

HOUSTON BALLET

STANTON WELCH - ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

FOR RELEASE ON
JUNE 6, 2004

CONTACT: JOHANNA TSCHEBULL
SUSAN FERREIRA
713 535 3226

**HOUSTON BALLET CAPS ITS 2003-2004 SEASON WITH
SIR FREDERICK ASHTON'S COMIC MASTERPIECE
*LA FILLE MAL GARDÉE (THE WAYWARD DAUGHTER)***

**Houston Ballet Commemorates Great English Choreographer on the
100th Anniversary of His Birth**

Principal Sara Webb Dances Title Role in Houston and Australia

Houston, Texas -- From June 10 - 20, 2004, Houston Ballet will commemorate the centennial of the birth of Sir Frederick Ashton, one of Britain's greatest choreographers, with his glorious romantic comedy, **La Fille mal gardée**, hailed by *The New York Times* as "the most enchanting ballet in existence." (March 4, 2003) Set in the countryside in eighteenth century France, the ballet tells the story of Lise, a young maiden who must choose between the handsome, penniless farmer Colas and the wealthy simpleton Alain whom her meddling mama wishes her to marry. Audiences will delight in the witty choreography and host of colorful characters in this joyous celebration of love and life that is perfect for the entire family. **La Fille mal gardée** is a two-act comic extravaganza featuring a maypole dance, a clog-dancing widow, dancing chickens and a live pony on stage. The company will give seven performances of the ballet at Wortham Theater Center in downtown Houston.

"Ashton has a unique style of his own – which is understated, pure and humorous – that is a true accomplishment for dancers to be able to master," remarked Houston Ballet Artistic Director Stanton Welch. "It's a milestone for dancers to be able to dance the role of Lise and Colas in this work. **La Fille mal gardée** is Ashton's greatest and most popular full-length ballet. It's true

romantic comedy, and one of the few ballets that leaves you humming and singing along afterward.”

“It is impossible to imagine British ballet without Frederick Ashton,” observed the English dance critic John Percival. Sir Frederick Ashton was founder choreographer of The Royal Ballet and served as director of that company from 1963 - 1970, creating a body of 80 major works that have become the cornerstone of the British ballet repertory, including **Symphonic Variations** (1946), **Cinderella** (1948), **La Fille mal gardée** (1960), and **A Month in the Country** (1976). He lifted English ballet to a worldwide reputation by helping to shape and define “the English style:” a soft, fluid, lyrical, musically sensitive classicism. The English critic Alastair Macaulay has written, “The ballet style shown in Ashton’s ballets is a particularly intricate one, with upper and lower body maintaining a lively activity, and many internal embellishments of head, arms, épaulement and footwork.” Ashton was also the founding choreographer of another seminal British dance troupe, Ballet Rambert, now known as Rambert Dance Company, Britain’s oldest professional dance ensemble. Along with George Balanchine, Ashton is regarded as one of two greatest ballet choreographers of the twentieth century.

Born in Ecuador in 1904 and raised in Peru, Sir Frederick Ashton began his dance career by secretly taking ballet classes once a week. By chance, he studied under Leonide Massine and continued his studies with Marie Rambert. Later, Ms. Rambert encouraged Sir Frederick to try his hand at choreography, and she was responsible for helping him get his first commission in 1926. This work, **A Tragedy of Fashion**, was created for the Ballet Club (later to become Ballet Rambert). In September 1931, Ashton created **Regatta**, his first piece for Dame Ninette de Valois’s young company. He created several more works for the Vic-Wells Ballet before he joined the company as a full-time dancer and choreographer in 1935. While the Vic-Wells Ballet grew into The Royal Ballet, Sir Frederick remained as Dame Ninette’s associate. In 1948, he became one of the company’s artistic directors and was later named associate director. In 1963, he succeeded Dame Ninette and was the director of the company until his official retirement in 1970. He was knighted in 1962, and received the Order of Merit in 1977. He died on August 18, 1988, in Sussex, England.

Houston Ballet joins ballet companies from around the world in saluting Ashton. Other major companies performing works by Ashton include The Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, San Francisco Ballet, The Royal Ballet and the Birmingham Royal Ballet. In New York City in July, the Lincoln Center Festival 2004 will feature an “Ashton Celebration,” which will pay homage to the British choreographer with retrospective performances by several international companies of eleven of his works created between 1937 and 1987.

In addition to **La Fille mal gardée**, Houston Ballet has three other works by Ashton in its repertoire: **Façade**, **The Two Pigeons** and **Les Patineurs**.

Ashton’s protégé, Alexander Grant, with assistance from veteran dancer, teacher, Emilio Martins, will stage Houston Ballet’s production of **La Fille mal gardée**.

A long-time member of The Royal Ballet who had nearly twenty roles created on him by Frederick Ashton, Mr. Grant originated the role of Alain in the 1960 premiere of the ballet. He is regarded as one of the greatest character dancers of his generation. A former director of the National Ballet of Canada, Mr. Grant has worked with the English National Ballet as a coach and character dancer, and stages **La Fille mal gardée** for companies all over the world. Some of those include The Royal Ballet, The Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, San Francisco Ballet, Stuttgart Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow.

Brazilian-born Emilio Martins, a choreologist and former principal dancer, ballet master and répétiteur with the Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro, began working as Mr. Grant’s assistant in 1995. Since then, he has staged Sir Frederick Ashton’s **La Fille mal gardée** on many international companies, including Ballet Estable del Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, Argentina, The Royal New Zealand Ballet in Wellington, the Ballet del Teatro dell’Opera di Roma, Italy, and Hong Kong Ballet, China.

Houston Ballet Principal Dancer Sara Webb will perform the title role in **La Fille mal gardée** both in Houston, and at the end of June with The Australian Ballet as part of Houston Ballet’s International Exchange Program (IEP). Implemented by Mr. Welch in September 2003, when

Australian Robert Curran danced the role of the prince in Houston Ballet's production of **The Sleeping Beauty**, the mission of the IEP is to broaden the exposure of Houston Ballet artists around the world, to allow Houston Ballet dancers the opportunity to dance in other countries, and to expose Houston audiences to exciting dancers from other companies. Ms. Webb will travel to Australia as the exchange to Mr. Curran's performances here.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity to represent Houston Ballet internationally, and I am very excited to work with a new company," commented Ms. Webb. "I look forward to meeting and working with the artists of The Australian Ballet. Also, I've never been to Australia before, so this should be a wonderful adventure for me personally."

In conjunction with **La Fille mal gardée**, Houston Ballet's popular *Dance Talks* returns. *Dance Talks* have provided opportunities for audience members to meet notable members of the global dance community such as choreographer Trey McIntyre and guest artist Damien Welch of The Australian Ballet, and to learn more about the upcoming performance. *Dance Talks* are designed to increase the dialogue and further the understanding and appreciation of the art of dance. *Dance Talks* are free to all ticket holders, and will be held forty-five minutes prior to each performance in the Grand Foyer at Wortham Theater Center.

Houston Ballet's **La Fille mal gardée** has been generously underwritten by Baker Botts L.L.P., Anadarko Petroleum Corporation, BHP Billiton, KPRC Channel 2, and The Wortham Foundation, Inc.

Phillip Broomhead: "Very Much an Ashton Dancer"

Houston Ballet Principal Phillip Broomhead will be making a role debut as The Widow Simone in **La Fille mal gardée (The Wayward Daughter)**. Mr. Broomhead trained at The Royal Ballet school, joined The Royal Ballet in 1981, and rose to principal in 1986. "I worked extensively with Ashton starting at the age of sixteen, and **La Fille mal gardée** was one of my first school performances," Mr. Broomhead remembers. His first roles in the ballet were walk-on parts, and he gradually moved up to boyfriend roles, and even worked with Ashton on the role of Colas. "Ashton was instrumental in forming my style," he continued. "I was very much an Ashton dancer. He later

coached me in various roles, including Oberon in **The Dream** and The Young Man **The Two Pigeons**. During my first year at The Royal Ballet, he created a lead role for me in his piece, **Varii Capricci**.”

Mr. Broomhead, recalling rehearsals with Ashton, said, “Ashton was wonderful to work with. He was demanding in a quiet way, but never raised his voice. He always came up to you and pushed you into a specific position.” Regarding the famous choreographer’s style, he remarked, “The Ashton style is a natural dance form. In **Fille** it is slightly exaggerated. It has to do with going back to a dance style from the Romantic era, and using a lithographic look. All the girls are in poses – in a charming way.”

Sir Frederick Ashton intended a man to dance The Widow Simone, in the English tradition of the pantomime dame. A role that provides ample opportunity to showcase a crack sense of comic timing, it is a convention that Ashton employed to great effect in both **Fille** and his landmark production of **Cinderella**, where he himself memorably portrayed one of the stepsisters. One of the challenges of The Widow Simone is walking the fine line that separates comedy from overacting. “It’s very easy to go over the top with this type of character,” explained Mr. Broomhead. “The goal is to keep it as normal as possible. You’re playing a comic role, but she’s a normal peasant widow who has a lot of pathos and understanding. It requires a lot of acting.” Mr. Broomhead cites several past Royal Ballet dancers who were memorable Widow Simones such as Brian Shaw and David Bintley, the former being the most influential. “Every time I think of the role, I see Brian,” he explained.

La Fille mal gardée
The Oldest Existing Ballet in the Repertoire

The very first staging of **La Fille mal gardée** premiered in 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution, and in some respects the ballet heralded the changes which were about to overtake the political and social structure of France. To begin with, **La Fille mal gardée** was first performed in “provincial” Bordeaux, as opposed to Paris, then the artistic and political center of France. The choreographer, Jean Dauberval, was out of favor in the capitol and had been hired by the well equipped Bordeaux Opera House. In addition, **La Fille mal gardée** was a comedy, a rarity in an era

when tragedies and allegorical dance-drama abounded. Last but not least, the theme of the ballet was quite bourgeois and its characters decidedly middle class. Based on every day life, **La Fille mal gardée** brought eighteenth century ballet down to earth.

Utilizing the original score by Ferdinand Hérold, freely adapted and arranged by John Lanchbery, Sir Frederick Ashton's version of **La Fille mal gardée** received its premiere by The Royal Ballet at Covent Garden in London on January 28, 1960, featuring Nadia Nerina, David Blair, Stanley Holden, and Alexander Grant in the principal roles. Lanchbery, an acclaimed British ballet conductor, collaborated with Sir Ashton and composed pieces to suit Ashton's needs. He created new numbers for the mime scenes, the first act pas de deux, Alain's comic solo, the clog dance, and the finale, seamlessly melding them with Hérold's earlier work.

In Ashton's version of **La Fille mal gardée**, the choreography closely follows the plot of Dauberval's original 1789 staging, making it the oldest existing ballet story in the repertory. While creating the work, Ashton met with Tamara Karsavina, who taught him several comic and mime scenes. As a young dancer in St. Petersburg, she danced the role of Lise at the Maryinsky Theater, giving Ashton's choreography a link to past productions. Another source of inspiration was his love for the English countryside and folk customs. His additions of the maypole dancing and the clog dance are among the most beloved parts of the work. The ballet's longevity is credited to its charm and comic universality. **La Fille mal gardée** entered Houston Ballet's repertoire in 1992.

The Story of *La Fille mal gardée*

Roughly translated, **La Fille mal gardée** means "The Wayward Daughter," and focuses upon the love story of two young people, Lise and Colas, and the ambitious plans of Lise's mother, the Widow Simone. The ballet is set in the French countryside in the eighteenth century, and begins at the dawn of a busy day at the farm. A rooster and some hens jump down from their roost and dance. Lise, disappointed at not seeing Colas, leaves a ribbon tied in a lover's knot as a token of her devotion. Colas finds it, and binds it to his staff. The lovers meet, but are interrupted by Simone, who sets her daughter a task churning butter. Colas, hiding in the loft, joins her. The work is shared and then forgotten as they declare their love. The farm girls summon Lise to play, but her mind is elsewhere. Her suspicious and ever watchful mother catches her and chastises her. Just

then Thomas, the pompous and wealthy proprietor of a vineyard, arrives with his son Alain. Aware of their mission, Simone dismisses Lise. Thomas is there to ask for Lise's hand in marriage for his son. When Lise returns, Alain coyly and clumsily shows off his paces. Lise is amused and a little shocked by his antics, but not interested. They set off for the harvest.

After working in the fields, the harvesters, led by Colas, relax in a joyful dance. Lise and Alain dance, but Colas intervenes, and Lise makes it clear where her preference lies. One of the harvesters plays the flute, to everybody's general delight. Alain thinks he will have a try, but the harvesters mock him. He is rescued from his horseplay by his indignant father. The field is now left clear for the triumphant Colas, who dances with Lise. Simone joins in the merriment of the harvesters, but they are interrupted by a storm that drenches them, scattering them far and wide.

Mother and daughter, soaked by the rain, return to the farmhouse. They sit down to spin. Work, thinks the mother, should keep Lise out of mischief. But Simone is overcome by sleep and Lise, who has seen Colas through the gate, tries to take the key from her. Simone awakes and, in order to remain watchful, plays the tambourine for Lise to dance. But the taps grow feebler, she begins to nod, and soon Simone is fast asleep.

Colas opens the top part of the farmhouse door and leans towards Lise. She runs joyfully into his arms. The knocking of the harvesters, coming for their pay, awakens Simone. Simone tells her daughter to get on with her chores as she leaves to give the harvesters a drink. Lise, thinking she is alone, dreams of the delights of married life. Colas cannot resist, and comes out from hiding. She is bashful at having been taken by surprise, but once again they declare their love, exchanging scarves as a token.

As Simone reappears, Lise hustles Colas into her bedroom. The ever-suspicious mother realizes that the lovers have been meeting, and in her turn hustles Lise into the bedroom, locking the door.

Alain and his father now arrive with a notary to complete the contract. When it has been signed, Simone hands Alain the bedroom key. After a moment of idiotic indecision, he opens the door and to everyone's dismay Colas and Lise come out. The lovers fall on their knees to ask Simone for forgiveness and a blessing. In spite of Thomas and Alain, she finally gives in amid general rejoicing.

LA FILLE MAL GARDEE
(THE WAYWARD DAUGHTER)
FACT SHEET

WHAT: **LA FILLE MAL GARDEE**
 ("The Wayward Daughter")
 Music by Ferdinand Hérold (1791-1833)
 Score arranged by John Lanchberry
 Choreography by Sir Frederick Ashton
 Scenario by Jean Dauberval
 Set and Costume Designs by Sir Osbert Lancaster
 Lighting Design by Christina Giannelli

Generously underwritten by:

Baker Botts L.L.P.
Anadarko Petroleum Corporation
BHP Billiton
KPRC Channel 2

Additional support provided by:

The Wortham Foundation, Inc.

**ABOUT THE
PROGRAM:**

From June 10 - 20, 2004, Houston Ballet commemorates the centennial of Sir Frederick Ashton, one of Britain's greatest choreographers, with his glorious romantic comedy, **La Fille mal gardée**. Set in the countryside in eighteenth century France, the ballet tells the story of Lise, a young maiden who must choose between the handsome, penniless farmer Colas and the wealthy simpleton Alain whom her meddling mama wishes her to marry. In **La Fille mal gardée**, folk dance and classical ballet meet in a joyous celebration of love and life that is perfect for the entire family.

WHEN: At 7:30 pm on June 10, 12, 18, 19, 2004
 At 2:00 pm on June 13, 19, 20, 2004

WHERE: Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center
 Texas at Smith Streets in downtown Houston

TICKETS: \$11.50 -- \$115.50, Call (713) 227 ARTS or 1 800 828 ARTS
 Also available at Houston Ballet Box Office at Wortham Theater Center downtown
 at Texas at Smith Street, or purchase tickets online at www.houstonballet.org.

FOR MORE

INFORMATION: Visit Houston Ballet on the World Wide Web at <http://www.houstonballet.org>