

WITH THE DANCERS

By EDWIN DENBY

THE Monte Carlo which I am always happy to see began the season with a new ballet Diaghilev would have been proud of: *Devil's Holiday*. And Massine who has been the Diaghilev for this production deserves equal praise. I have seen it three times and I like it better each time. Everything about it is full of zest, sincerity, freshness, and charm. Tommasini, as Mr. Martin so well said, seems to have had the time of his life writing the music on Paganini themes, and the variations in the first half of the last scene struck me as particularly beautiful. Berman, from whom we had wonderful drops for *Icare* last season, has given us five more which are as brilliant as any baroque Burnacini, but full of a contemporary intimate and personal sentiment, and also scenically discreet; and his costumes are the most wonderful imaginable — just look at the two Servants of the Devil, at the Devil's horrible disguise, or the farandole in the last scene, like a fashion show in heaven. (Judging from the published sketches the drops were not as well executed as they should have been — especially the landscape — nor all the costumes, but even so they were wonderful.)

And I am delighted too with the new choreographer, Frederick Ashton, the young Englishman who several years ago did the dances for *Four Saints*. His style is original, and originality it seems always looks awkward at first or unnecessarily complicated, or arbitrary, or something. His at first looks jerky, and you miss the large simple phrases you have

come to like in Fokine, or the expert mass climaxes of Massine, or the incredible long moments of extension and tenderness of Balanchine, like speech in the silence of the night. But you can praise all that and still praise Ashton too. If he derives from anyone it is, I think, Nijinska, with her hasty almost shy elegance, her hobbled toe-steps. He derives too it seems to me from the kind of awkward and inspired dancing that young people do when they come back from their first thrilling ballet evening and dance the whole ballet they have seen in their own room in a kind of trance. The steps do not look like school steps (though they are as a matter of fact correct), they are like discoveries, like something you do not know you can do, with the deceptive air of being incorrect and accidental that romantic poetry has. But how expressive, how true to human feeling the dances are. The perverse solemnity of the betrothal guests, the noble and pathetic stiffness of the betrayed betrothed, the curious frenzy of cruelty after the scandal; these are real emotions. The lovers' dream dance is restlessly hurried like a dream in which you know you are only dreaming; and what a final and brief conclusion it has into a deeper sleep. Like a Sitwell poem, the Hunting number is fussy and witty to heighten the lonely and frantic despair of the lost lover, interrupted by a diabolically hysterical substitute love. And the last scene is a whirl of inventions, of young eagerness that can hardly stop for the tenderness it dreams of, and that is tender without

knowing it. A choreographer who can call up so many sincere emotions, who keeps a steady line of increasing interest (and animation) throughout a long ballet, and does not fall into conventional tags at important moments is a real rarity who is worth being enthusiastic about, and what is more worth paying for a ticket to see. Personally the only part I do not care for is the fox's dance, which however gets a laugh and a hand.

Devil's Holiday is probably difficult to dance and it is danced very well by every one. The type of expression is not mimetic, but like that in classic ballet, in which the entire personality illuminates a role that the dancer has to conceive without the aid of detail. Danilova is particularly fine, of course; Franklin is noble, which he always does excellently; Krassovska is brilliant; and Zoritch, who shows none of the neck mannerism he used to have, is magnificent. (He is the great discovery of the season.) Platoff, of whom I think very highly as a dancer, was good but not as good as he generally is. All the dancers in the divertissement of the last scene were splendid.

As to the other novelties: *Igrouchka* (Fokine) is a doll-skit in the Chauve Souris style, which looks a little silly blown up to the proportions of an opera stage. *Capriccio Espagnol* has the benefit of Argentinita's exhaustless repertoire of regional steps, and of Massine's equally exhaustless repertoire of effective theatre. Most of it is pleasant to watch and the end is one of those bang-up finales that are indispensable to ring the curtain down if you have a lethargic audience. Massine has a solo, and in it he makes the other men look like little boys. The showmanship, the bite of his stage presence is superlative; look at the

slow curling of his hands as his dance begins. It is inaccurate to call such a dance as his Spanish in the specific sense (see the difference in stance, in the relation of the partners, in the casual interruption of dancing) and foolish to compare him with a real gypsy, who would probably have no gift for dominating a crowded stage and would hardly be visible at that moment to an ordinary audience. (Eglevsky, the new soloist, is very agreeable in this number; he has the world's finest plié, which delighted me in *Swan Lake*; his *Spectre de la Rose* was more brilliant than Guerard's but less distinguished. Theilade was fine in the *Spectre*, too.)

The other major novelty so far, the Massine-Matisse-Shostakovitch *Rouge et Noir* was a disappointment to me. The set and underwear costumes, effective for awhile, become rather professorially meagre long before the piece is over (and rather unpleasantly indecent). The music sounds like a young man confusing himself with Brahms while in the next room somebody is cooking cabbage soup. (Such emotions were more charming with Mahler.) The choreography I am at a loss to describe because it does not seem to relate itself to anything I feel. I will gladly accept it as my fault that it all seems to me to happen in a vacuum. I can see ingenious arrangements, and good technic, a touching opening in the third scene, and an odd feeling of a conventional anecdote at the very end. When I like something I am sure I am right; when I don't, I'm not. I should like to read a sympathetic criticism of this ballet to help me get interested.

Bacchanale (Dali's Venusberg ballet), notwithstanding a fine easel painting for a backdrop, turned out to be a kind of

charade. There was a moment during the first entrance of the Sacher-Masochs (Platoff and Lauret, who were excellent) when it began to come to life and be at least a little horrid. It is a shame it didn't jell, because the idea was all right. Anyway, the audience had a few laughs and didn't mind.

Ghost Town won an ovation. Perhaps it would have anyway, but it seemed to me a sincerely warm one. It was certainly an American ballet. Rogers' music is Rogers at his own best, which is musically as good as Lehar, and that is saying a lot. It is catchy, and unpretentious, and keeps going, and I enjoyed the clarity of it. It also sounded repetitious and orchestrally sour and melodically saccharine, but that is not the point; it does say something of its own. The set and costumes (du Bois) too are musical comedy, and yet they have a callow freshness that isn't fake. The Picasso, the Derain, the Berman or Berard shows all have space under wonderful control; and their colors even during dancing stay in place, so to speak, and don't mess up the stage. There is nothing of that in this du Bois, which is obviously awkward and keeps going all the time all over the place, without rest or coherence; but it's not an imitation anymore than the Rogers is. You can call it vulgar, but in its own way it is sincere.

The choreography, which is Platoff's first work, strikes me as much more interesting than either the music or décor, although it is even less orderly. It too keeps going all over the place, messes up dances by realistic gestures, by awkward spacing, and operatic arm-waving. But there is an exuberant energy in it, that is certainly original and besides native American. There are also, even at a first view, bold details, such as the double

action of the two rival groups of prospectors, which are remarkable and very promising for the future; the second Mormon entrance and Ralston's dance of jubilation looked especially good too. But I think better than any detail was a something direct and true in the whole attack, which an American audience understood without fuss. It was not an imported atmosphere. For the first time the audience as a whole felt at home at the Ballet Russe. The pretentious spectre of Culture vanished, and before anybody knew it the Metropolitan itself turned out to be only two blocks from good old Times Square. It was an historic event.

The whole company danced *Ghost Town* with enthusiasm. In general the whole company has been better than ever all through the run, and everybody including the management deserves warm praise. I would also like to say that the revivals this year have been particularly good: *Boutique Fantastique*, for instance is a delightful Massine that looks as fresh as ever. I hope Massine can revive his *Pulcinella* for next year.

And Danilova is very, very wonderful.

III

The Bali ballet (so called) was very interesting. It is not "touristy" at all. It is the Malay version of our own casino show, without jokes. As we garble our own classic style for such purposes, so they do theirs, and only variety numbers can retain their dignity; and musically Malay jazz hits an all time low. Evidently the T.B.M. of Singapore likes the same emptiness of feeling as the T.B.M. of Manhattan. If you are shocked by Dev-dja doing a temptation of Buddha in the style of the "Scandals," look at the enormously successful Easter Stage show with the Rockettes in Cross formation on Sixth

Avenue. It goes to prove that the East and West have been meeting for quite awhile behind Kipling's and Spengler's backs, and that art is made for the few who like it anywhere in the world.

NOTE TO COMPOSERS

A composer who is interested in writing ballets should certainly see the Monte Carlo as often as possible, and watch what happens. I think he should start by seeing *Sylphides* and *Carnaval*, because they are both obvious and successful. If he watches the dancers and listens to the music at the same time, he will see how the rhythm of the dancing frequently goes against the rhythm of the music. He can see how the choreographer runs over the end of a phrase, distributes effects and accents sometimes with, sometimes against the pattern of the music. Look at the group accents in the final measures of most of the *Sylphides* numbers. Look at the way in the Schuman the same motive is danced with different steps, or a piece is broken into by different entrances. The metrical freedom of a solo is similar to the freedom of a swing singer, who maintains her rhythm against the rhythm of her accompaniment.

If he looks more closely he will see how a dance phrase rests on several accents or climaxes of movement to which other movements have led up or from which they will follow, as unaccented syllables in speech surround an accented one. He will see that these accents frequently do not correspond to the accents of a musical phrase, and that even when they do correspond, the time length is rarely the same time as musical time. (A leap for instance that fills two counts may end a shade before, and the next movement begin a shade after the third

count.) The instants of greater energy in dancing around which a dance phrase is built are what make the dance interesting and alive; and they correspond to a muscular sense, not to an auditory one. I think it is the fact that in ballet technic these moments are not expected to fill out the metrical units to which they are set which keeps the ballet rhythmically alive — just as in Negro dancing the effect of rhythm is derived from the fact that energy does not stick to the metrical values, but increases or decreases in a time value of its own. (The beat and offbeat are differently long.)

All the musicians I know have been bothered by noticing that dancers "can't keep time." I notice that when dancers do for more than thirty seconds they become dull and bad and unrhythmic. It is the curse of "modern" dancing that it generally keeps time. That is why it has no rhythmic effect. And it is also the curse of music written for such dances after they have been choreographed that it has a fatal tendency to keep time with the dancers. That is slavery and is unpleasant to watch or hear.

In a good dance the dancer is dancing a period which as a whole is equivalent to a period of music, and in the case of the Debussy *Faun* the period is by the nature of the music the piece as a whole. The excitement of watching a ballet is that two completely different things fit together, not logically but in spirit. The audience feels the pleasure of a happy marriage at least for the fifteen minutes the piece lasts. It is a pleasure to which the human imagination responds with delight.

But the moral I am inclined to draw is that when the rhythmic structure of the music does not get too involved with

itself the dancer can more readily preserve both the necessary independence and the necessary contact, and the audience more easily enjoy the collaboration of two forms. Besides, the more delicately adjusted the composition, the more necessary it becomes for the conductor to play it in just one way. For dancing however, any piece has to be played more simply and more elastically than in concert, because besides conducting the conductor has to see to it that the dancers hear their cues, and because (as in opera) temperamental variations of tempo are inevitable with good dancers. Mr. Kurz who is a first rate dance conductor would probably conduct Shostakovitch or Beethoven very differently at Carnegie Hall; if he didn't, his pieces would sound pretty bald (and sloppy). So a composer is safer if he does not require subtlety, because he can't get it. (Even without taking into consideration lack of rehearsals and poor quality of operatic orchestra.)

It is true that an exceptionally sensitive choreographer like Balanchine will prefer a subtle score; but his *Apollon Musagète* though it is universally accepted as one of the great triumphs of modern choreog-

raphy is still very rarely performed, while *Lac de Cygnes* is attempted anywhere.

Of course a composer's name can be B. O. for a ballet, but once the curtain is up the music functions in the show as atmosphere, as giving the general emotional energy of the piece, its honesty, cheerfulness, steadiness, or amplitude; with occasional bursts of lyricism, or wit, and an effective conclusion which are more consciously heard. Most of the details (details which dancers of course notice) disappear as such in performance, are swallowed up in a general impression even more than the detail of playwrighting is swallowed in a Broadway production. The composer is best off if he writes as close as possible to the real simplicities of his gift, because then the atmosphere his music makes will be appreciated. I imagine that such a simple communicativeness will always be danceable, and that the composer does not have to bother with thinking in terms of movement, unless he is going fancy anyway, and then he is pretty sure to be undanceable no matter how carefully he criticizes himself.

ON THE FILM FRONT

—BY PAUL BOWLES—

THE prevalent criterion of film music seems to be that quality is in direct ratio to imperceptibility. An unnoticeable score passes for competent when it doesn't detract from the spectator's interest in the film. We do not need to con-

sider the basic fact that a musical soundtrack is three things: dialogue, sound-effects and music, perceived together and thus inseparable. But let us consider music alone, (unfortunately still the composer's sole precinct). Why grant