

LIONESSE IN THE ORCHESTRA PIT

by Giora Manor

A small but significant part of the once famous Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo is well and alive in Tel-Aviv. I met her recently, made aware of her existence by Jack Anderson, the American dance critic, who is now engaged in writing the history of the Ballet Russe.

She is now retired, of course, but still very temperamental, her hair blond, her manner brisk, and her name is Rachel Chapman. For more than 30 years she was part and (rather important) parcel of the B.R.dM.C. as the staff pianist of that illustrious company, accompanying rehearsals and playing in the orchestra pit during performances.

"Mind you, I never played at classes, never," she keeps insisting.

Rachel ("Rachel, like in French, no one ever called me Miss Chapman, just Rachel...," she is quick to inform me at our first meeting) worked with all of "them", Massine, Balanchine, Mijinska, de Mille, the stars like Tallchief, Danilova, Franklin, Danielian, Youskevitch, and of course the conductors, Efrem Kurtz, Antal Dorati and the rest.

"A blond Polish lioness" Agnes de Mille called her after working on "Rodeo" with Rachel, who, as was her wont, had given the choreographer a piece of her musical mind. "You see, during rehearsal I am the orchestra, and I play music, and the choreographer shouldn't take liberties with what the composer wrote. It has to be right."

Most rehearsal pianists are unsung heroes, representing conductor and orchestra in the rehearsal-hall, disappearing into the orchestra-pit at performances. Rachel Chapman got her share of the critical limelight, perhaps because several times the Ballet Russe used piano concertos as accompaniment, such as Tchaikovsky's in G major for Balanchine's "Ballet Imperial", Nijinska's "Ancient Russia" (Tchaikovsky's again, the B flat minor) or the Chopin Concerto in E minor.

One may safely assume that Rachel has played the Tchaikovsky concerto more often than any other pianist in the world. "Ballet Imperial" was in the company's repertory for many years from its creation in 1941, when Balanchine did it as a sort of tribute to the spirit of the great French choreographer Marius Petipou, who made Russian ballet in the last decade of the 19th century into the magnificent thing it was. "Ballet Imperial" is an evocation of the spirit of St. Petersburg, the city where Balanchine began his career as a student. There is no plot or story-line, just the atmosphere of elegance and opulence, which one may perceive in Mstislav Doboujinsky's backdrop for the ballet, resplendent in blue, silver and gold, rich draperies with imperial eagles and a vista of the Neva River.

Ballet imperial is a ballet without a plot, as luminously incomprehensible as the old classics were. It begins with a solemn, pompous, vaguely uneasy mood, groups and solos that turn into brilliant bravura; then comes a touching pantomime scene, with softer dances, a scene which suggests a meeting, a misunderstanding, a reconciliation, a loss; and then a third section succeeds, even more vertiginously brilliant than the first, in which everybody shines, individually, in clusters, the boys, the girls, the stars, and all in unison. The musicality of the choreography is as astonishing as its extraordinary ease in affording surprises and virtuous passages.

Rachel Chapman was ideal for dancers in the piano part - says Edwin Denby (*Looking at the Dance*, Feb. 21, 1945, p. 93).

There is hardly a critic's notice of the "Ballet Imperial" which does not praise Rachel for the coordination, or rather symbiosis, which she created between dancers and pianist.

"Oh, I never changed the tempo to suit the dancer," Rachel states categorically. "When I play, I play music, I play Tchaikovsky, and that's that. I don't even always look at the stage. But, of course, I know exactly what every dancer is doing all the time. And when the ballerina is doing her fouettés, I watch carefully, to end exactly with her, it would not do otherwise... But no tampering with the score ! Of course there are always cuts, a whole piano concerto is much too long for a ballet, but no accommodation to the whims of choreographer or ballerina."

Stern but just, and still very much a dancer's pianist. Otherwise how can one explain her being summoned time and again to play for famous companies.

When Bronislava Nijinska created "Ancient Russia" for the B.R.dM.C. in 1944 she used Tchaikovsky's B-flat minor Piano Concerto, and Rachel was at the keyboard.

"Madame Nijinska did not always listen too carefully to the music. There was a place where the boys came jumping in from the wings, and she made them jump not on the beat, but somewhere in the middle of the bar. Impossible. Perhaps her hearing was not too good. Anyhow, I couldn't take it any more." And Rachel gets up, and claps her hands for me to demonstrate the rythm, she sings the melody and hops about, forgetting her age, to show me how absurd it was.

"Impossible, eh ? Wrong. So I got up and told her, in Russian, of course, that something was wrong with the timing. 'What, are you teaching me my job ?' she shouted. 'No, Madame, but this is a musical matter, and music is my business,' and I took my hat, which was always on top of the piano, put it on and went to another rehearsal room, and asked the pianist there to change places with me. Well, she was furious, but later she asked me to accompany the performances, and we became friends again. And what's more, the jumps were corrected..." And Rachel smiles at the victory of art over ignorance.

Rachel Chapman was born in Warsaw into the very musical, Jewish, Bodestein family (her brother was one of the founding members of the Israeli Philharmonic, then the

Palestine Orchestra). In 1933 she came to the U.S., where she married her husband, who was later killed in the Pacific as a soldier during the Second World War.

She had studied music to become a concert pianist. She never had any dance lessons, and her first encounter with ballet was about a year after she immigrated to America and was asked to stand in for a rehearsal pianist who worked for the B.R.dM.C., at that time managed by Col. de Basil. She finished her job, and the company went back to Europe. To her great surprirse she got a telegram requesting her to come immediately to London, to join the company. Apparently there had been some argument about musical interpretation between Sergei Grigoriev, who had been Diaghilev's regisseur, and the management, and it was decided to call in Rachel.

"Well, I came, and that was it. It was to become an association which lasted for 30 years." She stayed with the company, later managed by Sergei Denham, till its disbanding in 1964.

"I belonged. It was not just a job, I was part of the Ballet Russe family," she reminisces.

"We used to go on tours, spending weeks and months together, in hotels — always first class ones; in theaters and rehearsal-rooms. You see everything, know evérybody... But I am not goint to gossip. One has to be discreet, not to meddle in other people's affairs. Once on a tour in America, Denham was sitting next to me on the bus. Suddenly he asked me what I thought about a young dancer who had lately been getting many big roles. I knew that there was something between the girl and Mr. Denham. So I said, I had no opinion, I was a musician. He got the message. But I shouldn't be telling you this, one has to be descreet." And she goes back to telling me about her history as company pianist.

"In 1939, when the war broke out, we were in Paris. Most of the company members managed to get on board some ship, to get back to America."

For 30 years the B.R.dM.C. was Rachel's home and the Tchaikovsky Concerto became her trademark.

"The piano part was brilliantly played by Rachel Chapman who seems as much a part of the Ballet Russe as Danilova herself," writes a critic.

And A. Frankenstein of the San Francisco "Chronicle" says:

The performance was the more remarkable for the superb work of the ensemble, a remark which applies to the pit as well as the stage. Natalia Krassovska, Maria Tallchief and James Sterbuckwer superb in the principal roles, and Rachel Chapman was equally fine as the piano soloist playing the Chopin Concerto in E-minor. All might have had better support.

Touring constantly meant not only living from a suitcase, but also meeting a new instrument at each stand. The critic of a newspaper in Phoenix, Arizona in 1946 describes it thus:

But it was the pianist in the pit, on a piano which was anti-quoted and flat-toned, who was the true star of "Ballet Imperial", Rachel Chapman. She received the gracious homage of conductor Ivan Boutnikoff, the men in the orchestra, the dancers on stage and the large and enthusiastic audience when she finished. And though sick at heart with what she believes to be the worst piano she had ever been asked to play on, she gave such an inspiring performance that it will be forever memorable.

"Well," Rachel adds 30 years later with a smile "he did not know that there was also a pedal missing..."

When the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo folded in 1964, that seemed to Rachel to be the end of her career in ballet. But soon she was asked by Sol Hurok, the impresario, to work with the foreign companies he brought to the U.S. And before long she was working again with the Royal Ballet from London, the Bolshoi from Moscow, Moiseyev's company and many others. She went on till retiring to Tel Aviv, where her relatives live, in 1974.

The role of the accompanist in music is a rather ambivalent one. Gerald Moore, who became famous through his accompanying all the great virtuosi, called his autobiography *Am I Too Loud?*, because accompanists are supposed to stay in the shadow.

"But in ballet this is quite different," Rachel states. "One has to give the dancer the security, the right tempo. You are, first of all, playing great music. I would never let the choreographer or dancer tamper with it. You can make cuts, of course, but still be faithful to the composer. I would never let a dancer down during performance, but I would not allow them to fool around with the music.

Take, for instance, Danielian, an excellent dancer. But he was always too fast, he would run away with the beat. But not because he isn't musical or does not care! Oh no, his inner rhythm is very lively and his temperament would carry him away. There was no use telling him, he knew. He was brilliant, and I could do nothing but play just a little faster, so as not to spoil the performance.

Once I was asked to play in the orchestra for the Royal Ballet when they danced at Lincoln Center. During the last rehearsal Nureyev stopped and asked the conductor, Lanchberry, to play a certain passage slower. I was amazed that he agreed. After the rehearsal I asked him about it. 'Oh,' he said, 'it is all right. In the evening I will take the right tempo, as the composer wrote it, and Rudi will manage: And so he did!' she ends her story triumphantly, savouring the victory of art over star self-indulgence.

In 1948 a reporter for the "New York Times" visited a rehearsal of the Ballet Russe and in his report he writes:

Sometimes she will slam down the piano cover in the middle of rehearsal and berate everyone who happens to have been crammed into the drab rehearsal room on the top floor of the Metropolitan Opera House. She may tell Paul Strauss [the conductor] that he knows nothing about conducting; rebuke Fred Franklin on his dancing; or take the entire company to task for being off beat. She has never conducted and cannot dance. But she is almost invariably correct because of nearly flawless memory. In the case of the Ballet Russe de

Monte Carlo Rachel Chapman is a walking ballet library.

Who was the most musical choreographer she had worked with ? “Perhaps Balanchine,” she answers, “but I worked with so many great artists, one can’t tell. They were all wonderful...”. And her mind goes back to all those years

of ballet, the mementos of which are neatly stacked in folders and plastic bags, programmes signed by the artists, photos with inscriptions by famous ballerinas, all thank-you’s to Rachel, filling the drawers of her modest, neat little flat in Tel Aviv. A lifetime spent among the glory, suffering, beauty and hardship that was the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. ■

