

IN DEFENSE OF THE BALLET

LINCOLN KIRSTEIN

DEFENSES have a diversity of impulse. Often called into being on occasions of attack, later they sometimes acquire a historical aura of marking the commencement of great periods. Sydney and Ronsard, Dryden and Boileau launched classic indignation at the anarchists of poetry in their day, and their defense has become the cornerstone of a subsequent fortified tradition which, in spite of little defeats along the way, has survived in recognizable integrity down to our time.

Dancing in America needs no defense. There is a healthy audience for every sort of dancer, the emphasis usually being on the personality of the performer rather than on the dance design. But this is natural in a country where the very existence of a dance audience has depended, not on state support or private munificence, but on energetic personalities who have gathered about them groups who are eager to dance, and who have almost forced a negative public into the realization that dancing is a legitimate branch of the theatre and one of the first of the arts.

However, the victory of these dance groups has been an angry triumph. It has developed a factional congress of personal devotees neither impressively trained, endowed with talent, nor untainted by chauvinism. Almost the only common ground of a critical attitude which they inhabit is a virulent animus against that form of theatrical dancing which for four hundred years has found no more accurate or inclusive name than the classical ballet, and their only common working esthetic is a belief in a free use of gesture and movement, the freedom defined only by their own idiosyncrasies and their debt to Isadora Duncan.



Among the many kinds of dancing coming under the categories of ritual, character or folk dancing and dance designed for appli-

cation to the stage, ballet occupies a special position. Its nature is spectacular and it depends upon a governing design, a subordinate troupe of performers with a presupposed technic that amounts to at least as much ordinary virtuosity as is enjoyed by the average member of a symphony orchestra. Its national origin is Italian; its direction soon turned towards France, but for the last twenty-five years the ballet has meant the Russian Ballet, which when more closely analyzed is Russian dancing in Western Europe.

Ballet dancing is based on a series of exercises which guarantee to the participant brilliance, precision and legibility. Its national origins are merely descriptive and accidental. It applies not to Italians, French or Russians, but to the human body dancing on a stage. In its venerable history it has taken unto itself many portions of dancing on green lawns, parterre floors, market squares and music halls, but before receiving them into its ample catholicism it has baptized them with theatricalization.

The present American resentment against the form of classical ballet is double. Its most obvious and superficial irritation is provincial jealousy on a nationalistic bias. Many people were actually relieved to find the first ballet company to visit our shores since the war was shoddy, an echo of a great period. This was too quickly held to be conclusive proof that the form was dead and hence unamerican. The criticism of the ballet was marked by and large by ignorance and prejudice as intense as it was personally defensive.

The other irritation is historic and more profound. We are, at the present, in the tail-end of a decade or more of experiment, a denial of tradition which has been a holiday from discipline and the hey-day of the dilettante. Considerable nervous energy has been spent on experiments. It has taken nerve and sweat to accomplish clearances now realized, and the experimenters are not going to relinquish their hard-earned righteous priority without a fight. The form of ballet, as a traditional form, has come to represent tradition, and what is more, pressing the point a little, an alien tradition.

But tradition, or the sum of classic and romantic reactions, or orthodoxy or the large history of any art form is patient and in-

evitable. It eats what is digestible in its progress and rejects the smaller heresies of individual personalities. From 1910 to 1930 tradition paid out enough rope for its children to play with, and those who have not hanged themselves are drawing back to the sturdy source with the same cord. The experimental reaction against the academies, and the academies are only the right hand of tradition, is valuable and negative. But it is inevitably followed by reaction against reaction, and two negatives are positive.

Defense and apology, if worth much, are usually assertion and explanation. Perhaps there is altogether too much talk about the denial of tradition in American dancing. There is surely, whether it is traditional or not, a lively precedent for the existence of numerous civic symphony orchestras in the United States although one wouldn't use that fact to prove the existence of an inherently American symphonic form. If there were schools of American ballets in five of the largest American cities to provide material for good companies there would be little enough discussion of ballet being unamerican. It would be soon seen as good dancing done by Americans.



There are certain peculiarities in the ballet which give it its style and frame. These peculiarities embody limitations for the sake of strength and carrying power, similar in measure and quality to the assumption of the tempered clavichord. The very presence of a limitation to a liberal opponent of ballet seems a palpable hit against it. The "modern" dance is offered as an example of a limitless form capable of expressing anything. This it usually is—an expression of such freedom as to be at least ambiguous when it is not entirely without a cogent precision. The limits of classical ballet are best concentrated for attack by questioning the reasons for the use of turns, toes and leaps. The opponents of ballet assume that toe-work is torture. Even finger-exercises on a piano are not a pleasure. Toe-work is arduous but not senselessly cruel. The use of points gives a continuous line to a choreographic pattern which is not superior to but sometimes desirably different from the angle of foot and leg. Entrances on points remove action into the sphere of the miraculous and provide another fulcrum of movement to the theatrical uni-

verse which has never yet ignored an effect or a lovely trick. Turns or pirouettes, when properly used, present the whole body as a plastic member, back, front, sides at once, the whole form inherent in the blur of spin. And it has also its brilliance in the turn itself as gracious as the tested ability of any slight virtuosity. Leaps and aerial dancing take the body off the floor, and allow humans, without the use of acrobatics or mechanical tricks, to make sudden apparitions and splendid flights not extraordinary in the behavior of gods and heroes. That to effect these actions depends on rigorous schooling no one can deny, but the gestures in themselves, insomuch as dancers can do them, have done them, are neither superhuman nor supernatural. Nijinsky was super-average, but he is taken not so much as an exception, but as a standard to be achieved.

Then the ballet has as its own private duchy, the province of adagio, understood as the sustained dance of a man and of a woman supported by him, enabling her to do with her and his body, what she could not do alone. Although in this passionate geometry the part of the man is subordinate, almost a shadow, it is by no means to be ignored. It is his quiet strength, his long holds, his steady arms which give to her a lightness, a height, a slow relaxation and a looser fall which in the proximity of her body to his is, assuming always its being well danced and well designed, infinitely touching and distinguished.



The advantages of an American ballet to American musicians and composers is well realized by most of them. The gift of commissions, the explanation of orders on command, the sense that an artist is working for something definite, with something definite as dancing, towards something as instinctively rewarding as a dancer's audience, is enough to do for America what Diaghilev did for Europe twenty years ago.

When there is an American ballet company, a corps of trained dancers at the frequent disposal of painters, poets and musicians, a working instrument for their collaboration, supported by the interest of an audience educated by this interest into as slight a technical information of dancing as the average symphony orchestra audience has in music, the arts in America will have a

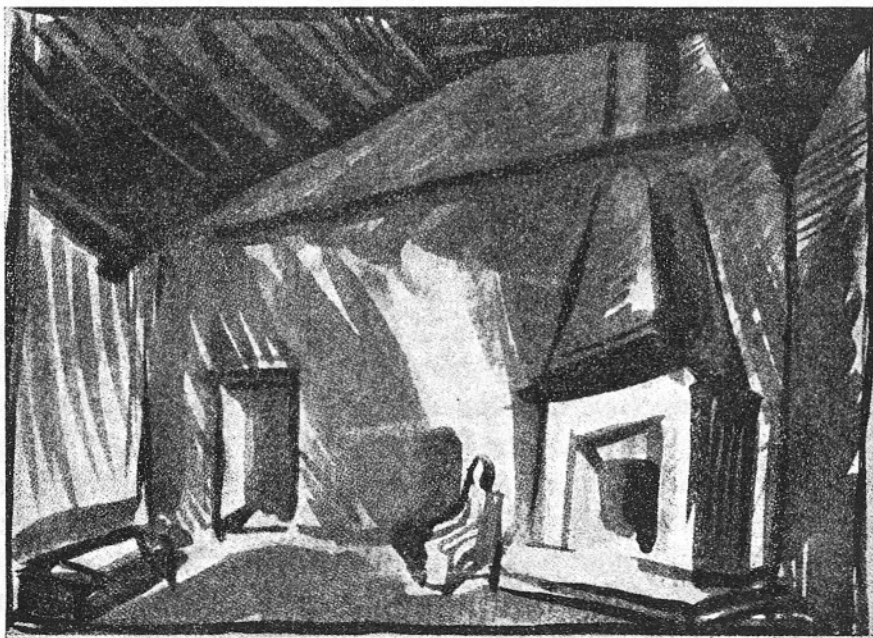
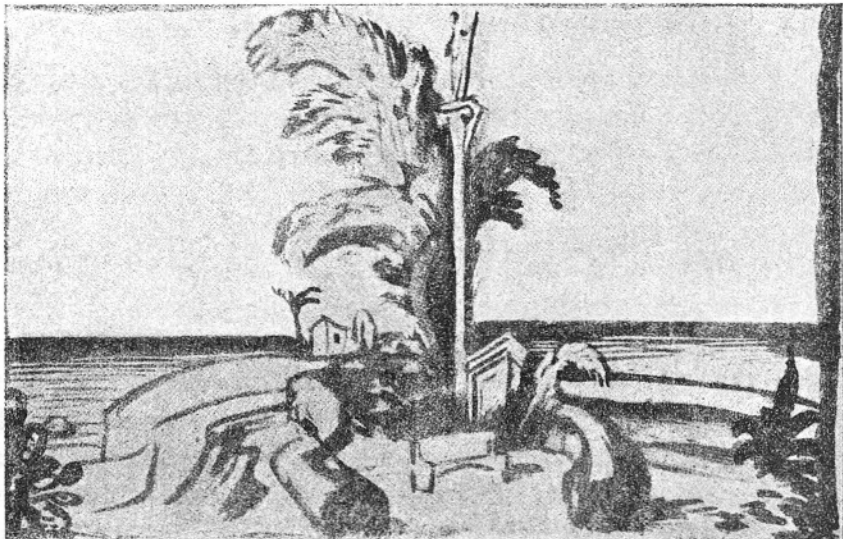
surprisingly fertile ground for reference. A ballet company and a ballet audience, as opposed to the devotees of group dancers, have the continuity of an ancestral tradition to support them, independent of the success or failure of individual personalities or single contributors, plus the active competition of all the collaborators. A single dancer can only command his or her own frame. A ballet has innumerable frames, and canvas to fill them.

The audience for the ballet is an extremely important element in the maintenance of its tradition, and can be evoked in America with a backing and organization not possible in Europe. The days of the unique patron are over. Diaghilev was the last man to be able to make two million gold francs in a season and spend three, because we cannot command a Basil Zaharov, a Dimitri Gunsbourg or an Aga Khan. And so much the better for us. The type audience of the League of Composers, the Theatre Guild and the Museum of Modern Art insures a support which is devoted in essentials and ready to be shown. More than New York, there are the vast untapped audiences of universities and provincial museum towns. We like dancing for its fire and concentrated impact. There is no conceivable reason why we should not like more exciting dancing better than less. A new, a much younger audience is on the verge of support and patronage, and will think twice before succumbing to a sentimental maintenance of an exhausted opera, who will be curious and appraising of cooperations between Virgil Thomson and Franklin Watkins, Sandy Calder and George Gershwin, Chavez and Jean Charlot, Covarrubias and Louis Armstrong. As for dancers there are technicians here as able in their possibilities as the best foreign material; and further afield, although there are no fields which can't give pasturage to ballet, Fred Astaire, Paul Draper, the Twelve Aristocrats, Buck and Bubbles, and the whole range of negro dancing.

Our dancers must feel the pleasures of devotion to an unrelieved discipline. They must study not only the historic limits of their medium but investigate the unrealized possibilities in their own bodies, common to that fluid which made French dancers paragons of the suave, Italians masters of the acrobatic, and Russians the more sensitive heirs of the combination. Al-

ready one senses the style of the American school, coltish, abrupt in a brusque way, but not jerky, more Hepburn than Garbo, more Cagney than Barrymore. The American manner is most obvious in films: it can be most intense in dancing.

Those Americans who have the ballet close to their hearts and who are worried as to its possibilities on this continent are in a similar position to the American lovers of German and Italian music before the foundation of the great opera companies or great orchestras towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It might almost have seemed, that, due to the complacency of our provincialism, we might be content forever with visiting virtuosi. But a tradition is stronger than mechanical inconvenience and half-hearted antagonisms. The future of the ballet is as sure in this country as in any country it has previously affected, except with this difference. In America the combination of races provides a richer material for dancers, and the extent of the country a more popular reception on a larger scale than ever before.



MALPIERO'S OPERA, THE PRODIGAL SON
Settings for the Roman premiere by
CIPRIANO OPPO

This opera for which Francesco Malipiero used as libretto the play of the same name by Luigi Pirandello has been forbidden further performance in Italy by a recent edict of Mussolini.