

The usual impeccable Copland taste and high musical integrity are of course ever-present, although the music turns out to be practically unnoticeable. The non-committal themes are carefully suited to the subject matter and conscientiously worked out. He achieves a simple "home-folk" quality admirably, and without ever bordering on the vulgar. Toward the end of the film Copland had the task of writing music for a long scene full of maudlin pathos. Even here he did not

compromise, though that lasting high note eventually grows monotonous. One feels at a certain point that it should grow either louder or softer. The burial music is as touching as one could wish. Other excellent spots are the deathbed scene with its flute and the night scene of the drunken choirmaster. If it were fair to compare fictional with documentary films as to the possibilities offered the composer, I should say that I much prefer *The City*.

WITH THE DANCERS

By EDWIN DENBY

BALANCHINE's *Poker Game* (for Stravinsky's *Jeu de Cartes*) revived this fall at the Monte Carlo is as good ballet as one can possibly have. And it creeps into your heart as unpretentiously as a kitten. To be sure its range is limited. It is no more than a new twist to the animated doll subject, which by nature is witty, ironical, pathetic, and playful, and rather likes to stay within the bounds of good manners. Ballet certainly can have a larger range if it chooses; and *Petrouschka*, to be sure, does choose. But *Poker Game* doesn't, and yet succeeds in becoming what used to be called a "little masterpiece." I think when you see it, you will notice yourself how easy it is to look at, how agreeably it shifts from group to ensemble or solo, with an unexpectedness that is never disconcerting; how lively the relation is between still figures and moving ones; how distinct the action remains; how clear the center of attention, or the division of interest, so your eye does not take to wandering on its own, and con-

fuse the rhythm intended. But besides being easy to look at what you see is amusing. The steps emphasize a kind of staccato and a lateralness that may remind you of playing card figures; many of the steps you recognize as derived from musical comedy. But the variety, the elasticity of rhythm, the intelligent grace, are qualities you never get in musical comedy routines. Nor does the musical comedy routine allow everyone on the stage to project intelligent and personal good spirits. *Poker Game*, by allowing the dancers just this, makes you feel as if you were for awhile in the best of company, with everybody natural and everybody interesting.

It is Balanchine's merit that all this is so. He keeps the dance placed in relation to the actual stage frame, which gives it a common sense point of reference. He has the sense of timing, the sense of distances, which makes the movement distinct. He has the wit which makes it amusing, and the invention both plastic and rhythmic which keep it going in a

lively way. He has the good sense to keep the numbers to their obvious subject: you see the Durante-like Joker egging on the silly Queens against the Aces; you distinguish between Jacks and Kings, you can tell who is winning or losing, and he does not make either too serious for the other. The subject in other words remains real and above-board; and the emotion it leads to, whether witty or sentimental, kept in relation to this subject, does not take on a faked or a private urgency.

But Balanchine has a profounder choreographic gift. His steps no matter where derived are steps that a ballet dancer specifically can do and do best; steps a ballet dancer can be brilliant in. His rhythms however complex are grateful to ballet dancers. He seems never to violate the real nature of a dancer's body, the part native, part trained, relation of trunk and arms and head and feet; so that no matter how odd the movement required, the dancer still remains himself, and does not congeal to an impersonal instrument. And so the choreography does not violate the dancer's best gift, which is his natural human warmth. It is a fact that Balanchine has been able to make the same dancers seem real and true in his ballets, who have seemed conventional or stupid in others. All these qualities being the best qualities of choreography there are, make a good Balanchine ballet as good ballet as you can get. — It is true his style is very complex, and some people don't like complex things, whether good or bad; but that is a different issue.

I found the entertaining music of *Poker Game* wonderful to listen to; and thanks to the play of counter rhythm and counter dynamics on the stage — and also thanks to what seemed a better orchestra

than the Metropolitan's — easy to follow. (The unsymphonic orchestration, obvious accents, and sharp eighth notes seemed to be helpful for dancing, making counting easier.)

I cannot resist adding by way of footnote that I urge you to see and see again the Balanchine-Stravinsky *Baiser de la Fée*, now also in the Monte Carlo repertoire. I even prefer it to *Poker Game*. It has a range of expression that includes the brutality of the peasant dances, the hobbled tenderness of the bridal duet, the repulsive dissolution of the last scene; and all of it very fascinating and beautiful. It is a very great work. It is a poem about what a small boy saw, when he was taken at Christmas to see Petipa's *Nutcracker*.

Balanchine's third piece for the Monte Carlo, a revival of *Serenade*, I was not invited to by the organization's publicity department; well, I remember liking it some years ago at the Stadium.

The other revival of the Ballet Russe, Petipa's classic *Nutcracker*, has a charming and straightforward first scene, which is also a good example of ballet "recitative." In this scene Miss Lauret was very fine indeed, and Miss Etherige also. The second scene is a virtuoso adagio and variation, in a noble and extensive style, beautifully composed; the dancers did it full justice technically but were unable to give the real presence of nobility. The third scene seemed pretty dull. I do not care for the décor of any of it. Which leaves the two actual novelties: Massine's *Vienna-1814* and *New Yorker*. *Vienna* is unfortunate in every way (Massine-Weber-Cheney). *The New Yorker* I thought entertaining, with many excellent caricatures (Danilova, Semenov, Yazvinski, Chamie, Lauret). It's nothing you

remember as ballet. Nor has Gershwin's nice Bronx nostalgia (in a corny orchestration) anything to do with what goes on.

Looking at this season as a whole, the dancers seemed to me better than ever in technic and verve. But I am a little disappointed that Danilova and Massine are still the only artists that seem to have got over the limitation and the prejudice of being invariably juvenile. It gives the company a certain monotony. Maybe I do Rostova, Lauret, and Krassovska an injustice; and Markova showed real warmth as Queen of Hearts. But I believe that she, and Franklin, Eglevski, and Zoritch are greater dancers than they have here dared to prove. Yes, I miss in general the performer's passionate and uninhibited belief in his part, which can make a dancer the most luminous thing in the world.

And in another way, too, the season discourages me. It looks as if the Monte Carlo were reviving not the Diaghilev tradition of intelligent dancing, but the Petersburg tradition of attractive performers. The last score one could be eager to hear was *St. Francis*, which was also the last time Massine took a chance with novel choreography; and that happened long before the war. *Devil's Holiday*, also pre-war, is still the last interesting décor or choreography to be shown; excluding the Dali backdrop, which a year ago looked lonely enough in the foolishness in front of it. That isn't much of a record for so pretentious an institution.

The American contributions, so condescendingly promised, have been pathetically stupid, and seem to have been chosen with a kind of inverted snobbishness—commercial art for commercial

art's sake. Commercial art is, as Cocteau said of New York's Jewish and Negro populations, the rich manure of our intellectual life; but to dump that manure on the stage in full view is not the proper function of Universal Arts, Inc. Broadway does it more naturally. Our local artists may not have the easy sweep of the great Paris Period, but at least they are in the real art business, and they are the people to go to if you do want American art—they have all there is, and there isn't any more. This season the only local contribution that can be mentioned among educated people is Irene Sharaff's—the pretty costumes for *Poker Game*; and they were bought up from a previous show.

Nothing risked, nothing gained. Still, at this date, it's hardly such a risk. Thomson, Copland and Bowles have all been on Broadway. As for painters, there is Stuart Davis, who is a ballet natural; Christofonetti, with his exquisite taste; last year there was a show of ballet sets by New Yorkers at Valentine's, and the sketch of Rudolf Burckhardt, for instance, was far better ballet than anything the company commissioned this year; I have also seen two good ones by Lorna McIvor. But the organization of the Monte Carlo, it appears, pays for the pretence of intelligence, not for its reality. It is unjust, I think, to blame Massine. But it begins to make a stuffy atmosphere that I have no great pleasure smelling.

III

I went to a recital given by the new "School of Natya" to see Ruth St. Denis dance, because at a benefit this summer I had seen her and been delighted. Her dance was straightforward and cleancut and interesting; and she was wonderfully friendly, all good sense and no fake

about anything; and openness that made me very happy. And I'm sure such a spirit is the most valuable thing any art school can offer its pupils.

The new musical shows all happen to be very pleasant entertainment indeed, and they each have a star altogether marvelous. They also happen not to have anything as extraordinary as that in the way of dancing, though everywhere the dancers are so pretty and work so hard, you can't help but like them. Their routines have novelty enough, too; either in the traditional style at *Panama Hattie* or in the arty style at *Cabin in the Sky*. *It Happens on Ice* has the prize novelty of course, as it offers all the proper styles

of dancing, and all of them on skates, all very well done. Miss Stenuf even has a touching solo as Swan Princess. And Skippy Baxter has more than that because he has the real illumination of a dancer. Someday I hope a choreographer will make a ballet with the terrific contrasts in dynamics that are possible in skating, contrasts you now find used in the comic numbers. Skippy Baxter is the star to bring such a terrific ballet to life.

At *It Happens on Ice* and at *Cabin in the Sky* I also enjoyed Vernon Duke's adroit tunes and well-groomed orchestration; they add a great deal of toniness to the procedure.

OVER THE AIR

By CHARLES MILLS

IN an election fall and at a time of international stress, we may expect radio schedules to be interrupted or cut out completely, so it is gratifying to record that time was reserved for some interesting music. WJZ broadcast portions of the Brazilian concerts from the Museum of Modern Art. Included was enough of Villa-Lobos' entertaining *Choros No. 7* for chamber orchestra to give the radio public a sample of his instrumental imagination. The cello writing came over especially well. And there were some beautiful moments for woodwinds; the clarinet figuration was delicate and there was a particularly nice line for the high, lyric bassoon. WQXR also sent some of the Villa-Lobos music; the *Bachiana Brasileira No. 1* is a pleasing if not completely satisfying work, with rhythms of a popular dance character, harmonic tex-

tures that seem a trifle too mellifluous, warm and sultry, and melodies with sequential interval leaps of sixths, derived, as we are honestly informed, from Bach. The lines are not without flow and grace however, although this writer found the scoring of eight soli cello rather too bottom-heavy for lasting comfort. *Rudepôema*, a piano work by the same composer, is a striking hodge-podge of multi-colored materials, sonorities brilliant and sonorities muddy, clear-cut lines and melodic miasma. There are some curiously prosaic cadenza-like passages, but there is also a display of primitive power and brilliance, more interesting than entertaining.

Two pieces by Henry Cowell, *Meeting House* and *Hornpipe*, were heard in a program of symphonic band music over WNYC. Certainly they are not fairly