National Theatre

PRESS RELEASE

Filip Barankiewicz
Artistic Director of The Czech National Ballet

ballet

Liliom – Czech National Ballet

Liliom – a story of seeking redemption

The Czech National Ballet presents John Neumeier's *Liliom*

A deeply moving story of love and violence, highlighting the need for happiness, but also a story of failure, longing for forgiveness and redemption, will be told at the State Opera in Prague.

On 23 October 2025, the Czech National Ballet will give the Czech premiere of *Liliom*, a work by the legendary American choreographer John Neumeier, who has previously enthused Prague dance lovers with his masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The ballet, which received its world premiere in 2011, is based on Ferenc Molnár's play *Liliom*, depicting a tragic love story, the inability to express affection, a story of error and failure, as well as the desire for redemption.

"I usually am in love mostly with what I'm working on at the moment. And I think that's still true even when re-creating, as I'm doing here in Prague. I have to fall in love with the work again," John Neumeier says.

"It is our great honour to have the opportunity to stage at the State Opera a ballet by John Neumeier, one of the most celebrated contemporary choreographers. Using dance idiom, *Liliom* retells a truly soul-stirring story, a tale of love, sorrow and hope. I believe that the audience will sense the ardour and sincerity with which our dancers have embraced the work," says Filip Barankiewicz, Artistic Director of the Czech National Ballet.



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Liliom

A ballet by John Neumeier
Music: Michel Legrand
Choreography & costumes: John Neumeier
Set design: Ferdinand Wögerbauer
Lighting design: James French
Conductors: Nathan Brock, Václav Zahradník
Czech National Ballet soloists & corps
State Opera Orchestra & Top Big Band
Czech premiere: 23 October 2025

On the ballet *Liliom*

Inspiration and literary basis

One of the major 20th-century European plays, Ferenc Molnár's 1909 *Liliom* is mainly set at a fair in Budapest. Today it is best known as the basis of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's 1945 musical *Carousel.*

"As an American, I first knew the musical, which I still think is one of the most important pieces of American musical theatre. Of course, from that I went back to the original source. My piece is based on both of them, and also differs from both of them," Neumeier points out.

The story in Neumeier's dance adaptation takes place in the USA in the 1930s during the Great Depression, at Playland, a fictitious amusement park. Depicting a story of failure to express love, personal weakness and redemption seeking, Neumeier perceives his *Liliom* as a timeless reflection of human experience, transcending cultural borders.

"I obviously don't think theatre can change the world. It can only propose an alternative world that could become an inspiration for someone to rethink their way," Neumeier adds.

Characters and dramaturgy

The central protagonist is Liliom, a charismatic and tough yet self-destructive carousel operator, and the young Julie, who, his violent nature notwithstanding, loves him.

Their relationship is, however, fraught with problems. When both of them lose their jobs, Liliom, desperate and frustrated by his inability to sustain them, begins mistreating Julie, who stays with him nonetheless. When Julie discovers she is pregnant, Liliom is happy and looks forward to becoming a father. In desperate need of money, he participates in a robbery that goes terribly wrong. So as to avoid capture, Liliom kills himself.

The story then proceeds in the realm of fantasy. Liliom finds himself in Purgatory. Sixteen years after his death, he is allowed to return to Earth so as to do a good deed and thus redeem himself. Liliom's seeing his son Louis and his final gesture towards Julie endow the story with a tragic profundity and hope.

"Although it's a story and we like to understand somehow the story, I think more than that is the empathy, the feeling that the emotion that I'm seeing strikes me and awakens in me feelings that are similar. I feel I've experienced something like that, so I'm interested in this story," Neumeier explains.

The choreographer

A globally renowned American choreographer, director of the Hamburg Ballett and one of the most influential dance creators of the past half-century. John Neumeier was born on 24 February 1939 in Milwaukee, where he received his initial dance training. He went on to study ballet in Chicago and, after completing English literature and theatre studies at Marquette University in his native city, Copenhagen and London (Royal Ballet School). In 1963, he joined the Stuttgarter Ballett. In 1969, he was named director of the Ballett Frankfurt. From 1973 to the end of the 2024/25 season, he was director and chief choreographer of the Hamburg Ballett. In 1978, he founded the Hamburg Ballett School.

Neumeier has created more than 120 works, including numerous feature-length narrative ballets, with the best known being *The Lady of the Camellias* (1978), *Romeo and Juliet* (1971), *Hamlet Connotations* (1976), *Sylvia* (1997), *The Little Mermaid* (2010), *Liliom* (2011) and *Nijinsky* (2000). He has made adaptations of the major classics, e.g. *The Nutcracker* (1971), *Illusions - Like Swan Lake* (1976) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1978); choreographed a number of pieces to music by Gustav Mahler, e.g. *Song of the Earth, Symphonies No. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9* and *10;* and other composers, as well as ballets inspired by mythological and Biblical themes, such as *Messiah* (1999), *The Legend of Joseph* (1977) and *Saint Matthew Passion* (1981).

John Neumeier has worked with leading dance companies worldwide, choreographing for the Hamburg Ballett, Stuttgarter Ballet, Opéra national de Paris, Royal Danish Ballet, Wiener Staatsoper, and others. His pieces have been staged by the American Ballet Theatre in New York, the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg, the Bolshoi in Moscow, the National Ballet of Canada in Toronto, etc.

John Neumeier has garnered numerous accolades and honours, including the Prix Benois de la Danse for Best Choreography (1992) and Lifetime Achievement (2016), the Nijinsky Award (2006), the Prix de Lausanne for Lifetime Achievement (2017), the Dance Magazine Award (1983), the Deutscher Tanzpreis (1988 and 2008), and other coveted prizes. In 2021, Queen Margrethe II of Denmark awarded him the Ingenio et arti medal, bestowed to prominent scientists and artists.

The composer

The score for Neumeier's *Liliom* was written by the world-renowned French composer, conductor and pianist Michel Legrand. He conceived the music as a singular dialogue between the orchestra (in the pit) and the big band (on the stage). Their voices now alternate, then compete, while coming together in perfect harmony at pivotal moments. This innovative musical architecture serves to underline the story's contrasts – between reality and dream, tender love and violence, downfall and hope.

"Michel was the most cooperative and beautifully enthusiastic person to work with," Neumeier recalls.

Michel Legrand (24 February 1932, Paris – 26 January 2019, Neuilly-sur-Seine) was a composer, conductor, pianist, singer, writer and producer, with his multi-genre legacy encompassing jazz, classical, film and easy listening. After completing his composition and piano studies at the Conservatoire de Paris (under the guidance of Nadia Boulanger, among others), he began working as a chanson piano accompanist. He wrote more than 200 film and television scores, starting in 1955 with Henri Verneuil's *Les Amants du Tage,* followed by music for Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Vard, François Reichenbach and Jacques Demy, thus becoming a key French New Wave figure.

In 1964, Legrand composed the score for Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, a groundbreaking, sung-through film musical. The success in the cinema industry launched his international career as a widely sought-after composer. The numerous movies he worked on include Norman Jewison's *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), Richard Lester's *The Three Musketeers* (1973 and 1974), Barbra Streisand's *Yentl* (1983), Irvin Kershner's *Never Say Never* (1983), Robert Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), Claude Lelouch's *And Now... Ladies and Gentlemen* (2002), and many others. The last film score he composed was for Didier Van Cauwelaert's comedy *J'ai Perdu Albert* (2018).

Michel Legrand won three Oscars (from 13 nominations), for the original scores for *Yentl* and Robert Mulligan's *Summer of '42* (1971), and for the song "The Windmills of Your Mind" from *The Thomas Crown Affair*. He also received five Grammy Awards, and dozens of nominations for the Golden Globe and other coveted accolades.

Legrand collaborated with musicians of such renown as Neil Diamond, Barbra Streisand, Jessye Norman, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Kiri Te Kanawa, Perry Como, Ray Charles, etc. As a conductor, he worked with prominent orchestras worldwide. His discography is extensive indeed, with the recordings he made including an acclaimed account of Erik Satie's piano pieces.

Scenery and visual symbolism

The sets for *Liliom* at Prague's State Opera, designed by Ferdinand Wögerbauer, foreground the contrast between the realistic Great Depression milieu and the magical images conjured up by the Man with Balloons, a character representing a timeless, transcendental dimension. One of the major symbols featured in the production is the pink balloon Liliom gives Julie, a token of their love, as well as the fragility of human happiness.

Born in Salzburg, Ferdinand Wögerbauer studied set design at the local Mozarteum University. His first engagement was at the Salzburger Festspiele, where until 2003 he worked as an assistant designer and head of set design. He has collaborated with a number of stage directors, primarily Peter Stein, creating the sets for drama and opera productions worldwide (Uncle Vanya, Faust 1, Don Giovanni, Macbeth, etc.). Wögerbauer has worked on John Neumeier's ballets *Messias* and *Orpheus*.

Lighting design

The lighting for *Liliom* has been created by James French, an acclaimed specialist in dance and drama productions, as well as corporate and charity events. His lighting design serves to enhance the contrast between the production's reality and fantasy components.

James French has worked with numerous notable choreographers and other artists, including Crystal Pite, Benjamin Millepied, Hofesh Shechter, Jo Stromgren, Alexander Ekman and Twyla Tharp. His designs have appeared in productions of such companies as the San Francisco Ballet, Ballett Basel, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and LA Dance Project, staged in 25 countries and 36 US states.

Creators

Choreographer: John Neumeier
Music composer: Michel Legrand
Set designer: Ferdinand Wögerbauer
Costume designer: John Neumeier
Lighting designer: James French
Stagers: Konstantin Tselikov, Sonja Tinnes, Marijn Rademaker, Niurka Moredo
Conductors: Nathan Brock, Václav Zahradník
State Opera Orchestra and Top Big Band
Dancers: Czech National Ballet soloists and corps

Czech National Ballet

Founded in 1883, the Czech National Ballet is one of Europe's leading ballet companies, known for its commitment to innovation and collaboration with celebrated choreographers worldwide. Under the artistic direction of Filip Barankiewicz, the Czech National Ballet offers an extensive, diverse repertoire that includes both classical and contemporary works. The company comprises dancers from over 19 countries, whose artistry contributes to the vibrant cultural legacy and modern expression of European dance.

Contact:
Helena Bartlová
P. R. of The Czech National Ballet
M: +420 737 205 899
h.bartlova@narodni-divadlo.cz
www.narodni-divadlo.cz









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