

WITH THE DANCERS

By EDWIN DENBY

THE Original Ballet Russe is not just another version of the Monte Carlo, it has a quality of its own, and a particularly pleasant atmosphere. It hasn't of course so much prestige, but it seems to have more dance to it, more buoyancy. I think this is due especially to Lichine. He used to be a handsome star with, to my taste, rather too glamorous a manner. He is now a comedian of genius and a choreographer of the first class. The directness he himself has seems to have cleared the air for the whole company. Their dancing is not weighed down with mannerisms.

Lichine's *Graduation Ball* is a delight to everybody. It is, of course, just an operetta to Strauss music; the stock item every company puts out. But Lichine's piece, without any visible effort to be special, is really very special indeed. You may think you are looking at the same old thing, but you don't feel as if you were. You don't even see it as a ballet number, you see it as happening. The very first entrance, though professionally speaking it is a witty realization of the music, strikes you right away as a human sentiment. And the "Perpetuum Mobile," which is a feat of new steps and trick technic, doesn't impress you, it delights you as spontaneously as the best Lindy Hop does. *Graduation Ball* has its weak spots too, but they do not seem important because you feel the piece directly as a whole, you feel its wholehearted impulse before you judge its detail. This, more than professional quality seems to

me a mark of first class talent.

More specifically, it's easy to see that Lichine brings new life to ballet comedy. The old jerky marionette gestures, which have a comic idea but no comic life, have almost disappeared. They were not jokes of character, they were only professional jokes of style. Lichine's dances, instead of being patched up out of smug references to what is supposed to be funny, are the natural movement real characters would make under real circumstances, real dances with all the exuberance of dancing. Such direct humor puts *Graduation Ball* in the best class of comedy, which even a Massine ballet, for all its wit, does not reach.

Character dancing is not like lyric dancing. Lyric dancing is concerned with the secret reality of proportions in space; to character dancing space is more practical, it's a question of having enough room. I am particularly fond of lyric dancing and cherish it. But its method (under the absurd name of modern and abstract) has become so canonized in the last two decades, that it is now the only respectable way to dance, whether one has the gift for it or not. Lichine's imagination seems too forthright to get very far among secrets; and it is a pleasure to see them dropped rather than continued as a convention. You can forgive him his plain floor patterns, his unrefined spacing, for the sake of the new gift he gives free play to instead. No, Lichine is not "translating ideas into terms of dance," he is dancing in the first place. His mis-

takes are not correctible according to another choreographer's style. The movement is too original, an originality so spontaneous, you get the wonderful feeling he can go on inventing forever, that he draws not on his taste but on a whole world he was born with, a whole new world to us.

Graduation Ball, though by nature a minor piece, struck me as proving Lichine's great gifts most conclusively. Of his other four pieces, *Protée* (Debussy-Chirico) seemed like a grave finagling of nothing much. *Francesca da Rimini* (Tchaikovsky-Messel) has fine action scenes, and a striking real feeling that life in a thirteenth century castle must have been brutal, crowded and public; there is no fake style about it. Much more brilliant however is the new *Prodigal Son*, to the same Prokofieff score and Rouault set as Balanchine's version of a decade ago. On the first night Lichine himself was magnificent in the title part. The ballet, it is true, is much stronger as a wild night on the waterfront than as a parable. The concrete parts of the story, the high spirits of well-to-do boys, the lure of a tricky courtesan, the orgy, these are all lively and interesting dances; but the scenes of warning, of remorse, of reconciliation, which ought to counter-balance the others, are mostly dumbshow and not interesting dances at all. In our hearts, as in the parable; forgiveness is more wonderful than sin. But though Lichine doesn't manage to say this he has invented a great number of magnificent moments, such as the courtesan's hoop dance, her two frightening elevations above a pile of people, the hand chorus and the dangling arm chorus, which have his special quality of being exactly what they are and not pretending

to be symbols or stylizations of something else. At moments like these he shows us such real human feeling, such normal human feeling, such a direct meaning in dancing, that I feel he can be considered the first ballet choreographer of major importance to appear since the Diaghilev epoch. But what is best about Lichine is apart from rank. It is his wonderful happy presence his wonderful impulse to dance.

The other major premiere by the Original was Fokine's new ballet *Paganini* to Paganini music. Fokine is of course a genius and his ballet is about a genius and it was highly praised. I myself found no pleasure in it, so I cannot speak of it fairly. Perhaps it is an error to make the central figure of a ballet a role without dancing, because you keep wanting to see it dance and get at the heart of the matter. But I will say in favor of *Paganini* that you cannot help watching it with attention, and that it made me definitely uncomfortable; that is certainly a mark of personality. Another novelty was *The Eternal Struggle* staged by Schwyzoff, an intelligent dancer in the company itself. It is something of a tour de force in keeping allegorical figures properly busy to the music, but more ingenious than interesting. And still another novelty, *Quest* (Verchinina - Bach - Christofanetti) is coming.

The repertory of the Original is enormous. The older masters are represented by a fine *Aurora's Wedding* and *Swan Lake*. Among the familiar Fokine classics there is a wonderfully fresh revision of *Carnival*; and the Stravinsky *Firebird*, which apart from the Bird's long solo, isn't very interesting. Massine is represented by the earlier symphonic ballets, some travesties left over from the

twenties, *Union Pacific*, and by the Bizet-Miro *Children's Games*, full of witty invention and very pretty to look at. There is also an unsatisfactory Lifar number, and a confused *Faun*. And last comes what to me is the glory of the Original's repertory and the great classic in dancing of the later School of Paris – Balanchine's *Cotillon* (Chabrier-Bérard). This piece profoundly affected the imagination of my entire generation. It expresses in a curiously fugitive and juvenile movement the intimacy, the desolation, the heart's tenderness and savagery which give a brilliant unevenness to our beautifully mannered charm. The thirties had not only a kind of Biedermaier parochialism, they had also insight into the eternity of a moment of grace. We are all of us out of them now, and it is strange to see that what we then believed is still as true and as absorbing in itself as any subsequent discovery.

I have already praised the dancers of the Original as a whole. First of the stars is Riabouchinska, the wonderfully over-rapid who can transform herself completely in comedy – everybody loves her; Toumanova, a marvel of the sternest technic, an actress who more than anyone can create a tragic isolation on the stage; Baronova, lovely, now uncertainly feeling her way toward a warmer, more womanly style. Among the men is a dancer for whom I feel a particular affection, Jasinsky, the most modest and most poetic of the stars. The flexibility of his upper spine, his *déboité*, shows you how elastic ballet dancing can be, against the military rigidity many people think the back of a male classicist should be confined to; and his arms are correct enough, and free. He shows you that the batterie of the feet can be a game, instead

of a test, and that at some brief moments you can hold your shoulders too high and still be right. I wish I could see him in the *Spectre*, the touchstone of unaffected lyricism. Among the other dancers: Leskova, as true a comedian as Riabouchinska; Osato, Denisova, Moulin, the frank Petroff, Lazovsky, Runanine, Orloff (in *Good-Humored Ladies*), and the rest. I am glad we have them all, and glad of the atmosphere of healthy development the company has. Incidentally its musical taste (especially clear in the novel Strauss selections for *Graduation Ball*) is very good indeed.

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A word more about Carmalita Maracci, the new star in the local world of initiates, who has had a phenomenal success at the YMHA theatre. She is an excellent dancer and an excellent showman. Both her Spanish and her ballet are sound in approach, though naturally less wide in technical range and less brilliant in finish than a specialist's. In this respect she might be said to have no knees. But she does not mean to use these styles in their pure state. She uses them for their clarity, for their fervor, probably for their definiteness of aplomb, as a sort of language in which to cast her own rather more intellectual and individualistic epigrammata. It is a welcome change from the usual recitalist's "modern" jargon. I did not care so much for her humor, which seemed to me rather too sly for these lucid styles; but the audience loved it. She is an exceptionally intelligent dancer, and you will no doubt hear of her more and more. Her music, composed for her by Mr. Albanese, somewhat in the Granados manner, sounded intelligent, too.

There is plenty of incredibly good Spanish dancing around town, too. At El Chico there is the superlatively bril-

liant Martinez, with a beautiful partner; his heeltaps make a noise as intoxicating as the noise of swing. At the Waldorf Astoria there are two terrific adolescents, who have not his mastery but have all the real temperament in the world, Dead End kids out of Garcia Lorca, Los Chavalillos. And at the Washington Irving High School I saw at the extreme opposite

of style, Argentinita, the very perfection of refinement, as limpid and as true a dancer as I know; this year she has a new male partner, Frederico Rey, who will no doubt make quite a sensation in his own right.

There was much more dancing than this during the last six weeks; this is only some of the dancing that I liked.

OVER THE AIR

By CHARLES MILLS

TOP honors for sending new music this month undoubtedly go to Station WOR. A healthy step in the right direction was *Russell Bennett's Notebook*, a series of programs devoted entirely to American works, many written especially for these broadcasts. That kind of idea should be picked up and carried forward in the near future. Obviously the development of native talent must be viewed as a cultural necessity and not undertaken as a cautious experimental gesture. New and gratifying is the evidence that this fact is slowly being absorbed by the big shots of radio. The musical content of the series was certainly uneven but that, after all, is not the most vital criticism. It is more important that the programs had an entertainment value refreshingly different from the overplugged commercial affairs. Among the most amusing of the set was Bennett's own, novel, American folk-opera, *Music Box Opera, Number 1*. This slight and unpretentious work actually managed to sustain its charming fun for thirty nice, harmless minutes. Bennett knows which instrumental timbres take well on the

microphone. It is disappointing however that his fondness for lush, sugar-coated harmonies is so uninhibited; the result is too little textural variety. The vocal writing proved more successful, aiming modestly at coy sentiment and slap-happy humor, and admirably achieving both. The whole thing was a slightly corny farce, but it can always be said that the composer knew what he wanted and got it. Oscar Levant, guest on another of these programs, knew what he wanted too, and got it with a performance of his *Caprice for Orchestra*. In fact, he admitted as much on the air: "I would rather the *Caprice* had one performance and be forgotten, than no performance at all." However, an andantino movement from Levant's string quartet, heard on the same program, indicates that he leans over backwards to underrate his by no means negligible "serious" gifts.

Other WOR broadcasts included a beautiful performance of Honegger's *Concertino for Piano and Orchestra* directed by Alfred Wallenstein, and played with superb restraint by Milton Kay as soloist. This was an example of music