

WITH THE DANCERS

By EDWIN DENBY

THE great event of any Ballet Theatre season is the dancing of Markova. And this season she danced even more wonderfully than before. She appeared night after night, and even in two ballets on the same program. Once the papers said she had fainted after the performance. There is only one of her. I very much hope she is gratefully taken care of and prevented from injurious overwork.

When she dances everybody seems to understand as if by sympathy everything she does. And yet her modesty is the very opposite of the Broadway and Hollywood emphasis we are used to. A Russian girl I know who works in a defense plant brought along her whole swingshift one Sunday into standing room. They had never seen ballet, and they all unanimously fell in love with Markova. Markova has the authority of a star, but her glamor comes from what the English so well call a genuine spiritual refinement.

Watching her critically in Petipa's *Swan Lake*, in Fokine's *Sylphides*, in Massine's *Aleko*, or in Tudor's novelty, the *Romeo and Juliet*, I am constantly astonished how she makes each of these very different styles completely intelligible in its own terms. None looks old-fashioned or new-fangled. Each makes straight sense. Her new Juliet for instance is extraordinary. One doesn't think of it as Markova in a Tudor part, you see only Juliet. She is like no girl one has ever seen before, and she is completely real. One doesn't take one's eyes off her, and one doesn't forget a single

move. It doesn't occur to you that she is dancing for an audience; she is so quiet. Juliet doesn't try to move you. She appears, she lives her life, and dies.

One of the qualities that strikes me more and more in Markova's dancing is her dance rhythm. Anybody who has been to the Savoy Ballroom knows what rhythm in dancing is. But once you get away from there and start watching the art of stage dancing, you find rhythm very rarely. You find many beautiful things — exact control, intelligence, energy, variety, expression; but they aren't quite the same thing as rhythm. Of course rhythm in art dancing is not so simple as in the Savoy "folk" form. But you recognize it wherever you find it. And as anybody can hear that Landowska has rhythm, so anybody can see that Markova has it.

Markova's rhythm is not only due to her remarkable freedom in attacking her steps a hair's breadth before or after the beat, a freedom in which she shows a perfect musical instinct. I think one gets closer to it by noticing her phrasing. And that what we speak of as Negro rhythm is perfection of phrasing in a very short dance phrase. What strikes me equally about their two-beat phrases and her very long ones is how clearly each separate phrase is completed. It is perfectly clear when the phrase rises, and when it has spent itself. I feel the impulse has been completed, because I have seen the movement change in speed, and in weight. (In the Lindy the thrust is hard and quick, but the finish of the step is light and seems even re-

tarded; in Markova's incomparable *Sylphides* phrases she prepares during five or six steps with a gentle, uniform downward martellato for one slow expressive and protracted upward movement in her arms.) In musical terms there is a rubato within the phrase, corresponding to the way the balance of the body is first strained, then is restored.

Markova's way of dancing adds a peculiar quality to a ballet by Tudor. Other dancers can make his dramatic intentions clear. They show that each of his gestures carries a meaning: a nuance of emotion, of character, of social standing. They show his precision of timing and placing, so that one appreciates his extraordinary genius for visual rhythms on the stage. They are personally self-effacing, and give a thrilling intensity to the drama he intended. But Tudor's style includes many hampered movements, slow-motion effects, sudden spurts of allegro, arrested incomplete, arm tensions straining into space, pelvic displacements and shifts of carriage. They are fascinating effects. On the other hand I notice that in execution the movement looks forced. The dancers have trouble with their balance, they are apt to look laborious and lose their spring. Perhaps Tudor meant the dance to look off balance, but it also looks airless. Now I see that Markova can sense and can show the dance rhythm that underlies his visual phrases. She finds their point of rest. She is easily equal to his dramatic meaning and passion, but she also gives his drama the buoyancy of dancing. As I watch her, Markova — like Duse in Ibsen — seems to be speaking poetry to the company's earnest prose.

Tudor's *Romeo and Juliet* was the world premiere Ballet Theatre presented in its spring season at the Met. It was

a great success and fully deserved it. It has a few unconvincing moments, but it has a great many original and very fine ones. (One of the most delicate effects is the special use of toesteps in the part of Juliet; they take on a quality different from any "pointes" I ever saw.) As a whole, I found the piece fascinating.

The plot of *Romeo* is that of Shakespeare's play. Tudor follows the action almost faithfully, but the individual thing about it is that the poetic message is not the same. The ballet's conception of mutual love is far less impetuous, far less straightforward, far less dazzlingly radiant. The difference is clearest in the character of Romeo, who in the ballet is never quite frank; he is like an object of love, rather than a lover. But he is a perfectly real young man. And Hugh Laing — always a dancer full of real character — dances him as one. Tudor's piece strikes me as a personal version of the story, a reverie on the subject, with muted and oppressed images. Shakespeare's openness is its foil. And it is precisely the private deformation Tudor has made which gives to the ballet its core of poetic reality, its odd spell.

That Tudor had no intention of copying Shakespeare is clear enough in his choice of Delius for the music. The various pieces that together form the score have not the theatrical incisiveness of ballet music. But they are used as background music, as sound-track; as such they are of high quality.

But I think the big event and the most telling effect of the *Romeo* production is the extraordinary décor the painter Eugene Berman, has given it. I have never shared the complacency with which we New Yorkers accept window-dressing (be it functional or "camp"), as ballet décor. I think ballet sharpens the eyes and opens the heart, and under

these circumstances a vulgar set is carrying our cult of lowbrow manners too far. I am shocked to see *Giselle* danced in front of a powder-room wallpaper, or to see the Swans in *Swan Lake* troop out in so many little home-made Dutch outfits, just as if they had rolled up their sleeves for a bout of spring cleaning.

Berman's Italian Renaissance décor is a serious work of art, like Picasso's *Tricorne* or Berard's *Cotillon*; like the works of the baroque designers. And I imagine later theatre lovers who look at the record of it will marvel at the refinement of sensibility it presupposes in the audience. As a picture it is shut in and still it lifts and spreads, it comes forward, and it keeps its secret. As a stage-design it has inventiveness and immense learning, everything has been made with tenderness and is useful. The blended perspectives, the contrasted weights of the materials, the originality of the colors, the animation of the proportions, the energy of the drops, all these show us the many kinds of visual pleasure the stage has to offer. And in *Romeo* for once, the scene-painting and the execution of costumes are superlative.

Ballet Theatre brought one other novelty to New York, *Helen of Troy* (Lichine-Offenbach-Vertes). It is a musical comedy number — not as ponderous as a real musical comedy, not as bright as a real ballet. It has its good moments, but an awkward lack of fancy keeps cropping up too. It's a great pity for the score, and a pity for Lichine, who is a good choreographer. Jerome Robbins as Mercury runs away with the show. He's real Third Avenue (as I heard a young lady giggle to her girl-friend) and everybody enjoys it.

Otherwise Ballet Theatre rounded out its repertoire by handsome reproductions of Massine's *Tricorne*, *Boutique Fan-*

tasque, and *Capriccio Espagnol*. It also revived Balanchine's beautiful *Apollo* (to Stravinsky's *Apollon Musagète*), which received a fine ovation from the audience. The ballet itself I reviewed in this column five years ago, explaining and defending the choreography; now it turns out to be perfectly clear anyway. Everybody smiles at the little jokes, everybody appreciates the intimacy of tone and the wide openness of line. I wondered though if the dancing of the Muses wasn't too slick; they used to look a bit more timid, more virginal. André Eglevski as Apollo was excellent — he always was an exceptional dancer and this year he is better than ever.

Besides Ballet Theatre, the spring has brought a good deal of other dancing and the summer promises more. Argentina presented a new *Café de Chinitas*, a quadro flamenco number which García Lorca had long ago arranged with her. The first version shown at the Serenades was able enough; a second version with a Dali décor was performed at the Met with her Ravel *Bolero* and dances from *Carmen*, too late for comment here.

At the very active Humphrey-Weidman studio there were a number of new programs, including several guest stars. Here and elsewhere there have been numerous regional or historical American and Latin American numbers, new or revived. Among the new ones was Doris Humphrey's version of the *Salon Mexico*. What is best about them all is a sort of casual homey charm. And I warmly recommend Weidman's revived *Impressions of Famous Dancers*. They are parodies of Doris Humphrey, Anna Duncan, Wigman, Ted Shawn, and Amaya. They are highly intelligent, infamous clowning, and especially if you know the models, terribly funny.

I apologize for not having previously

mentioned this year, as I should have, the appearance of a new modern dancer of great promise, Valerie Bettis. As a generous rival said of her in admiration, "But she moves." Bettis too has dance rhythm. Her vitality on the stage, her technical facility are astonishing, and her compositions unusual. The other young modern dancer I find extremely interesting to watch is Merce Cunningham, of Martha Graham's company. His dance rhythm too is like a natural gift one watches with immediate pleasure.

A number of people have asked me the reason for the present wave of balletomania that is sweeping from coast

to coast, and that packed the Metropolitan for the longest ballet season in our history. My personal opinion is that ballet — when it is well danced — is the least provoking of our theatrical forms. Nobody on the stage says a word all evening. Nobody bothers much about sexiness or self-importance. The performers are bright, tender, agile, well mannered, they are serious and perfectly civilized. It is good for one's morale, because it appeals to the higher instincts. You feel sociable and friendly and at the same time wide awake. I think that's why so many people are delighted. Civilization is really a great pleasure.

THEATRE and FILMS

BY ELLIOTT CARTER

DURING the past three years the League of Composers has been encouraging composers to write theatrical works for communities with modest resources. Out of this project have come *Paul Bunyan* by W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten, *Solomon and Balkis* by Randall Thompson, and this year *A Tree on the Plains* by Paul Horgan and Ernst Bacon. Like *Paul Bunyan*, *A Tree on the Plains* was revealed to New York audiences by the enterprising Columbia Theatre Associates in cooperation with the Columbia University Department of Music at Brander Matthews Hall. Milton Smith, the theatrical director, was able in both cases to get together shows which were interesting to people who were not in any sense "community audiences" and hence did not exactly conform to the conditions under which the operas were originally intended to be performed. Professional singers were

enlisted for important roles and professional musicians were added to the university orchestra. The Britten work being conceived in a more formal and intricate style was much better adapted to these conditions than Bacon's, which seemed to cry for more intimacy.

Indeed, the best thing that can be said about *A Tree on the Plains* is that all the performers seemed to be having a good time. This is a result of several factors which must play a certain role in any musico-theatrical work to be given by amateurs. First, there should be nothing difficult, risky or perplexing in the musical score. Next, the underlying feeling should always be direct and self-evident to both actors and audience. Also, the dramatic situations must be simple and natural and varied enough to afford the composer opportunity for different kinds of music and to give the actor-singers ample chance to display