

BILLY SUNDAY'S BIBLE

BY
RUTH PAGE

Ever since I was a little girl I have always been interested in the Bible . . . not so much as a religion maybe, but as literature. I never missed a single Sunday in Sunday School because I adored learning stories of the Bible. I even got a ribbon all filled with golden stars showing that I had never missed.

Much later as a choreographer, I wanted to do a Bible "revue" with the first half of the evening being the old testament and the second half — the new testament. I wanted to do it on a very large scale for a big public. In the Bible as you know, all the stories are told very concisely with no waste of words and yet with a certain beauty and simplicity of style which I hoped somehow to approximate in dance movement accompanied by the spoken word, with singing, and the harp predominant in the orchestra. I thought Kurt Weill the ideal composer for this. But he had just finished Reinhardt's "Eternal Road" and didn't want to do anything biblical unless it could be the Bible "with a difference". In other words, he wanted a "point of view". At this moment, Billy Sunday popped into my mind. In the middle twenties I was in a French School for Girls in New York where I was "being finished off" as they say, and we were all taken en masse to the Billy Sunday revival meeting. Maybe it is only nostalgia for the innocence of my youth, but I now seem to remember that all us school girls were very much affected, for we all went around singing Rhodeheaver's famous hymn "Brighten the Corner Where You Are".

Unfortunately Kurt Weil got involved in something else but anyway I did do the Billy Sunday Love Stories of the Bible in about 1948 with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and in Paris with Bentley Stone and myself. The following is the scenario which I used. Frederick Franklin played Billy Sunday — spoke all the words and also danced all the various parts. Alexandra Danilova was Mrs. Potiphar . . . they were both extraordinary in these roles.

BILLY SUNDAY

or giving the devil his due

BILLY: (shouting) Temptation is the devil looking through

the keyhole; Yielding is opening the door and inviting him in. My Theology, they say, is weaker than a jackrabbit's, But I know the fast pitches of the devil. He's quite a pitcher. Strictly big league stuff! And it's amazing the fellows he strikes out. Strikes 'em out! And they don't even take the bat off their shoulders. Not when he feeds up that old temptation ball . . . The one with a curve on it . . . usually a woman's!

THE DAVID MELODRAMA

BILLY: Take David, the man after God's own heart. David is revealed. David was a great man. (shouting) The leader of his people. But he was weak, — as other men have been weak. You know Davids — So do I. They are men who covet other men's wives! (softly) Seeing Bathsheba, David coveted her.

BATHSHEBA'S BATH

Pas de Deux

BILLY: (with vehemence) History calls it affinity, The Bible calls it adultery, I believe the Bible from cover to cover.

THE JOSEPH MELODRAMA

Young, boyish Joseph appears. Potiphar follows, his motions indicating the orders he gives Joseph.

BILLY: Now young Joseph — was a different sort. He was a great kid — eager to learn — liked by his boss, Potiphar. Yes, old man Potiphar would have trusted Joseph with everything in his possession. As a matter of fact, — he did. What he didn't know was that he couldn't trust his possessions — notably his wife, Mrs. Potiphar.

(MRS. POTIPHAR APPEARS)

(Mrs. Potiphar adopts a vampish attitude. Hands on sensuously swaying hips, she approaches Joseph again).

MRS. POTIPHAR: My, you're a fine looking young man. So big and strong. And much too handsome to be a slave. Come have tea with me today. I've baked biscuits with my very own hands, And I've received new honey. (plaintively) Come! Come to my room and we'll talk of better things for you. Come! Come! (Joseph moves away and shyly turns his head.) (for Joseph): You'll have to pardon me!

(Mrs. Potiphar retreats. Billy hands her a mirror, silently and she looks at herself – adjusts her hair – puts on a hat hopefully.)

MRS. POTIPHAR: (wistfully) I've made myself beautiful just for you. (to Joseph) You'll have to pardon me!

MRS. POTIPHAR'S POLKA

(A moment of tenseness, as Mrs. Potiphar mentally debates what to do. Infuriated, she decides to recover her lost dignity; imperiously she dances a Polka. Mrs. Potiphar, enraged grasps him in a struggle. His garment becomes torn and falls of.)

BILLY: (to Joseph): Unhand me woman! I will not yield to your infamous designs. (Joseph runs away.)

MRS. POTIPHAR: You are cruel! (Mrs. Potiphar picks up the garment and screams.)

THE POTIPHAR MELODRAMA

(Potiphar re-enters, and the tearful wife via gestures explains the presence of Joseph's torn shirt.) Soldiers enter. Potiphar orders them to bring in Joseph).

BILLY: Ah, the woman scorned! (Joseph, guarded by two soldiers, is brought in, in chains.) Circumstantial evidence! But too often it convicts. Especially if there is no chance for cross-examination. (Billy mocks the unctuousness of Potiphar – the foolishness of Mrs. Potiphar's rage – then leaves the stage.) She held Exhibit A. Who was Potiphar to doubt her story? (Billy waves an ironical farewell to the pair) (Weeping, Mrs. Potiphar is led away by her husband.)

JOSEPH AND THE ANGEL OF INNOCENCE

(The guards release Joseph. He begins to dance, quietly. The Angel of Innocence enters and dances with Joseph.)

BILLY: And you can't burn the candle at both ends and expect to have light when you need it.

DANCE OF THE VIRGINS

BILLY: Consider the Wise and Foolish Virgins. (The Wise Virgins enter. The Foolish Virgins enter. Billy appears in a devil's mask.)

DEVIL: Hello, you beautiful bit of femininity. You're so pretty you'd look good – even in a burlap bag. Don't tell me to go away and forget you – I'm a memory expert. Kisses are the language of love – let's talk.

(Billy gathers the Foolish Virgins around him. The Wise Virgins begin to dance a slow waltz.)

WALTZ OF THE WISE VIRGINS

THE DEVIL'S DANCE ON A GROUND

BILLY: Who's sorry now? It was fun while it lasted . . . On with the wedding!

MARCH OF THE WEDDING DOLLS

THE SAMSON MELODRAMA

(Samson, standing erect and motionless, is seen on an elevation in the center of the stage. Delilah reclines on the stairs at his feet)

BILLY: Bulging biceps are wonderful. But the steel in muscles can become as fragile as chicken coop wire unless there's common sense between the ears. (Samson changes posture each time Billy speaks). Witness Samson and his dancing dollie, Delilah!

DELILAH'S DANCE

SCENE AND TRIUMPH MARCH OF THE PHILLISTINES

(Delilah views Samson asleep, then cautiously approaches him and cuts off his hair. Samson shakes the temple. Lights out! Billy enters, carrying a baseball bat.)

FINALE

SWING TO THE BAT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

BILLY: Samson was sold out for silver. Treachery and avarice – treason and greed! They march hand in hand. Samson knocked a clean hit off the Devil. But the old Devil is still in there pitching. Slam that temptation ball back at him and ram it down his throat. So swing the bat of righteousness! Swing the bat of faith! Hit a home run and knock the Devil out of the box!

I had a letter from Mrs. Billy Sunday saying I was making fun of her husband and that he was a very serious preacher. I was not making fun of him at all. If parts of this were funny it was because of his making all of his statements in the vernacular, and to me, his vernacular was extraordinary poetry. At times his language was so graphic and so humorous that it seemed a strange combination of terrific sincerity, naivete and lots of good American "corn". He always said that "God like a little humour as is evidenced by the fact that he made the parrot, the monkey and some of you people."

Billy Sunday said "I'm an old-fashioned preacher of the oldtime religion that has warmed this cold world's heart for 2000 years. I believe the Bible is the word of God from cover to cover. I want to preach the gospel so plainly that men can come from the factories and not have to bring a dictionary. Too many of us have been wrapping the Bible in mothballs. I am trying to bring the Bible into the day's work and the day's pleasures of the men and women whom I urge to accept it. I want to make it real and vital and definite and personal and not a talcum-powder, violet-scented, lady-like proposition. I want people to know what I mean. What do I care if some puffy-eyed, dainty little dibly-dibly preacher goes tibly-tibly around because I use plain Anglo-Saxon words." As Billy himself says, "A revival gives the church a little digitalis instead of an opiate. What

we need is the good old kind of revival that will cause you to love your neighbors and quit talking about them."

Everybody seems to have a different interpretation of "Salome" and I, like everybody else, have been fascinated by this strange subject. I have done two versions of this story. One was about half an hour long and really told the story like the opera by Richard Strauss and I used a reduced version of the music. When the curtain goes up (Nicholas Remisoff did the decor and costumes), John is standing up on a pedestal, with Herod on his throne with Salome lying on the floor at his feet and the chorus of Jews arguing. Herodias does not make her entrance until later. This version of "Salome" was entirely impractical because I knew it needed a big orchestra and the subject matter was too shocking to take on tour – so I did this only a very few times.

I later used only the Dance of the Seven Veils music and it was a pas de deux between Salome and Herod. Again Remisoff did the costumes and they were a very unusual conception of Salome – maybe a little Beardsleyesque. Salome is almost like a fragile, baby-doll type. I have never seen Salome like this and I find it a fascinating conception.

There is so much to say about Ballet in conjunction with the Bible. The subject is endless. □



Alexandra Danilova as Mrs. Potiphar (at left) in Ruth Page's "Billy Sunday Love Stories of the Bible"