ROMEO AND JULIET

An LAB PREMIERE *Sir Fredrick Ashton* MAY/JUNE 2016

First performance was May 19, 1955, Royal Theater, Copenhagen, Royal Danish Ballet. Choreography: Frederick Ashton. Music: Sergei Prokofiev. Libretto: Frederick Ashton, after Shakespeare.

PROLOGUE Romeo is dreaming of being in love when he is disturbed by Tybalt.

SCENE ONE Mercutio, Livia and three friends play in a city square in Verona. Tybalt starts a fight with Romeo's friend Benvolio. The Prince of Verona – Escalus – enters, stops the fight, and demands peace.

SCENE TWO Juliet is with her nurse when her mother Lady Capulet arrives and tells Juliet she is about to meet Paris, the man they have chosen for her to marry.

SCENE THREE Lord and Lady Capulet host a ball at which Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio arrive uninvited and in disguise. While the Capulet family celebrates the future marriage of their daugher Juliet to Paris, Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time and fall instantly in love.

SCENE FOUR That night, Romeo climbs Juliet's balcony. They declare their love for each other.

SCENE FIVE In the square in Verona, Livia, Mercutio and Benvolio are having fun. Juliet's nurse arrives with a letter from Juliet to Romeo.

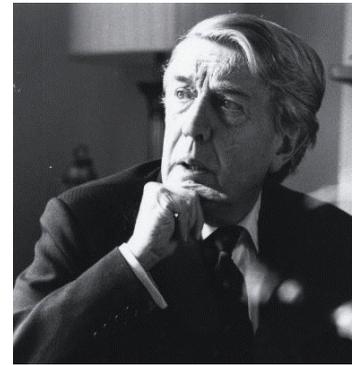SCENE SIX Juliet and Romeo are married in secret by Friar Laurence.

SCENE SEVEN Tybalt finds Mercutio and challenges him to a fight. Romeo tries to stop the fight, but he cannot calm Tybalt's anger. Mercutio is stabbed and killed by Tybalt. Romeo cannot bear the loss of his great friend, and in the ensuing duel, Romeo kills Tybalt. The Prince of Verona arrives and banishes Romeo.

SCENE EIGHT Juliet and Romeo share their first night together before he must leave Verona. Lord and Lady Capulet arrive in Juliet's bedroom to tell her of her engagement to Paris. Juliet is tormented by her family's intentions.

SCENE NINE Juliet runs to Friar Laurence to seek his help. He gives her a potion which will put her into such a deep sleep that she will appear to be dead. He explains to her that she will awaken again and be able to flee with Romeo.

SCENE TEN Juliet agrees to marry Paris, and her parents celebrate the good news. Once alone, Juliet drinks the potion. The following morning – the intended wedding day – she is found dead.

SCENE ELEVEN Romeo mourns Juliet in the Capulet tomb, believing she is truly dead. Paris arrives, and in the ensuing fight Romeo stabs him. Romeo drinks a vile of poison and dies just as Juliet awakens from her deep sleep. Finding Romeo dead, in her extreme grief, she stabs herself and the young lovers are united in death.

SIR FREDRICK ASHTON
(1904 – 1988) British ballet dancer and choreographer widely credited with the creation of a specifically English genre of ballet.

IN 1955 WHEN approaching *Romeo and Juliet,* Ashton's vision was unencumbered. He cut and rearranged Prokoviev's score – down to ten scenes and an epilogue – and set it as a classical ballet. Taking his cue from the lyricism of Shakespeare's text, Ashton focused the story on the growing relationship between the high spirited young lovers. Central to the ballet are three lyrical pas de deux for *Romeo and Juliet* that trace their maturing love. Far from a heroic setting, Ashton conceived of his Verona as inhabited by recognizable human beings whose misfortune is to get caught up in events beyond their control.

Although Ashton took advantage of the Danes' excellence in mime to advance his narrative, in his *Romeo and Juliet* people express themselves primarily through movement, often flavored by the modesty and intricate footwork of the Bournonville tradition. Harkening back to Petipa, Ashton's work abounds with formal ensemble numbers: for the townspeople, for Juliet and her friends, for Paris and his kinsmen, for Romeo and his friends, for the Capulets and their guests at the ball. Even the fight scenes are carefully choreographed. Since an excess of passion, not clan hostility, precipitated the tragedy, Ashton deemed a reconciliation at the tomb unnecessary, and the ballet ends with the deaths of the lovers.