

WITH THE DANCERS

— BY EDWIN DENBY —

THE ballet season (Ballet Theatre and Monte Carlo Ballet sharing a month at the Met) has not been very startling but it has been unusually pleasant. Both companies danced almost constantly at dance pitch, which had never happened before. The audience was less jittery and more cordial. People didn't seem to come to ballet because they "must" see it, they just naturally were there, and the house wasn't any too big for them. A few older people may have wished for a little more nervous stylishness in the air. But I had the impression that the elegance we are headed for is a less quivering, a less immodest and more amiable one.

The success story of the season was the Monte Carlo's all-American *Rodeo*. I never heard so friendly an enthusiasm as on the opening night. The noise didn't have the harsh fierce sound of a demonstration, either artistic or regional. It sounded like a sincere pleasure, easy and full and sort of homey.

The effect of the ballet as a friend of mine said is like that of a pleasant comic strip. You watch a little coy and tear-jerky cowgirl-gets-her-cowboy story, and you don't get upset about it. What you are really recognizing is what people in general do together out West. Somehow the flavor of American domestic manners is especially clear in that peculiar desert landscape; and that is its fascination. The dance, the music, the décor (Agnes de Mille – Copland – Smith and Love) each are drawn to that same local

fact with affection; and so they have a mysterious unity of a touching kind. They also have the unity of being each one of superior workmanship. It is a modesty of the work that their relationship otherwise looks quite casual.

Choreographically, too, *Rodeo* looks like something improvised. It's truest and luckiest overtones come from style-mixtures. For instance, the long first and third scenes to full orchestra are made up of stylized pantomime, plot, gags, and stylized folkdance effects. But the brief second scene has none of that. It's a fast cowboy dance or running-set – a real one – danced just to hand-clapping and some calling. By themselves the other two stylized scenes would turn cute and corny. But thanks to the little interlude you feel as if continuing through the others, the long silence and the cheerful loneliness of the real place. It's a fine effect; and it also escapes the sourpuss these-are-my-roots claptrap.

The dances proper which take up most of the time are full of variety and quick invention, lively and very attractive; the best we've had on the prairie subject and the best Miss de Mille has done. The ballet was danced very handsomely, with an accurate sense of what American movement (and the pokerfaced expression it has) is like. It was no trouble at all to the Ballet Russe. What I particularly liked about Miss de Mille in the lead was how – by imaginative projection – she gave a completely clear sense of the West as a place she had

lived in, quite independently of anything she did. It gave her performance the extra dimension of style; and the audience took to her completely. — The drawing and sense of space in the drops by Oliver Smith are remarkably fine too:

Well, there was a dispute whether the ballet imitated *Billy the Kid*. It didn't in any respect. What in *Billy* is local color, in *Rodeo* is the main subject. (*Billy* was revived by the Ballet Theatre afterwards. The score sounded fine but was played slowly and roughly. Gibson, as Billy, is of course a better dancer than Loring, on the other hand he hasn't Loring's command of the dramatic pause. The spacing of the figures as well as the flavor of the movement has not the old clear focus; and the Sheriff has lost his mysterious quiet. Not enough rehearsal.)

The season brought one novelty that is in the big-time tradition and with a fresh approach — in all respects a work of highest quality: Nijinska's *Chopin Concerto*, also presented by the Monte Carlo. It is danced to the *E-Minor Piano Concerto*, in a self-effacing attractive décor by Ignatieff. It is a kind of *Sylphides* thirty years after; just dancing, without a story, in the academic classic style. (But it doesn't feel at all like *Sylphides*, and the style as a matter of fact is much more correct than Fokine's.) Two independent girl soloists are contrasted in movement with several close groups of dancers, either girls or boys. There is no psychology, no nostalgia, there is only limpid and constantly interesting change. There is a real subject, the weight and the lightness of the body seen in motion. The dance does not go to either extreme of violence or pathos, but it makes the difference clear

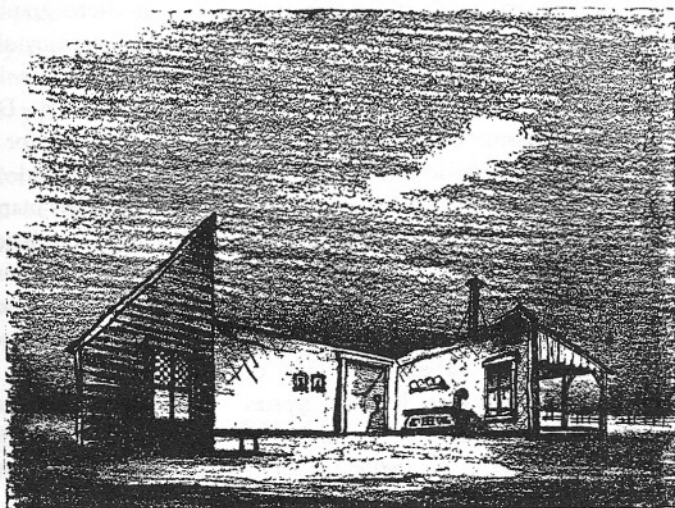
and also very moving. And from a slow awkward beginning it takes flight toward the end in several more and more extended solo variations, a continuous flutter of little steps and low rapid leaps, astonishingly unforced in conception and fantastically brilliant in execution. (No wonder, Danilova and Krassovska were the dancers.) The work is big-time because it is ample and consistent and doesn't leave any emotional loose ends around. To me it also seemed a clear example of the new reticently ingratiating and unstrained and gently corny fashion.

Nijinska's other new ballet, *Snow-maiden*, also done by the Monte Carlo, I liked very much, too. It is set to an arrangement of Glazounoff's *Seasons*. It has a Russian folktale plot about a daughter of Frost and Spring, a maiden who is cool until a shepherd wins her love at a village festival; she loves, melts, and dies in his arms. Spring has come. The ballet, especially in its Aronson setting, gets pretty close to greeting-card art, but by some gift of vivacity and unpretentiousness its sentiment turns out to be fresh and light like the pleasure of walking alone to the woodlot on a day in early spring. The simplified Russian folkdances come off very happily too, and Danilova, as the Spring, is poetic just being carried around the stage — what delicacy of stage presence!

These were the three novelties of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Ballet Theatre also had three: *Aleko* (Massine-Tchaikovsky-Chagall), *Don Domingo* (Massine-Revueltas-Castillanos), and *Romantic Age* (Dolin-Bellini-Merida). They weren't so novel. *Romantic Age* is a decorative little parody of conventional ballet, too harmless to be as elegant as



THE CORRAL



THE RANCH-HOUSE

Décors for AARON COPLAND's ballet, *Rodeo* by OLIVER SMITH
 Presented with the choreography of AGNES DE MILLE
 at the Metropolitan Opera House in October

it might. Its Bellini music doesn't suit the purpose, it is much too interesting nowadays. The happy feature of *Romantic Age* is the special wit of Markova in the lead. First she pretends – exquisitely – that she can't dance; later she goes that one better and pretends she can. Her parody of Victorian ballet, the self-satisfied slow-motion floating in adagio, the prim placement of the extremities in allegro, is the sweetest joke in the world. Markova, too, this time showing her peppery little feet, is the only pleasure on the stage in *Don Domingo* – a welter of complicated plot, seven or eight badly imitated Mexican folk dances, a second-rate night club plastique number in a spotlight, agitated groups that don't know where they belong, and heaps of décor in the official Mexican-art style with too much indigestible color. The Revueltas music is of course something to be grateful for.

The one big-time novelty of the Ballet Theatre is Massine's other ballet, *Aleko*. It has the only Paris-school décor of the season, by Chagall, and besides giving the satisfaction and having the fine presence of a great painter's work, it is also beautifully executed. The ballet is Massine's finest since *Fantastic Symphony*. It has lots of his expert stylization of local color (in this case, Russian gypsies and peasants), lots of his stylized dance-pantomime, lots of his ballet counterpoint (different dancers doing different things at the same time). It has as prize plum a long last scene with the breathless melodramatic thriller rush that Massine does better than anyone. And it even has an admiring bow or two in the direction of Tudor choreography. For me however it has also plenty of the qualities I dislike in Massine's work – an

agitation that seems senseless, a piling up of scraps of movement and bits of character like so much junk from Woolworth's, patterns but no room for them, accent and metre but no rhythm and flower of phrase. The duets are bizarre without intimacy, the man has to jerk from one position to another by turning his back awkwardly on his partner. For me *Aleko* has a real subject only in its décor, the dance is just a hectic show and whenever it slows down it goes flat. Well, the public at any rate loves the hubbub of it, and it loves the junk. Anyone can very well love all the dancers of it, they work as hard as possible and everyone danced his or her best.

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It seemed to me that the audience this season wasn't taking sides on the question of choreography and décor, it was so eager to enjoy all the dancing. Each of the companies had its familiar and wonderful star, Danilova for Monte Carlo, Markova for Ballet Theatre. This year Markova added to her glory by doing each of her many parts in a different ballet style – each accurate and complete. As a Markova enthusiast I was especially delighted with her *Aurora's Wedding* role, which she chose to do in the grande courtesane manner. It was the last trick one would have expected of her, and of course she was right. It made that sermon-like Rose Adagio for once deliciously breathless. In the Monte Carlo company, Slavenska appeared with a new friendly Viennese manner, and for the first time in years she was admirable in a classic piece. Youskevitch, as her partner, had got over the little foolish stiffness between between the shoulder-blades that used to look so boyish; and his knees give now as sumptuously as

Eglevski's when he lands. He is very fine.

But it is Gibson, of the Ballet Theatre who wins the hearts this year, because you watch what looks like a great star just emerging. What's new for a lyric star too is that he hasn't the 1930 Russian mannerism of a certain greasy sexiness. So far he is at his best only in *Aurora's Wedding* and in *Naughty Lisette* (*La fille mal gardée*). But his *Spectre of the Rose* is more promising than any recent one has been. He has the gift for the poetry of leaping, and the basic trick of stopping in midair; now he is teaching himself to continue dancing on the ground, too. Best of all he begins to show personal imagination and personal dance rhythm. He and Miss Conrad and Miss Lyon seem to be the only ones who are learning this fundamental of style from the great example of Markova; as in the other company Krassovska has learned her freer rhythm from Danilova's example.

It is quite right for the management of Ballet Theatre to be developing its better dancers by rotating the solo roles.

I hope it can also do something to give the ensemble more real style. (The Monte Carlo still is the better company in that respect.) A sense of style in the ensemble is what really brings a ballet to life. Style is the expression of the secret meaning of the piece as far as it relates to the individual dancer, in that way it is the dancer's deportment. In another way, it is the question of giving a phrase of dancing an edge or vivacity by timing the point of emphasis — as in reciting poetry. Virgil Thomson who saw a performance of *Swan Lake* in which Markova was magnificent told me that in the old days with the magnificent Doubrovskia in the part he had not had so sharp a sense of a distinction between star and chorus; in style they were related to her style, they were all enchanted swans. The ensemble of the Ballet Theatre are accurate technically, they are lively and pleasant and goodlooking. But nobody has yet taught them classical deportment, which is delicate and grand and personal; it also allows the girls a special femininity which would be interesting.

FILMS AND THEATRE

BY PAUL BOWLES

THE *World at War* is one of the better propaganda pictures and has one of the better soundtracks. The copy I saw (in upper New York State) suffered from frequent cuts, so that sometimes it was impossible to understand even the commentary. However, the logic of its sequences seemed straight enough. Naturally it is a task to make background music for a conversation between a group

of dive-bombers and several anti-aircraft guns. The sound-effect carries the day nearly every time, as against the music. The important thing would therefore seem to be to write music which sounds so much like the noises covering it that the ear will not find it too easy to detect any disparity between the two: protective tonal coloring. Anything to avoid that symphonic strain over which suddenly