

WITH THE DANCERS

By S. L. M. BARLOW

*"Here in this garden of Le Nôtre,
Correct, ridiculous, charming . . ."*

I THOUGHT that paraphrase of Baudelaire (or is it Verlaine?) would constitute the perfect introduction to Agnes de Mille's *Tally-Ho*, but now it seems to me that the three adjectives fit the whole ballet season ingratiatingly. Whether it be the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo at the City Center, the Ballet Theatre at the Metropolitan, the various stars at the Kaufmann Auditorium, or any of the others, the level was astonishingly high and delightful.

There were four Spanish ballets to be seen: *Three Cornered Hat* and the *Capriccio Espagnol* at the Metropolitan, *El Amor Brujo* at the Metropolitan and also at La Meri's, and *Cuckold's Fair* at the City Center. The most satisfactory were the *Capriccio Espagnol* and La Meri's *Amor Brujo*.

Capriccio Espagnol is a brilliant series of Russo-Iberian ball-room numbers. Music by Rimsky-Korsakov, sets by Andreau, and the dancing in the capable hands of Massine, Argentinita, and a largely American corps de ballet. There is no difficult, intense, allusive Spanish story to get lost on the big stage; and since everything is "in the Spanish manner," the absence of the pure and intimate Spanish characteristics is not fatal. The *Three Cornered Hat* has a superb set by Picasso, an authentic score by de Falla, and again Massine and Argentinita in the lead. I can only explain my lack of enthusiasm, my sense that

the present performance does not catch fire, by saying that, to me, Argentinita's exquisite but small art is lost on the wide, far stage. Her restraint becomes uncommunicative in such a huge space. In *Cuckold's Fair*, Pilar Lopez took a very slender story by Garcia-Lorca and then threw it away, leaving a melodious, Frenchified score (with one admirably scored and arranged dance-song at the start) by Gustavo Pittaluga, a simple and fresh set by Joan Junyer, and a series of unrelated dances. Franklin, as the cuckold husband, danced with such force and elegance that he fortunately ruined the balance of what story there was left.

El Amor Brujo, at the Metropolitan, had other and more reprehensible faults. One fault is undoubtedly the spottiness of de Falla's score. It has superb moments, but it lets the story down badly at the end, which calls for a strong climax, a mounting excitement. Yet the music suddenly becomes static. Argentinita has seen fit to alter the original sequence of the music for the *Dance of Seduction*, and her departures from the story by Martinez Sierra are equally arbitrary and ineffective. She permits the ghost to do most of the male dancing, in a cape which no gipsy ever wore; she has turned a *brasero* over which Candelas herself should conjure into a Hans Anderson witch's-pot, hung at the back, before which the old seeress does all the incantation; and finally, in-

stead of having Lucia pitch the ghost over the cliff, he simply dances his way out and never comes back. I thought the set of Weidhaas somewhat clumsy and the costumes not only incorrect but garish. As a matter of fact, it was de Falla's thought that for the final scene, Candelas should wear a *traje de cola*, – and such a dress was made for Pastora Imperio under de Falla's supervision.

None of these strange alterations were made by La Meri. She had the inestimable advantage of having once worked, not only under the eye of Martinez Sierra, of de Falla, and of la Bisca, but also with the gitanos of El Albaicin, among whom the action of this intense, communal little drama presumably took place. Furthermore, the small studio stage is a great advantage to a ballet that should be drama and not spectacle. None so personal, so remotely hot, so earthly elegant as the Spanish; and such intimacy evaporates in miles of plush. And lastly, La Meri possesses a knowledge of what is back of certain gipsy gestures, and can therefore exploit them and develop them correctly; for the ancestry of the gitanos of El Albaicin winds through Egypt to the Orient, and several of their gestures as well as of their rites and customs have Dravidian roots. And I still think that no dancer or choreographer interested in classic ballet should miss La Meri's *Swan Lake*, – if only to go and crib some superlative pantomime.

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I can however see little to admire in *Ancient Russia*, at the City Center, where Tchaikovsky's ubiquitous B-minor piano-concerto is warped to support warmed-over (but pleasant) scenery by

Gontcharova, and an impossible series of scenes credited to Nijinska. Krassovska, Youskevitch, Tallchief, all labor valiantly, but the original and real primadonna is the piano, and this impossible duality of interest simply results in imbalance, false accents, and boredom.

Besides *Ancient Russia*, *Cuckold's Fair* and *El Amor Brujo*, there were three other novelties. *The Red Poppy* was presented at the City Center. It was originally a Soviet propaganda piece, with vulgar music by Glière, choreography by Schwyzoff, sets by Aronson. The scene was laid in the *barsfonds* of Shanghai; the story was allegorical, concerning the rescue of Dame China from the clutches of barkeep Japan by a Russian, an American, and a British sailor; and a middle-section dream-scene which touched the nadir. Yet curiously enough, the amazing vitality, humor and authority which Franklin and Starbuck brought to their roles – plus a superb interpolated Ribbon Dance by Youskevitch – and an energetic climax by the whole troupe, gave the tawdry piece a real excitement which some better ballets have not achieved. It is a pity that Glière, some of whose songs, whose septet, and whose "*Murometz*" *Symphony* have merit, should now be discredited by such a crass and feeble score.

Happier far, Agnes de Mille's *Tally-Ho*, at the Metropolitan, for which Nordoff arranged some Gluck – coarsely enough, if you like, but the ballet itself is hardly chaste – and for which Motley produced some ravishing costumes. To the eye it is, like *Romeo and Juliet*, a period piece, this time Louis XV, and equally lovely. After much pruning and some recasting it is now a delightful

hit; bawdy, touching, diverting. It is far more substantial than the *Three Virgins* and *A Devil*, and in it some of the best moments belong to the corps de ballet, to groupings of remarkable freshness and point. Lancret and Pater and Fragonard have been scrambled – a dozen *coryphées* at a time are suspended in the air at the angle of the famous damsel in a swing casting her shoe – the allusions are subtle and witty (you expect St. Hubert to appear any minute, blowing a tin trumpet) – the story of princely seduction and of forgiven penitence in the bosom of the over-rapt poet carries perfectly. Dolin is magnificent, and Lucia Chase as the innocent and Karnilova as the contrary are admirable. Hugh Laing and de Mille (latterly Janet Reed) dance their principal roles to perfection. Mr. Hurok can now pack up *Mademoiselle Angot* and send her to storage.

And, for *Fancy Free*, he gets the Navy's E pennant. This immediate hit is the work of Jerome Robbins (choreography), Leonard Bernstein (music) and Oliver Smith (scenery). It is the saucy tale of three sailors in a bar, three much pursued girls, a pleasant brawl, and closing time. Bawdy, touching, and diverting, too – but more than that: the expression, in motion, of that exact speech which Dos Passos found, with impeccable ear, in *Three Soldiers*; the aloof nearness of rookies or gobs; the American counterpart of the humors of Raimu; the immemorial pathos of camaraderie. The set is good; the music very good, the dancing and pantomime superb. Robbins himself is the most expert in conveying just the nuance he wants conveyed (like the moment when he *doesn't* put his arm around the girl

or pinch her behind), but the finest dancing is done by Harold Lang, who is on his way to being an important member of the troupe.

Amid all these encomia, it might be added that the score was more spirited than lasting. It was largely orchestronomy, of the deftest sort, snappy, blaring, soft, all at the right time, with double-takes in the brass and ogles in the oboes. But, particularly for a young conductor dealing so easily and craftily with instruments and timbres and combinations, there is a great temptation to let it go at just *combinazione* and leave out the real marrow of music. Perhaps I can most immediately and politely explain what I mean by pointing to another American ballet, by way of contrast.

The real glory of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo is *Rodeo*, by de Mille, Aaron Copland, and Oliver Smith. Here the score is also witty, American, and touching. But there is also a wistfulness, truly American. It is Mark Twain and Bret Hart, where *Fancy Free* is a comic strip. Its round-dances take on a hieratic quality – in fact, quality is what it has supremely, all wool and a yard wide, and heart-warming. And the music has a continuous substance, a permanence and dignity, that a New England hill has. I had never seen it before, and was deeply impressed. And the dancing of Franklin, Etheridge, and Magalanes is really incomparable.

III

Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and their company have also been giving a memorable series: *Canonade*, canons and variations by Paul Nordoff; *On My Mother's Side*, with music by Lionel Nowak; and *Inquest*, with music by

Norman Lloyd. (Also, for the record, *The Heart Remembers*, with music by Lukas Foss, and *Daddy was a Fireman*, with music by Herbert Haufreucht. These I did not see.) *On My Mother's Side* is entirely delightful. In a set of brief portraits, Weidman presents the older generations (Aunt Jessie who sang *Little Buttercup* with Raymond Hitchcock; great-grandfather Hoffman, who settled down; another who settled up by hanging himself; a blind grandmother and others) each vividly presented by some salience of character, through motions inventive and personal. Altogether an expert and entertaining performance. And *Inquest* is a knock-out. Doris Humphrey has taken a sombre story of a poor cobbler's family, dying of starvation (based on an inquest held in England, 1865) and developed it as concisely as possible, with a minimum of movement, and with a narrator, like a Greek Chorus. Then, when the tale is told, the real ballet begins, for then the survivors of the horror and the towns-

folk who have seen and heard begin to consider the implications of what has gone before; and this second half is the human cry of anguish, the bitter commentary, the welling sense of injustice and revolt, the little by little surge of protest, and the final rush to batter at the door of Justice. It is superb and moving, and, with the greatest economy and at the same time intensity, brings home its charges, the same charges implicit in *No for an Answer*. Both Humphrey and Weidman are wholly admirable in this bleak fatality, as are all the company.

Pearl Primus, at the Kaufmann Auditorium, was really all that I had been led to expect. Her first *African Ceremonial Dance* is by far the most impressive, matriarchal primitive expression I have seen. And all her interpretations, often to recitation or song, had variety and power. Of her accompaniments, I preferred that of the drummers, Cimber and Koker, artists in the best vaudevilian tradition.

ON THE HOLLYWOOD FRONT

By LAWRENCE MORTON

HOLLYWOOD'S commercial product during the past few months has provided hardly anything of interest to musicians. It has been the familiar story of old paths stubbornly pursued, past successes relied upon, well-tried devices refurbished, ancient formulas reaffirmed, imagination suppressed, opportunities missed. There can be genuine satisfaction only with the highly developed technics in orchestration and recording, which remain the most de-

pendable virtues of film music. But one can no longer be astonished by these. The excellence of Robert Russell Bennett's arrangements for *Lady In The Dark* could have been forecast, and of course they proved to be, as one expected, superior in skill and taste to anything that has been turned out for similar pictures. But pickings are meager indeed when one must single out for distinction such minutiae as echo-chamber recording for music that Gin-