

# TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

by Giora Manor

Style is the dress of thought;  
a modest dress,  
Neat, but not gaudy, will true  
critics please  
Samuel Wesley (1700)

Wonders don't last for ever.

Less than five years ago America discovered Jiri Kylian. His ballets swept over the stage in a wonderful flow of swirling movement. Some of his devices, surprising at first – like his penchant for showing his dancers' backs or his use of momentum to extend moves and turns – became a personal style. Hardly anybody bothered to discuss the tedious, shopworn question of modern dance versus traditional ballet elements in his works, because what he created was so personal, a unique blend of well-known steps and forms made to look like newly minted coins.

Kylian's works all bear his hallmark, be they exuberant, like "Sinfonietta"; tragic, like "Overgrown Path"; hilarious, like "Symphony in D"; or serene, like "Symphony of Psalms". What they possess is style.

Style in art, a phenomenon which is easy to recognise but hard to define, is always an act of elimination, of willingly refraining from using certain forms or means. It is a narrowing of the wide field of possibilities offered by the artist's material, a drawing of boundaries, a self-imposed frugality. Pablo Picasso once said, "God . . . has no real style. He just goes on trying other things." But while Picasso himself never ceased exploring new "things", he nevertheless limited himself at any given period to very clearly defined artistic means. He spoke in many languages, but one at a time.

Creating a personal language, as Kylian succeeded in doing, carries with it the inherent danger of repetition. Several critics found that in his recent ballet, "Forgotten Land", to Britten's Requiem Symphony, "there was nothing new" . . . which reminds one of the anecdote about an admirer of Britten, who told the composer he liked his operas, but found them very similar. "Perhaps you are right," Britten

replied, "they all have the same notes, only in a different order."

For me, "Forgotten Land" was poignant, meaningful, a further development of Kylian's choreographic language, welcome like a letter from an old friend. What I admired in this work again was his ability to use the by now well-known devices in new contexts. A prime example of this is the dancers walking away into the distance. In "Sinfonietta" it was like Charlie Chaplin's hopeful stepping into the sunset; in "Symphony of Psalms", a disappearing into the cosmic void; and in "Forgotten Land", like facing the threatening waves of a storm-whipped ocean.

But apparently some of my colleagues tire easily. It seems strange that such a sensitive critic as Tobi Tobias feels that "as for Kylian's ballets, having seen each twice and having duly acknowledged their effective moments, I never want to see them again." (New York Magazine, August 3, 1981).

Such an attitude reflects, I am afraid, the prevalent mood of subscription ticket holders, who, like Diaghilew talking to Cocteau, want "to be astonished" and are unable to savour the beauty of change within a well-known style.

Surely the primary task of all art is to make us see familiar sights in a new, revealing light. But for a change to be discernable, it has to be seen against a recognisable background, which is exactly what a style provides. Without a grid, there is no innovation. This is exactly the advantage of Kylian over many other gifted choreographers.

A quite different case of an important modern choreographer who seems recently to be under attack is John Neumeier. Many felt that he overreached himself in tackling the monumental "Matthäus-Passion". "Neumeiers eitlen Griff ins Leere (Neumeier's vain reaching into the void)" is Hellmuth Karasek's word for it (Der Spiegel, nr. 27, 1981).

Before watching the four-hour long monumental work to Bach's great music, I was afraid Neumeier's dramatic flair would lead him to picturesqueness, to illustrations of Christ's tragic path to death. Indeed he found new means of expression for the Passion, such as the movement that travels through the group like a tremble and gains momentum till it is taken up by all the dancers.

At the beginning of Neumeier's choreographic career Horst Koegler found in him "a brilliant mind at work. Both dramaturgically and choreographically . . . One of the rare specimens of choreographer who never seems to repeat himself." (Dance and Dancers, May 1974). Does that imply a lack of style? Certainly Neumeier approaches each new ballet the way a director in the theatre should, looking for appropriate forms, for means to express the infrastructure beneath the dramatic material. He does not impose his style on the subject matter arbitrarily but nevertheless molds the drama in his own way.

Of all the different ballet versions of "Romeo and Juliet" I have seen, Neumeier's was the one closest to Shakespeare's play. He was able to find movement which expressed the dramatic content as well as the dramatic form without recourse to mime, down to the smallest details such as Juliet reluctantly holding her hands the way her parents did, or the very effective device of a troupe of strolling players, which solved the problem of the friar's explanation of the potion's action when offering it to Juliet and which also helped to turn Mercutio's death into a macabre joke.

The same dramatic insight made his "Kameleindame" into a portent of the revival of a ballet form thought of as obsolete, namely the full-evening ballet. Nevertheless, Neumeier's best work is, in my opinion, the abstract "Mahler's 3rd" (Symphony), which has no dramatic plot, but is a drama of sorts. Perhaps G. B. Shaw is right when he says, "Effectiveness of assertion is the alpha and omega of style" ("Man and Superman").

The cardinal question of style is flexibility. When style loses its elasticity, it ceases to be a personal written hand and becomes an external limitation, a prison — as often as not a voluntary one — an instrument of immobility rather than a grid or a term of reference which one may use freely.

Of course a creative style may lead by elimination to a dead end. Perhaps the case of Pina Bausch, who certainly is a great creative force, seems to be a good example. Her preoccupation with certain human relationships, which at first opened the scope of dramatic movement to new ways of expression, now tends to limit her to a specific emotional gamut. But Pina Bausch is a very special cuttle of fish and it does not matter if she goes on creating in her idiosyncratic style as long as one does not have to feed on her caviar alone.

Style has to be observed dynamically, dialectically, as it evolves. Though it is a fixative, restricting element, emphasising the steadfast, reoccurring self-imposed boundaries of art, it is not a codified set of rules. Only when it ossifies into sterile repetition does it cease to be a language and become a burden, narrowing the creative freedom of the artist.

This is not the case of any of the choreographers discussed above. All three belong to the category of true creators who did not borrow or adhere to a given style, like the many who use, for example, Graham's language to their own disadvantage. Such dependence on a ready-made style often leads the choreographer to say not what he set out to say but what the language was invented to say in the first place.

In the wake of real creative artists a host of epigones travels, swept willy-nilly in a predictable direction. That is the negative side of "style" while the creation of a language of artistic expression is a breaking of new ground. Often innovation surprisingly quickly becomes a new orthodoxy. But it seems churlish to regard the crystallising of an artist's style as stagnation, especially when it shows constant development, as with Kylian, Neumeier and Bausch. One should be able to enjoy a tiger's gracefulness, a cat's litheness even if they are not chameleons. □