

WITH THE DANCERS

EDWIN DENBY

ABOVE all, don't miss *Mexicana*. Besides being as pleasant an evening as Broadway offers, it is the only good dancing show of the year. Looking back over the show season for good dancing, we've had Mann, the giant comic of *Hellzapoppin*, who is certainly one of the world's great dancers (though he makes so much money nobody thinks of him as that); we've had the bursts of happy frenzy in the WPA *Mikado*; a certain amount of taste in Balanchine's *Boys from Syracuse*; and Bill Robinson who—though a great showman—is disappointing in the mechanical *Hot Mikado*. Our producers have used up as much horsepower in hoofing as it takes to run the entire Shredded Wheat Plant, and this is all they have to show for it; it's lucky Mexico came to the rescue.

In the first place *Mexicana* has José Fernandez. (He is a flamenco character dancer.) He is a tall young man, and you first think he looks awkward. But when he dances he becomes fascinating. His precision of gesture becomes the expression of a personal nobility. The dynamic shading flows from an inner complete poise. He is a showman who makes you see the subtle detail of hands, head, or feet without ever losing the continuous line of the drama. He is an actor who invites you onto the stage,—he doesn't have to rush into your lap and knock you down to establish a contact. You understand, so to speak, the human being he is showing you, you are happy the scene is so clear and so true, and you never confuse him with his number. And above all, there is the happiness of a continuous dance impulse, a ruling physical secret, a sovereign force of rhythm that is not musical rhythm but forms a counterpoint to the force of music. That is what you expect of any great dancer, and what you get; only I wish I could say it more simply.

Fernandez' partner, Melissa Flores, is good too. But among the ladies a lovely and subtle mulatto, Estela, (with what distinction she does her part in *Cordoba!*) was my great delight.

Very lovely Miss Molina is also, in the excellent comic Trio Mixteco. And the other comic Trio Lina is just as excellent. And the solo comic Rolando is a prize find, whose swivel-jointed baseball number would rate headlines in any show. Besides these stars, the chorus is exceptionally charming, and the coquettishness of the girls is a welcome change from the cold breast of chicken we are mostly served.

Then there is another point about *Mexicana* that sets a new high for Broadway. It is the only show outside the Ballet Russe that has had real painters to mount it, painters who know their trade. And the result shows up our designers in a body for the department store decorators, the befuddled window-dressers they are; even their vulgarity does not hide their ineptness. The only trace of talent I have seen all winter was in the two iron lanterns and the last backdrop of the *Hot Mikado* by Nat Carson. As a rule the best theatre painting you can get in New York is a good primitive now and then at the Harlem Apollo.

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Have you noticed that if you stand by the Pool and stare at the Perisphere for five minutes, it suddenly looks no bigger than a tennis ball? The cruel thing is that then it takes you half an hour to walk around a tennis ball. It's a kind of practical joke.

It would be nice to take the Fair lightly, like a real fair, but somehow they won't let you. Everything is busy dwarfing you, including the darkness at night. They've spent a hundred and fifty million to make you feel like a mouse. I thought a fair was a place where you enjoyed yourself and felt friendly with everybody who happened to be around. An artist (like Frank Lloyd Wright) could have built a place like that. But our Leaders of Business don't care for such foolishness. When they build anything they want it to impress, browbeat and bully the customers, whether it's a bank or a fair exhibit. At least that's the effect. As a show the Fair is as much fun as Milton's elephant: it's the unwieldy Chase National Bank wreathing its lithe proboscis to make us mirth.

Such conscientious criticism aside, I did have a good time at the Cuban Village. The dancing there is very pleasant, the Negroes especially. I also enjoyed my old friends from the

Savoy. The Aquacade (in preview) was "impressive" and disappointing. Three hundred people swimming in time to music is astonishing but that is all: I had hoped for a water ballet that would use the delight of spurting, thrashing, slow gliding, diving under, disappearing and jumping half out—things you see helterskelter in waterpolo. Well, the two stars swimming together is a charming moment, of course. The other big show, *Railroads on Parade*, is harmless and pleasant—high praise for any pageant; and everybody enjoys ancient locomotives puffing under their own steam. So far, however, there hasn't been a single bit of "serious" dancing at the fair. I heard that the Swiss pavilion was thinking of presenting an evening of Marie Eve, who in a specialty all her own is one of the two Swiss dancers who really have an international appeal. It would be a good start.

Perhaps the WPA *Adelante* will move out to Flushing later. It is at any rate the best WPA dance so far, and one number, a court dance (in excellent costumes), comes off as well as any modern theatre number of the season. WPA's *Sing for Your Supper* has good dancers too; and the number *Papa's Got a Job*, besides having the best flow of movement of any ensemble number I saw this winter, is an interesting steer toward a possible American opera style. It is astonishing what freshness these simple shag evolutions have. Even better just as dancing and in the same everyday style are the numbers Dorothy Bird has made for TAC, of which *Priscilla Picketline* is justly famous. (Was the excellent *Right to Live* ensemble hers?) She is both as a dancer and choreographer a happy find; she makes her chorus seem so much more human than the Broadway routiniers and she has an easy sense of humor (which they haven't either) and a choreographic education. It seems to me that TAC and the WPA are evolving an intimate, human manner of show dancing, like the quality Kurt Weill, for his part, is trying to get into show music. If the great Broadway showmen could occasionally relax and get a little human (and not merely mechanical) value out of their dance choruses, it would be a happy day for the American Theatre, or at least for the patient American theatregoer.

It is as far back as March 23rd that the greatest dance event since my last notice happened: Markova that night in *Giselle*

(Ballet Russe again). The ballet in itself is full of poetry, of simple and complex romantic emotion. Markova, though perhaps a little prim in the realistic act, was incredibly perfect in the abstract one. The expressiveness of her movements is such that one might think she had invented classic ballet as a personal medium. Her *pointes*, her *developpés*, especially her *seconde en l'air* are no school formula. They have the breathtaking simplicity of a mere impulse, as though these extraordinary coordinations were the natural reflection of a miraculous event. It was dancing as you pray to see it. I also remember Krassovska's extraordinary leaps.

Now I am eagerly looking forward to the Ballet Caravan evenings at the Martin Beck Theatre.

OVER THE AIR

DAVID DIAMOND

GIAN-CARLO MENOTTI is to be congratulated for his radio opera, *The Old Maid and the Thief*. Commissioned by the National Broadcasting Company and broadcast on April 22 with the assistance of the NBC Symphony under the direction of Alberto Erede and a capable group of singers, Mr. Menotti's clever, well-planned libretto, delightful though sometimes crudely set text, and witty, ebullient score, received about as perfect a presentation as is possible.

The very charming story of the Misses Todd and Pinkerton, rivals for the love of an "honest" thief whom they shelter, and the amusing, grotesque situations which arise after they, in turn, commence robbing the small town stores to provide for the supposedly escaped desperado, gives Menotti opportunity to display his indisputable gifts as a composer of opera-bouffe. There is no doubt about it, he has a magnificent technic for this medium, and he uses it with consummate skill. His theatrical sense of timing is enhanced by a keen sense of humor and a command of simple, direct means to approach situations which might appear banal and embarrassing in less skillful hands. In this rarely well done species of opera, there is little to hold against Mr.