

## **Gentleman Jack**

Welcome to this introduction to Northern Ballet's **Gentleman Jack**, inspired by the life of **Anne Lister**.

The choreography is by **Annabelle Lopez Ochoa** the music is composed by **Peter Salem**, the set and lighting by **Christopher Ash** and costume design by **Louise Flanagan**.

**Clare Croft** a performance historian with a particular focus on queer dance shaped the narrative arc of the ballet.

The following introduction will take about **16** minutes to listen to and features information about Gentleman Jack, including descriptions of the set, characters and costumes.

The performance lasts for approximately **1 hour and 40 minutes** including a 20 minute interval and the live description is given by **Joanna Myers** and **Pippa Moore MBE**.

The production leans more towards modern ballet than traditional classical ballet and gives full opportunity to the cast of 30 international, multi-racial dancers to display their powerful dramatic ability as well as their superb dance technique.

Anne Lister was born in Halifax Yorkshire in 1791. She was a force of nature - intelligent, ambitious and unapologetically herself, in a world that sought to confine her. As a businesswoman and landowner, she challenged businessmen, whilst navigating the complexities of queer and societal expectations. She was a social climber and adored women, falling in love time and again with women of the aristocracy at a time when homosexual acts were illegal, sexual relationships between women were unacknowledged and the word lesbian didn't exist.

Anne dressed in thick, black clothes and boots and wore a black hat. Her peculiar dress and boyish frame stood out in the working-class town - leading people to remark she was "like a man".

She was often mocked, sent abusive letters and given the cruel nickname Gentleman Jack, derogatory slang for a lesbian, but Anne embraced it, turning it into a symbol of her powerful individuality and defiance against restrictive gender roles.

Her diaries of over 4 million words were written in code based on algebra, Greek and Latin. Decades later they would reveal

her intimate, sexual relationships and encounters with women in explicit detail.

The ballet is a portrait of Anne Lister, aged 40, and focuses on two relationships - one with Marianna Lawson, also aged 40 and the love of her life who breaks her heart. The other with Ann Walker, which became a bold act of defiance culminating in a symbolic marriage.

The ballet is a timeless, abstract piece, not set in a particular era - instead it invites a modern-day audience to focus on and explore what is happening to these characters in their internal and external worlds.

The design emphasizes open space- the stage's proscenium arch and wings are sage green with a grey blue hue, suggestive of nature and a wide landscape.

At times chessboard lighting illuminates the grey floor symbolic of a competitive game. Anne was amazingly deft at controlling situations and manipulating people to further her ambitions.

The spatial relationships on the board represent how Anne was always calculating and create the element of surprise.

**The costumes** are a twist on 1830's fashion - a mix of contemporary and period design. The elaborate style of women's clothes in that era has been simplified and modernised. The use of some modern fabrics and transparencies help reduce the volume and allow the dancers' bodies, movements and sensuality to be highlighted.

Although Anne always wore black, dark green has been introduced to her character for theatrical reasons. Colour is used as a tool throughout the ballet to distinguish and group families together.

At the start of the ballet, we are introduced to **Anne Lister** carrying her cane and wearing a long black coat, dark green trousers and a black top hat. Her masculine movements are grounded, decisive and sinuous.

Seven men in grey suits, top hats and frock coats inhabit the space, but when they approach Anne too closely, she repeatedly slams her cane, using it to delineate her boundaries.

Businessman **Christopher Rawson** is arrogant with an impatient temper. One of the most powerful men in Halifax, he owns many assets in coal mining and is Anne Lister's nemesis. Dressed in a slate blue suit and matching top hat, he wears a high collared cream shirt and a blue cravat beneath his frock coat and double-breasted waistcoat.

Six male and female **coal miners** dressed in dirty, brown, baggy trousers and long sleeved, grey, mesh tops, perform a Rapper Sword dance in black boots and head-lamp helmets. In this fast, traditional English folk dance originating from North East mining communities, the miners link short flexible steel swords and weave intricate patterns, performing complex footwork. They greet Rawson respectfully, but are surprised when ordered around by Anne, despite her being a businesswoman and landowner too.

Rawson and the businessmen she encounters are offended and perplexed by her intelligence and forwardness. When she challenges them - they physically push her down every time she wants to stand up. Anne however remains unfazed by their attitudes towards her.

We move to the Lister's family dining room in Shibden Hall, Halifax.

**The servants'** costumes are gender fluid, men and women wearing identical black trousers and white corsets over sheer black collarless shirts.

They configure four grey wooden bookcases around a matching rectangular dining table, check board patterned stools and a hanging candelabra. The bookcases stand over 2 metres high and are moved seamlessly throughout the ballet into various configurations. at times throughout the ballet The bookcases are significant as reading and writing was so important to Anne. Women were barred from universities, yet she was determined to learn everything a man was able to, becoming a woman of great intellect.

**Anne's family** lead a quiet, orderly life. Her **Uncle** is an accepting man, comfortable ceding power and leadership to women. He wears dark grey trousers and shirt beneath an olive- green waistcoat and a dark green thigh-length jacket. Her **Aunt** is warm and loving and also accepting of Anne's otherness. She wears a dark green silk ankle length dress with

a full skirt and a sheer darker blouse with high neck and puffed sleeves, worn over the fitted bodice.

Anne's **sister Marian** is dressed similarly to her mother wearing an olive- green dress, cut shorter at the front with a transparent, lighter short sleeve blouse over the bodice. She is practical and hard working, but lives in a small, unimaginative world.

Anne is visited by her close friend of over 20 years, **Marianna Lawson**, with whom she shares a powerful and enduring sexual chemistry. Anne's hopes for a more meaningful connection however are ultimately crushed when Marianna chooses convention over love, marrying Charles Lawton, a man decades her senior, leaving Anne heartbroken.

Marianna is dressed in vibrant copper shades that match her personality. Her long dress has a textured pattern, the removable skirt has a high slit at the front and a wide belt with a gold double ring, and embroidered buckle. Her structured, high neck bolero has puffed sleeves with a low revealing neckline.

At the Ball she is similarly dressed, but with sheer puffed sleeves that sit off the shoulders, her voluminous, ruched silk skirt, short at the front and cascading at the back.

With Anne, Marianna is desirous and clever, yet her public image is cautious and respectable.

Her husband **Charles Lawton** is dressed in a knee length brown coat, matching trousers and top hat, with a white high collared shirt beneath his copper waistcoat. At the Ball he dresses the same but with white trousers.

Anne sits at a desk writing her diary obsessively. As she writes a **Chorus of Words** engulf the stage, 20 men and women similarly dressed in black gloves and skin-coloured leotards covered with printed quotes taken from Anne's diaries, in black script. As she gestures at them, they assemble and reassemble. The Words also manipulate her, conveying her thoughts in endless codes.

At times throughout the ballet Anne is seen on a treadmill, symbolizing that she was adventurous, well-travelled and an avid walker. The four bookcases rotate fully to reveal 75" TV

screens within each one, displaying images of a moving Yorkshire landscape.

Whilst out walking Anne draws the attention of **Ann Walker** a shy, gentle heiress from a neighbouring estate, 14 years her junior.

Ann Walker wears a pale blue dress with an off-the-shoulder neckline and large, puffed, transparent sleeves. The asymmetrical, removable skirt has a high front split and is cinched at the waist with a decorative buckle.

In Act 2 she wears a darker blue dress, it's fitted sequined bodice has a plunging neckline, the ruched skirt cut short at the front to reveal her legs.

Ann Walker is romantic and good humoured, but has a stubborn nature and a fragile mental health.

At the end of Act 1 a group of working-class men attack and harass Anne Lister. She fights back but in vain, and is left bruised and alone on the ground, her shirt ripped.

In act two, Anne feels vulnerable and confides in her Aunt about the assault. She consoles Anne and helps her to regain her confidence.

Anne leaves for Paris to forget about Marianna and her life in Halifax.

Dressed in a black leather skirt over her trousers, a belted, leather waistcoat and her long coat, she wears a structured black beret with a peacock feather - the feather was a queer symbol used in art and fashion that became a subtle way for gay men in particular, to signal their identity to one another.

In Paris, Anne engages in many sexual encounters. A chorus of eight women with long, loose hair, waltz in couples, all similarly dressed in fitted, beige bodices and a variety of jewel coloured, ombré skirts with crisscross waistbands.

Anne, confident that no woman ever rejects her, dances through them undressing the women, ripping off their flowing, chiffon skirts.

She returns home from Paris, greeted by her family who are happy to see her strong again.

**Christopher Rawson** arrives wanting to discuss business – a heated yet civilized argument takes place whilst around them a

deconstructed 'dance of the swords' emphasizes their vocal quarrel. Eventually Rawson concedes and invites Anne to his family home to meet his wife and sister Ann Walker.

His wife wears an ankle length, dark blue dress, with a fitted bodice and long puffed sleeves. The neckline is wide and draped, the skirt cut to knee length at the front.

Four stools and an ornate chandelier create the living room. The gathering is proper and rather dull until Anne Lister directs her seductive arrow towards Ann Walker, who is enthusiastic to finally get Anne's attention. Rawson and his wife try to function as a fence between the two women.

Later Anne Lister seduces Ann, their infatuation intensifies and their relationship quickly becomes intimate. Ann Walker, plagued by her conscience initially rejects Anne before ultimately reconciling.

A year passes and Anne Lister, accompanied by Ann Walker is a welcome guest at a grand ballroom filled with the upper classes. Two chandeliers create the opulent space and floor to ceiling russet swag curtains adorn the back wall.

The male guests in grey fitted suits and Christopher Rawson in blue, wear the same style zip up, single breasted jacket- cut into a high curve at the front hemline - beneath it the high neck of a white top is visible.

The female guests and Rawson's wife in blue, wear the same style ball gown in various jewel colours - the skirts cut short and ruched at the front, the sleeveless, draped, cream bodices, belted at the waist. The women wear grey elbow length gloves and embellished headpieces.

The two Annes dance together attracting the attention of the other guests including a jealous Marianna. Rawson aware of the illicit relationship, tries to stop them, but Anne Lister succeeds in snatching Ann away from her protective family.

In a bold act of defiance, the two Annes wed in a symbolic, candle lit ceremony, their ritualistic duet performed under long veils.

Anne Lister longed for someone she could dote upon, care for and put on a pedestal and Ann Walker along with her considerable inheritance, was the ideal match. After taking their sacred vows, they lived together as partners, wore wedding

rings and altered their wills to make each other a life tenant of their estate.

In the final scene Anne Lister resumes her opening solo, slamming her cane, but this time it is the Chorus of Words that react - her legacy living on through the words of her diary. She died in 1841 aged 49 from a fever.

A golden frame descends framing Anne Lister in reference to the only painting that exists of her, a woman who lived and loved on her own terms.

To enhance your enjoyment of the skill and artistry of the dancers, we include a brief description of some classical ballet terms that will be used throughout the performance.

Fundamental to all dance, the plié is a strong, sustained bend of the knee or knees. It's often a transition between steps or the means of take-off for jumps and spins giving the dance its strength and fluidity.

Often used is the arabesque, a position in which the dancer stands on one foot with the other stretched behind. One arm is

lifted to eye level in front, the other is held diagonally away from the body at the back. The leg behind can be lifted to waist level, or the dancer can lean forward with the head almost to the ground and the leg almost vertical behind- we will call this 'a high arabesque'.

The attitude is similar, but the raised leg is bent at the knee behind the dancer and the leading arm curved overhead.

For audio-description purposes, the Pirouette is a turn on one leg on the spot in any position; turns on two legs are described as spins that can travel.

We will describe jumps on the spot as simply jumps, which are high; or springs, which are lower but bouncy. Leaps are steps of elevation that can travel. During a duet – or pas de deux - one partner supports another by the waist or by the hand and walks round as the supported dancer pivots on one foot, often on pointe, in arabesque, or some other position. This is known as a promenade.

## **Cast and Production Credits**

### **The Dancers**

Kevin Poeung, Sarah Chun, Amber Lewis, Jackson Dwyer, Jonathan Hanks, Rachael Gillespie, Dominique Larose, Saeka Shirai, Filippo Di Vilio, Heather Lehan, Helen Bogatch, Harriet Marden, Andrew Tomlinson, Harris Beattie, Albert Gonzalez Orts, George Liang, Alessandra Bramante, Aerys Merrill, Julie Nunès, Antoni Canellas Artigues, Sena Kitano, Bruno Serraclara, Archie Sherman, Harry Skoupas, Alessia Petrosino, Kirica Takahashi, Jun Ishii, Stefano Varalta, Gemma Coutts, Nida Aydinoglu, Kaho Masumoto, Yu Wakizuka, Noah Benzie-Drayton, Mayuko Iwanaga, Miguel Teixeira, Eliza Hickey

**Composer** Peter Salem

**Set and Lighting Designer** Christopher Ash

**Costume Designer** Louise Flanagan

**Performance Historian** Clare Croft

**Choreographer** Annabelle Lopez Ochoa

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