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Expanding ballet style by imagining the first Giselle

by Lilia Costantino

On Wednesday, March 4, 2026, in my daily ballet technique class, taught by Professor Tong Wang, I tried to connect what I learned about ballet history to my own movement practice. The historical figure I chose to focus on was Carlotta Grisi, the original dancer of the role Giselle in the 1841 ballet *Giselle*. Among the many iconic ballerinas we learned about, I was inspired by descriptions of her lightness, expressive musicality, and the Romantic era emphasis on softness and illusion, where the dancer almost appears weightless on stage. This is especially good to do in a class like Tong's because he was Vaganova trained and uses a similar romantic quality.

Before class, I reviewed notes about the Romantic ballet style and how dancers like Grisi were known for delicate port de bras, soft épaulement, and airy jumps that created a floating quality. My goal in class was to embody that Romantic aesthetic during center specifically. Throughout the center, I wanted to feel like my movement was light and expressive, rather than purely technical. For the adagio combination we did, I really focused on the specifics of the port de bras of that time like the crossing of the arms when going up into fifth position and the almost droopiness of the wrists.

Additionally, during each combo I focused on maintaining a very lifted upper body with that softness Grisi was known for. During jumps, I tried to push off the floor lightly through my feet using a deep plié, so my jumps felt buoyant instead of heavy. When doing a waltz or pirouette combination I tried my best to emphasize fluidity and musical phrasing, letting my arms float through positions with a continuous motion. I also paid close attention to my lines, making sure that they were lengthening to their full potential as I continued to lift up through my torso and inclined slightly forward to create the elegant Romantic silhouette often associated with Grisi's style.

Imagining the light quality that Carlotta Grisi was so good at during class changed the way I approached every combination. My jumps definitely felt noticeably softer, and my transitions were smoother because I concentrated on continuity and ease within my movement. This helped me understand how ballet history can influence daily technique practice as well as being extremely fun to do. By thinking about the qualities associated with dancers like Grisi, I was able to bring historical style into an everyday ballet class. It reminded me that ballet technique is not only about precision, but also about embodying the artistry and performance qualities developed by dancers in the past.

Lilia Constantino is a junior at the University of California, Irvine, pursuing a BFA in Dance and expecting to graduate in June 2027.