

THE PRODIGAL SON

BY
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As a source for dance works, the theme of the prodigal son has not been especially prolific. For the tastes of the early years of ballet, choreographers probably found its lack of epic dimension a serious drawback. It deals, after all, with simple people, with family relationships; no battles are won or lost, no great hero emerges. More serious still, the story offers little occasion for the display of splendid and costly decor and costumes; only the episodes of "riotous living" — which merit no more description than that in the Bible — suggest the possibility of scenic wonders.

Fortunately for the 20th century, "riotous living" can include sexuality, and most modern versions have a seductress who engages the innocent youth in a sensuous pas de deux which, rather than the biblical famine, brings about his downfall. But the opening and closing scenes remain problematical; the rebellious youth seems too common a character to be very interesting, the forgiving father may easily be viewed as weak or merely stupid, and the dutiful elder brother may be something of a bore.

Of the choreographers whose prodigal sons I have been able to see or to read about, I have chosen to discuss several that have manipulated the parable in rather notable ways in order to make it more viable theatrical material. Each instance may be seen not only as an individual interpretation, but as a reflection of some of the artistic ideas current at the time of its conception.

Pierre Gardel's libretto for his *L'Enfant prodigue*, which was produced at the Paris Opéra in 1812, shows that a good deal of theatrical imagination had been at work on the outline of the plot. In his preface Gardel explains that he has violated the traditionally obligatory unities in order to include as many scenes as possible. Not long before he would have strictly observed the rules of French classicism and would more likely have taken his subject from Greek myth or drama. Now, however, the choreographer was well aware of what was needed to please the post-revolutionary audience, whose tastes had been formed not by the classics of the Opéra, but by the spectacular melodramas and vaudeville entertainments to be seen at the popular boulevard theatres. On the verge of romanticism, some sentiment was in order

as well, so Gardel's scenario neatly provides for a few tears at the end of its panorama of exotic settings.

To lure the working-class audience to the Opéra, Gardel invented not only new scenes, but a number of new characters. When the son Azael (Auguste Vestris) leaves his home in Goshen for the city of Memphis, he finds, "Le luxe égyptien y regne de toutes parts, les merveilles de l'art, de l'architecture brillent dans tous les monumens . . ." A religious ceremony occasions a grand temple scene with a variety of dances by virgins, priests, and slaves. Azael is attracted by the lovely Lia, who shyly admits her fondness for him. She goes to tell her father about him. But when she returns, Azael is dancing with several other girls, and Lia throws herself into the river. The people banish Azael who, after an arduous journey through the desert, reaches his home where he is welcomed by his father, mother, brother, and sweetheart. What a production it must have been!

When Kurt Jooss choreographed *The Prodigal Son* for his Folkwang Tanzbühne in Essen in 1931, he held a very different attitude toward his audience. Germany, never very creatively involved with classical ballet, was now the center of a new form of dance, Ausdruckstanz, the dance of expression, a vessel of cosmic experience and communication, opposed to the widespread conception of ballet as a vehicle of mere virtuosic display. While some of his contemporaries were primarily concerned with dance in relation to the development of the individual personality, Jooss applied the new theories to the realm of dance-drama. Approaching the Bible, he too made changes in the outline of the original parable, which A.V. Coton attributed to his need for "a plot suitable for his style of dramatic manipulation".

Coton finds Jooss's most notable invention here to be the creation of the "Mysterious Companion", a kind of personification of the threats encountered by the son on his travels. The stranger is at times an outright enemy, at others a false friend, but he consistently defeats the son until the final homeward journey, when the prodigal is able finally to repulse him. Here the son indulges not in riotous living, but in the pursuit of power, climaxed when he is invested with

a robe and crown. But he becomes a tyrant and is attacked by his former followers. Now the companion pretends to befriend him, presenting him to the queen of the harlots, but then denounces him to the people. Seeing that the elements of his destruction were pride and ambition, the prodigal humbly returns home.

Beryl de Zoete noted the structure: "The ballet opens with a monotonous rhythm of patriarchal simplicity . . . and passes through a series of splendid scenes depicting the Prodigal's journey . . . (until) his return and re-absorption into the patriarchal rhythm of the opening". She praised the ballet for its "intense poetic conception" and its "passionate and moving beauty". Coton remarked that Jooss's scenario, "touched upon almost every problem, moral, intellectual and emotional, with which man is faced in his social relationships. There is no preselytising, no emphasis of praise or blame". The only message: "none of us is beyond love; the only reward worth having".

At the time, curiously, no one paid attention to Jooss's changing the "riotous living" motif to the pursuit of power. Two years later, the choreographer remade his *Prodigal*, replacing Prokofiev's score with one composed especially for him by Frederick Cohen. By then, however, the Nazis in their rise to power, had forced Jooss to leave Germany and settle in England.

More than years separated the Germany of 1931 and the Sweden of 1957, when Ivo Cramer created his *Prodigal Son*, a work that Anna Greta Ståhle called "the most national of the Swedish repertoire". Cramer may have owed some of his interest in native material to his teacher Birgit Cullberg, who had studied with Jooss and who frequently drew her ballet themes from Scandinavian legend or literature. After many years of continental dominance, Swedish theatrical dance had begun to assert its own identity.

Cramer took his theme from the Bible, but told the story as it might have been envisioned by the peasants of the Swedish province of Dalecarlia, whose delightful 19th-century folk art retold biblical stories with characters in native costumes set against native scenes. The ballet's decor was designed by Rune Linstrom, who came from Dalecarlia, while Hugo Alfvén provided a score that blended actual folk tunes with original music composed in a consistent style.

Here the characters are father, brother, mother, false prophet, the Queen of Araby, and the Four Horsemen (power, war, pestilence, and death). "Colorful, gay, and amusing," wrote Oleg Kerensky, who saw it at the Edinburgh Festival. Here the son is led by the top-hatted prophet into

a boat bound for Araby, where he meets the queen, who leads him in a dance of merry-making. But his pleasures with her are interrupted by the appearance of the Four Horsemen, who frighten him into returning home. His repentance, remarked Kerensky, was not overly stressed, but the final scene led quickly into the folk dances that formed the finale of celebration. One avenue of appeal to the present, after all, is nostalgia.

On the contrary, George Balanchine's *Le Fils prodigue* was considered by most critics to be typical of the trendy work of the Diaghilev Ballets Russes, which produced it in 1929. Reviewing its revival by the New York City Ballet in 1950, Robert Sabin found it essentially a period piece: "The mixture of styles, alternating between slangy informality of idiom and serious and elevated emotionalism, the incessant attempt to be clever and different, the desire to shock, the combination of sophisticated wit and the most unabashed use of vaudeville devices — all these earmarks of the 1920s are to be found". Actually, *Le Fils prodigue* marked a drastic departure in genre for the Diaghilev company, which had been specializing in cold, formalistic works, and its movement roots can be traced, not to the Paris of its late 20s premiere, but to the early years of the Soviet Union, where the young Balanchine began to choreograph.

According to Boris Kochno, Diaghilev had commissioned the score from Serge Prokofiev in 1927, without specifying a theme but asking for something simple, timeless, and poetic; then it was Kochno who proposed the idea of the prodigal son and who eventually prepared the libretto. It was hardly a concept that would have appealed to the earlier Diaghilev, the one who cried to Jean Cocteau, "Etonne-moi!" After the Ballets Russes had become firmly associated with the avant-garde, the chic and the shocking no longer held such interest for him. "Assez de musiquette". was his order now.

His regisseur, Serge Grigoriev, recalled Diaghilev urging the cast of *Le Fils prodigue* to interpret the dramatic action to the full with appropriate emotion and admitted finding it "odd to hear Diaghilev extol in this way what for so many years he had been wont to condemn". Many welcomed the change. His former ballerina, Lydia Lopokova, wrote in London for *The Nation and Athenaeum*, remarked of Balanchine's choreography: "There were the same stylized versions of acrobatic actions and the same staccato mass movements with a wilful disregard of prettiness. But his other ballets seemed rather cold and empty and when I reflected on them, were about nothing. This time Balanchine seemed to succeed for the first time in using his technique for the expression of a serious dramatic motif".

Lydia Sokolova put the new ballet in the context of the evolving repertory of the Ballets Russes: "In recent years the Russian Ballet had fought shy of the dramatic and passionate works for which they had originally been famous, and Balanchine's specialty was a kind of up-to-date classicism. Now he had to do something to match the grandeur of the parable and the force of Prokofiev's music (Serge) Lifar was given an opportunity to let himself go in an emotional role, the like of which had not been seen in ballet since the days of Fokine. Yet how differently Balanchine and Fokine set about things! It was interesting to consider the contrast between the orgy in *Sheherazade* with its sprawling girls and bounding Negroes, and the orgy in *Le Fils prodigue* with its weird atmosphere and acrobatic groupings. In the first ballet there were cushions, wine and fruit; in the second the only props were a hoop and a trestle table".

While the new seriousness of tone was practically dictated to Balanchine by Kochno's libretto, the "acrobatic groupings" derived from his earlier work with the Petrograd theatre. In 1923, Balanchine had worked in Russia with FEKS (Eccentric Actor Factory). Yury Slonimsky accounted for the choreographer's interest in the group in terms of their "audacious, defiant rejection of the 'theatrical gods' of the past and their yearning to embrace and master everything which might be of use in the future when, it was hoped, art would join with revolutionary reality and win over the broad masses". Balanchine was then using devices drawn from the vocabularies of acrobats and clowns; his women dancers appeared in boldly high lifts, in splits, in the "bridge". His anti-realistic approach may also be traced to the theories of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who had urged that the essence of stage rhythm was the antithesis of everyday life, urging invention and stylization for the theatre. Slonimsky suggested the influence of Meyerhold in Balanchine's "modeling of sculptural groups as if to generalize individual experience".

But by the time Prokofiev set to work on the music for *Le Fils prodigue*, Soviet theatrical attitudes had been reversed; realism was in favor. The composer had expected Diaghilev to use real glass goblets, wine, and cushions; instead, he found a few all-purpose props. The choreography he considered "a shocking mixture of nightclub acts infused with formal classicism." The attitude of the designer, Georges Rouault, was enigmatic, for all the company saw him do, during the month of preparation that he spent with them in Monte Carlo, was balance a chair on his nose. Some say a few sketches were found in his hotel room the day be-

fore he returned to Paris; others say he made all the designs in a single night, the last he spent there.

W.A. Probert remarked of Balanchine's treatment of the parable that the swine were the only "notable" omission. However, the omission of the elder son is surely more significant. His absence at once simplifies and intensifies the plot; the conflict subsists only between father and prodigal; the resolution proceeds without interference. Actually, Balanchine's more direct source was Alexandre Pushkin's story *The Postmaster*, which describes three pictures illustrating the parable: In the first, the old father bids farewell to his restless son, giving him a blessing and a bag of money; in the second, the son is shown wasting his substance with dissolute companions; in the third, he returns penitent to the father. The ballet has exactly these three scenes and these same characters.

Bernard Taper has asserted that there is never a literal or naturalistic gesture in *The Prodigal Son* (as it has been known since 1950), but perhaps his definition of literal is unusually rigid. In the opening, the son points to the water jugs prepared for his trip as he counts them; he beats his thighs in anger; the father blesses his family with a simple, outstretched hand. There is also stylized movement, to be sure: the son's wonderful "corkscrew" pirouettes in deep plié, the figure twisted and turned inward; his magnificent leaps, their defiance heightened by the strong sideward thrust of one leg, the hands clenched in fists of tension. But the original gesture is clear beneath the form that intensifies it.

In contrast, the creatures the son encounters in the second scene are given movements that are bizarre, exaggerated distorted; they resemble monsters in a surreal nightmare. The eccentricities of FEKS may be seen in these weird beings, so marvelously described by Agnes de Mille: "Bald as eggs, dressed identically, moving identically, crowded together as closely as possible, the dancers hop over one another's back, circle around alternately squatting and rising . . . scramble about sideways in ridiculous positions like crabs."

The Siren, in Soviet style acrobatics, not only arches her body into the bridge, but "walks" in that position, rhythmically kicking up alternate legs. She climbs on the son's neck, slides down his back, wraps one leg around his body, then entwines his limbs with hers. An English critic commented: "Was there ever a woman more strangely serpentine? There was not a hint of voluptuousness in this scene. The prodigal was fascinated by the siren's inhuman contor-

tions, and he joined her in those strained acrobatical feats, which characterize Mr. Balanchine's choreography."

The movements of the final scene are, however, of the utmost simplicity. The son, leaning on a staff, inches his way along, reaches, falls, trembles, and finally pulls himself up into the arms of the father. In the beginning, he leaped in defiance; now he can barely drag himself along the floor on his knees until the father lifts him. The scene has the elevated and moving dignity of biblical language.

The contrast in Balanchine's choreography becomes especially striking when compared with the lack of it in the derivative version staged by David Lichine for the Original Ballet Russe in 1938. Edwin Denby described it as "more convincing as a busy night on the waterfront than as a parable. The action parts were lively, striking dances, but the lyric parts, the scenes of warning, of remorse, of reconciliation were mostly dumb show." The ballet is full of activity throughout; even in the final scene, before the son crawls back to the father, he has a dance of energetic torment that weakens the depiction of penitence and sorrow. The theme has not been spared its jazz version. Barry Moreland's *Prodigal Son* (in ragtime), choreographed in 1974 for London's Festival Ballet, concerns a family at the turn of the century. The boy goes off to return some seventy-

five years later after tap dancing his way through two world wars and their aftermaths. There is a Siren and also a Master of Ceremonies, who appears as an Evil Influence — all to the music of Scott Joplin. When the ballet was mounted for the Houston (Texas) Ballet last year, Suzanne Shelton remarked that "there is so much color, sound, and symbolism in this ballet that it takes a while to discover there's not much significant dancing." The character of the son, she found, remained unchanged, undeveloped; "he could only keep on trucking."

In 1966, when I was editing a book on the modern dance, I asked seven choreographers to describe how they would create a dance on the theme of the prodigal son. They came up with vastly divergent answers: biblical ambience and modern dress; elaborate sets and a bare stage; a cast of hundreds and a cast of two. It was José Limón who suggested that ultimate distillation, which ended for him, not in the celebration of reconciliation, but in quiet recognition of the chasm that must always exist between father and son, "the two dancers, remote as two planets, would circle — ostensibly for an eternity — each in his own lonely orbit."

I wish José could have lived to choreograph that dance. □

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