens express their grief by laying straw over the cobblestone streets around her house to buffer the noise of passing carriages. When Emma succumbs to her wounds on July 26, 1863, the Romantic Ballet era dies with her. She is 20 years old. Marie is devastated.

There is no dancer of any artistic stature to fill the void at the Opera. The Franco-Prussian war puts Paris under siege, and Marie Taglioni's investments are wiped out. To earn a living, Marie moves to London to teach social dance to children and society ladies. She dies in 1884 at age 80.

For Marie and Emma, it seems that their life's work was ended, if not lost, by a cruel twist of fate. But what is their legacy? What debt do today's ballet stars owe to these two 19th-century ballerinas? Did Emma die in vain?

Marie & Emma is a saga of politics, sex, transcendence, and courage. It offers hope to those who strive for excellence and wonder whether they'll have a lasting impact on the world.



Concept

The film opens with a reenactment of a key scene from the ballet *La Sylphide* at l'Opera Peletier in Paris. The year is 1832. In the title role is a ballerina portraying the world-renowned dancer, Marie Taglioni. A narrator sets the stage for our story as the camera captures the ballet from the dancer's perspective, similar to Hugo Nieberling's 1969 film, *Giselle*.

Each scene provides the setting for interviews and historical reenactments. As in a typical theater production, ballets are performed on the stage portion of the ground plan. Scenes that take place outside the theater (for example, in Emma Livry's apartment or a brasserie) have their own floor plans, furniture, and architectural details set up within the confines of the stage.

Shooting the entire film on a set like ours provides complete artistic control of the look and quality of the film from start to finish, similar to the Wim Wenders 2012 film, *Pina*, about the late modern choreographer Pina Bausch.