

THOUGHTS ON TERPSICHORE'S LIVELY FEET

by David Eden (Moskowitz)

Lincoln Kirstein's pioneering book, **Dance – A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing**, original edition 1935, reproduced by Dance Horizons, Inc., Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1969, remains the most authoritative study of an art to which Kirstein himself was destined to give shape and context in America.

If you want to understand classic theatrical dancing both as a theatrical spectacle and as social expression, this is the book to read. Kirstein's purpose is twofold: to acquaint his readers with ballet as an inherited tradition, and to place the story of dance in the broader context of economic, religious and moral changes.

Kirstein draws a logical parallel between tribal, ritual and primitive dancing, and that of dance designed for the theatre. Between the spontaneous outburst of feelings, such as stamping of joy, stamping of anger, or even frenzy en massé (as in his brilliant chapter on **Dance Macabre** of the medieval period), and the patterned, rhythmical sequences ordained for the theatrical spectacle. The resulting rhythm, Kirstein appears to be saying, is a reflection of the way people live, their social structure and organization.

He then takes the reader through Greek Theatre, where the Dionysian festivities gave birth to dance in the theatre, to the Roman pantomime ballet, where mimes enhanced their mute characterizations with a brilliant display of physical skills (the development of **ballet d'action** owes much to those mimes).

In subsequent chapters, as theatrical dance becomes solidified as a tradition, Kirstein emphasizes the dancer's heritage in the creative vitality of dance. He thus describes in detail the historical development of technique and the great choreographers and dancers who expanded the possibilities inherent in the form, and offered new ways of seeing human bodies in motion.

Reading the book from the perspective of the present, one can quarrel with Kirstein's emphasis on the latter stages in the evolution of theatrical dance, i.e. – the contribution and the legacy of the **Russian Ballet** is given short shrift

with the great contribution of Petipa not being sufficiently emphasized! Paradoxically, these shortcomings will be remedied by his own work with Balanchine, who he brought to America, and by his founding of The New York City Ballet, a great company built on principles inherited from the Russian Imperial Ballet School, but with a style made relevant to contemporary America.

This book remains one of the greatest contributions to understanding dance from one of the best dance scholars the world will ever know.

For the younger readers, who might find the Kirstein book challenging in its scope and style, the Mary Clarke and Clement Crisp book **Ballet – An Illustrated History** is highly recommended (Universe Books, N.Y.C. in 1973).

The title is very apt, for the black and white pictures complement perfectly the narrative that bursts with color and visual detail, and that bespeaks the authors' love of the dance.

The book begins with the period when seeds of ballet were planted in Renaissance Italy and where the social dances of the time nourished the burgeoning form that was to become known as dance for the theatre. The writers illustrate, with much humor, the early dancers of the Renaissance struggling merely to walk, let alone dance, while wearing 40 pounds of elaborate costume. They describe the social stigma that became associated with ballet, when 19th century ballerinas in their virginal white were the favourite courtesans of the gentlemen in the grand tiers, while, ironically, other ballerinas danced 'en travestie' (dressed as men), because the classical danseur was held in low repute. (We did not free ourselves completely of this prejudice.) Among other things, the book seeks to impress its readers with the dedication of ballet practitioners. Ballet is hard work. The legends are thus humanized. Taglioni danced until she fainted; Pavlova danced even as her toes bled.

The pictures with which the book is illustrated follow in the footsteps of Terpsichore (the Muse of the Dance) and the road she traversed, as a result of social upheavals and

plain chance, especially in modern times.

They tell the story of Serge Diaghilev, the great Russian impresario, who himself never danced or choreographed, but was to a large extent responsible for the direction ballet has taken in the 20th century. The national ballet companies emerging after his death are by and large creations of people who worked with him at one time or another, i.e., Dame Ninette de Valois, founder of the **Royal Ballet**.

Finally, this book is especially notable for discussing the way in which each nation played a particular role in further developing the art of dance; and how each in turn influenced other national schools.

Relative to the West, the Soviets publish a great deal of dance literature. Here is an example of one very important contribution to dance criticism, and two others that are representative of the Soviet approach to dance criticism. In addition, I chose to discuss these books, as they are expected to be published in English soon.

Soviet dance criticism suffers from the same malaise that afflicts Soviet dance — a limited perspective.

There has been a recent rush of Soviet books dealing with dance themes. By the very nature of the approach taken, these books illustrate what a drawback the past sixty years have been for the development of dance in the Soviet Union. The creative impulse that characterized Russian dance at the turn of the century and was given further impetus by the visionary Diaghilev, and in turn evolved into an ideal wedding of all the arts, was sharply circumscribed by an act of political intervention. Hence, Soviet dance was forced to return to the rigid academic guidelines that were the tradition of the Russian Imperial Ballet for most of the 19th century, but with that tradition rendered irrelevant. The greater impact of the Diaghilev revolution was experienced in the West, ultimately centering on two of the most creative personalities to have emerged in the 20th century, Stravinsky and Balanchine. Both were revolutionaries in the truest sense of the word, for they chose to build upon a tradition, using the past as part of the creative process to provide an impetus for change. Their own creations contain numerous postscripts to the past. Balanchine's ballets abound with references to Petipa and the Imperial School of Ballet, while Stravinsky, whose scores were to change 20th century music, drew his inspiration from the same motives that had impelled Mussourgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and the 'Mighty Five'. Because Stravinsky and Balanchine possessed an extraordinary power of

assimilation, their art drew upon, and by an ironic twist of history, transcended their native boundaries.

It is to the great credit of the late Yury Slonimsky, the dean of Soviet dance criticism and the founder of the "analytical school of ballet criticism", whose formative years were spent in the turbulent and wildly eclectic years of the 1920's, that he, as one of very few Soviet dance critics is able to bring the subject matter of his book, "Pushkin's Ballet Verses" (Baletnye Stroki Pushkina: Leningrad, 1974, 182 p.) into a reasonably satisfactory focus. He achieves this by totally immersing himself in the social and cultural milieu of the early 19th century, which provided an impetus for Pushkin's own work.

During this period, dance, which has previously been relegated to a carnival setting, began to move indoors. This came about as a result of the emergence of a western-minded aristocracy which sought to make all art and entertainment to cater to their own new-found sense of social snobbery and affectation.

Slonimsky skillfully describes Pushkin's admiration for ballet, citing numerous references to it in his correspondence, in which he often discoursed on ballet personalities and ballet performances. (It should be noted as an aside, that Pushkin had a peculiar attraction to women's ankles. That he had a particular interest in ballerina's shapely legs could be seen by a glance at his notebooks, the margins of which are filled with feet that are clearly point.)

**Diana's breast, the face of Flora
Are charming, friends, but I would put
Them both aside and only for a
Glimpse of Terpsichore's foot.**

(Eugene Onegin)

But Pushkin did not limit his observation of the dance scene to the fashionable salons and theatres of Russia's glittering capital city. The poet's frequent sojourns outside the cosmopolitan centers, often due to social pressures or political directives, led him to observe how movement — folk dancing — became a vehicle for expressing the emotions and sentiments of a largely inarticulate people. This realization was converted by Pushkin into a dramatic and stylistic device.

The author is most in his element when talking of Pushkin's works as a source for the ballet. His narrative poetry, especially **The Prisoner of the Caucasus** and **The Fountain of Bakhchisarai**, proved to be highly attractive to the sentimentally-minded ballet masters, who sought to convert

Pushkin's elusive plays and exotic landscapes into the orientalism that was then in vogue. Their intent was to move the audience to tears at the fate of the victimized heroine, while entertaining it with theatricalized ethnic dances.

The one notable and important exception to this was the Swedish born choreographer, Charles Louis Didelot (1767 - 1837), whose career in Russia spanned the same time period as Pushkin's.

Just as the history of Russian literature can be divided into two periods, before and after Pushkin, so can the evolution of dance in Russian be divided into two periods, before and after Didelot. Slonimsky documents Pushkin's interest in the choreographer's work, noting his habitual presence at performances of Didelot ballets. Pushkin was attracted to Didelot because he shared Didelot's attitudes towards art, as well as his political beliefs.

Slonimsky's penetrating analysis of the relationship of Didelot's ballet *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* to the Pushkin original is the high point of his study, and a valuable original contribution to dance scholarship. Indeed, the critic sees Didelot, like Pushkin, as an artist of transition, who rejected the ballet as being but a series of lyric dances or sentimental tales in mythological guise. Didelot was the first to translate Pushkin's masterpiece into ballet terms. From the ballet's first performance, he was accused of being unable to approximate the haunting quality of the poem. His critics disagreed with his decision to move the time of the action back to the days of the early Slavs and to transform the poem's protagonist into a young prince by the name of Rotislav. Didelot made the changes, it was commonly believed, in order to make the ballet politically neutral, and hence safe, at a time when Pushkin had been sent into exile in Bessarabia for writings that the government considered to be provocative.

Slonimsky is the first to reconsider this long held opinion. He sees Didelot's choice of the ancient Caucasus as the setting for his version of *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* as being in keeping with the Byronic romanticism that was developing at the time. Furthermore, Didelot imbued his locale with a rich array of references, that, as Slonimsky observes, were only too apparent to those who wished to see its significance on the eve of the Decembrist revolt. Slonimsky's thesis seems to suggest that the ballet is no mere romantic poster gallery, but an intense and provocative drama, which approached hitherto forbidden outposts of reality. Indeed, his description of the ballet seems to suggest a degree of engagement which would not again

find expression until the advent of the twentieth century.

Whatever the book's idiosyncracies and prejudices, and there are some, this is still the discerning, all-encompassing criticism that further enhances Slonimsky's unique status in the forefront of Soviet dance criticism. Unfortunately, a look at some of the other recent criticism to emerge from the Soviet Union yields a less comforting vision. They all suggest, to a degree, a failure to scrutinize the material critically.

A prime example is B. Lvov-Anochin's book on the principal artists of the Bolshoi Ballet, *The Artists of the Bolshoi Theatre*, (Mastera bol'shogo baleta (Moscow, 1976), 240 pp.). The author meticulously outlines the particular achievements of every performing artist he discusses, treating each one as a milestone.

The section that should concern us most is the one purporting to be a discussion of the creativity of the Bolshoi chief choreographer, Yury Grigorovich, who received the coveted Lenin prize for his full-evening spectacle *Spartacus*. In general, the Soviet artistic establishment considers him to be the Soviet Union's leading contemporary choreographer. Thus, it is not surprising that the author, too, regards Grigorovich's work and in particular his 1968 opus *Spartacus* as being the culmination of all Russian ballet traditions, going as far as to link Grigorovich's ability to tell a story in terms of dance with that of Mikhail Fokine, who gave early twentieth century ballet a whole new range of dramatic expression. Nothing could be further removed from the truth. Fokine's revolutionary genius lay in his introduction of intellectual content into the ballet, as well as in his ability to synthesize all the particular elements that go into the making of the ballet. Thus, in a Fokine ballet, the dynamics and the perspective are fixed by the music and design as well as by the movement, converting it all into a tapestry.

In *Spartacus*, Grigorovich's limitations as a choreographer are revealed, limitations which afflict all Soviet ballet. Grigorovich has a considerable flair for making the narrative of a ballet apparent in terms of dance alone, without resorting to the archaic gestures that still abound in Soviet ballet. However, he is not at all an innovator like his predecessor, Fokine, for he falls victim to the neo-realist style that has been dictated to Soviet ballet by political directive. It is a mode of presentation that Grigorovich seems to support time and again, in public statements and also in his choreographic efforts. Furthermore, a familiarity with his works tends to suggest that he might not be able to choreo-

graph outside of this dictated style. Grigorovich's dance vocabulary gives every detail and gesture the quality of a metaphor and has no subtlety beyond its rather overt showiness. It is precisely the attention to significant detail and the dislike for purely decorative effect that makes the older choreographer's ballets so absorbing on repeated viewing. Grigorovich abandons detail in favor of the grand gesture, which is especially disconcerting to the Western eye. In its attempt to be overwhelming *Spartacus* reeks of epic pomposity.

The Soviet choreographer uses the dance soliloquy as a compositional principle that is meant to reveal the protagonist's inner thoughts and to serve as a springboard for the ballet's action. But the device falls flat, since it actually offers no insight into the character's inner makeup. Unfortunately, this only serves to make the characters one dimensional and prone to caricature.

In all fairness, Grigorovich has to struggle against an insurmountable obstacle in the form of Aram Khachaturyan's unbelievably banal score for *Spartacus*. This music actually hinders the dramatic unity of the ballet resulting in a work which, both thematically and structurally, does not arise organically out of the music but is superimposed upon it in massive choreographic blocks. For this reason, Lvov-Anochin's assertion of the symphonic unity that characterizes a Grigorovich ballet betrays a certain critical negligence.

Another book of great interest is *Soviet Ballet Theatre, 1917-1967* (Sovetskii baletnyi teatr, 1917-1967, ed. V.M. Krasovskaya (Moscow, 1976), 376 pp.), an anthology of ballet history, which provides useful commentary on the evolution of dance in the Soviet era. The article by E. Surits on the *Beginning of the Road* (Nachalo puti), which discusses Soviet ballet in the 1920's is especially worth reading for its mildly mocking description of over zealous ballet masters in the immediate post-revolutionary period, who sought to make the classics conform to the new revolutionary reality. This culminated in the undeniably ludicrous retitling of *The Sleeping Beauty* (Spyashchaya krasavitsa) into *Dawn of Freedom* (Zarya svobody). The naive en-

thusiasm, which led to such attempts is shown in its total inappropriateness, for *The Sleeping Beauty*, the grandest of all the Petipa ballets, is also his homage to an aristocratic way of life that lionized him and formed the source of his inspiration.

There are other fine essays in the anthology, especially those dealing with the economic plight of the great theatres during and immediately following the civil war. Many talk of the change in the type of public which began to follow the arts after the October revolution, resulting in audiences which were indiscriminately enthusiastic and undoubtedly contributed to the sense of exhilaration which pervaded the time.

The studies of Diaghilev and Fokine, among others, are all commendable, but are not on the level of the criticism that one finds in the West. The reason for this is simple. At least in dance, the tremendous burst of creativity that originated in Russia came to fruition in the West, after being introduced by the Diaghilev company. Innovative artists like Stravinsky, Bakst, Benois, Fokine, Nijinsky and many others too numerous to mention, all chose to remain in the West, rather than return to post-revolutionary Russia. It was in the West, nurtured by the atmosphere created by the Diaghilev troupe, that Balanchine's unique talent was revealed. It is safe to say that here lie the roots of the creativity that characterizes Western ballet, and hence, Western ballet criticism.

In the second scene of Fokine's remarkable ballet *Petrushka*, the grotesque puppet-like character knocks his head against the wall, and he looks up pleadingly at the portrait of the "great magician", who even when not physically present, seems to exercise complete control over him. He then tries to break through the limited space assigned to him, to enter a world of larger dimensions. But an unseen force prevents him from doing so. He has the longing but not the ability to break away. As performed with great conviction by the emigre dancer, Baryshnikov, the irony of *Petrushka's* plight becomes only too apparent. It is, in a nutshell, the story of the contemporary Soviet ballet scene. □