

## SKYSCRAPERS: AN EXPERIMENT IN DESIGN

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT EDMOND JONES

WITH the production of John Alden Carpenter's *Skyscrapers* some time in February, the Metropolitan Opera House will have staged its long expected debut of jazz. Something native—tawdry, dazzling in color, with the insinuating rhythms of popular music, will suddenly find its place in a repertoire sacred to the more hallowed conventions. American ballet will have been launched on the grand scale.

Before this experiment has been accepted, repeated, and eventually copied, the history of its production should be recounted because in itself it adds something new and curious to the annals of the theatre. Robert Edmond Jones, the distinguished artist commissioned to create the ballet's settings, had been approached with a general query about his designs for the operatic stage. To discover what stimulus music rather than drama gives the painter, we casually asked whether he worked from the score or the libretto. His unexpected replies led us to the story of the making of this ballet, the details of which are given here to record a pioneer effort from which an art-form emerged, not as a development out of established conditions in the theatre, but in response to the creative will of the artist.

*Skyscrapers* originally, it appears, had no libretto, no plot, no dance designs, not even a locale. In the beginning there was only the music and it is directly from this that the production has been built—built by the composer and the designer of scenes without the traditional choreographer. For after the enterprise was undertaken the surprising condition was revealed that as yet there exists in America no choreography in the strict sense of the word.

"There is marvelous dancing," said Mr. Jones "but no art-form. Except of course in the Indian rituals, which offer perhaps the

finest examples of dance design in history. Other than these there is no native choreography, and the discovery, made after we were well along with our ballet, was absolutely unanticipated and extremely disconcerting. We found ourselves, a musician and a painter, suddenly voyaging over foreign and uncharted seas.

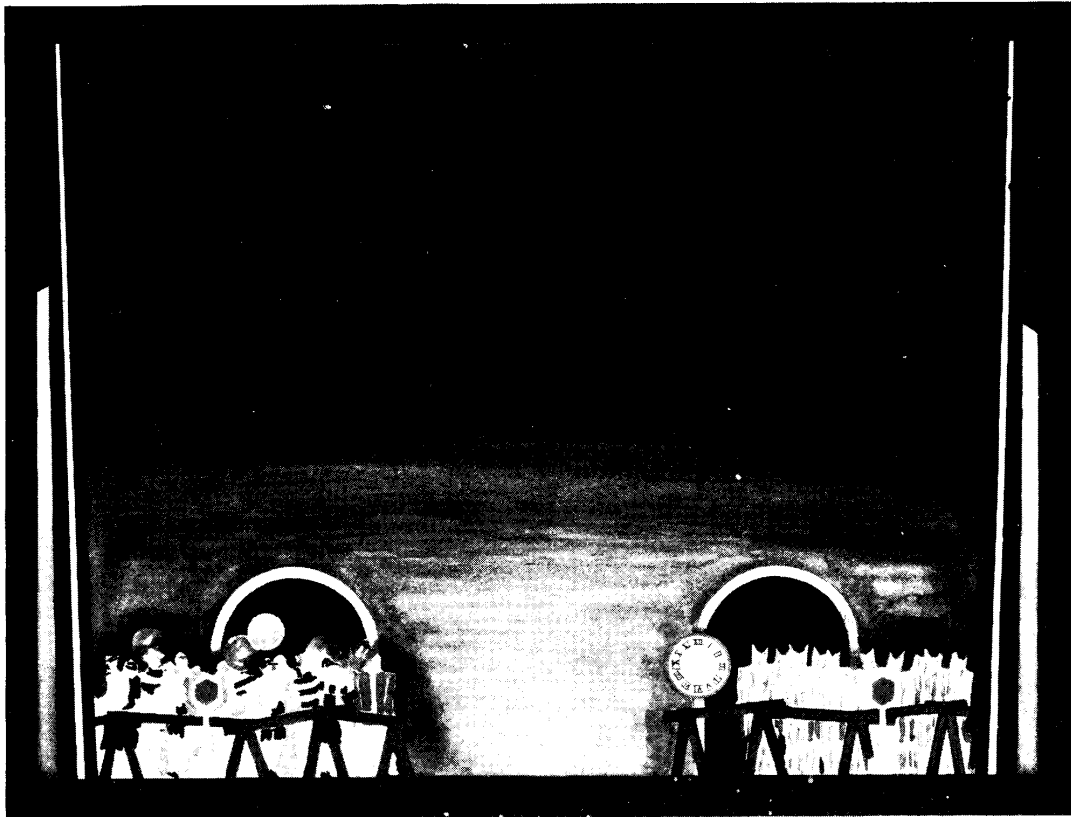
"Carpenter had written a piece of orchestral music complete in itself. Its structure was as follows—a short opening passage, a brief transition, a relatively long middle section, another brief transition and again a short passage. It had definite American feeling, a suggestion of metropolitan life. At the outset Carpenter expressed the intention to indicate moods of work and play, but beyond this he had not committed himself, not even to a literal locale."

A reversal of the usual routine, which is to start with the story, then proceed to the music and the stage picture, was therefore in order. Mr. Carpenter played the score repeatedly and from the music itself Mr. Jones evolved the scenes, which do not anchor a dramatic plot to definite time and place but express, no more literally than the music itself, the feeling of the ballet.

A background suggesting modern steel construction was created for the opening section, with tall skeleton frames of buildings in process of taking shape, a design new and strange, yet whose forms are familiar to every inhabitant of an American city. The brief transitions, which musically communicate a change of mood, are represented by curtains whose graded color also conveys a sense of passage emphasized by two openings that swallow up bright, moving figures—the atmosphere of factory egress, of the subway, of the crowded vehicle tearing away from the centers of labor.

The second part emerged as a pleasure park—Coney Island, the White City, the Midway—with all the familiar and typical symbols of urban recreation. Then finally there is the steel background again, this time with a shadowy form looming through it, evoking the image of a visionary city—a transition from an abstract present to the future.

"It was when these designs were completed", Mr. Jones continued, "that Carpenter and I began our search for an American



To suggest the transitions from work to play, and from play back again to work, which are the chief subjects of Mr. Carpenter's ballet *Skyscrapers*, Mr. Jones has devised this broad expanse of grey which is broken sharply by openings, obviously exits and entrances, that swallow up the masses who are daily swept back and forth the length of the modern city.

Adolph Bolm to create the ballet as choreographers do for Diaghilev. Five years ago when we were working on the *Birthday of the Infanta* we had the co-operation of a European. *Skyscrapers*, however, called for native talent. It seemed a little devious to say the least, that we should take one of the Europeans who after six months spent watching Florence Mills and other cabaret stars, go home and skilfully apply the borrowed devices of our jazz.

"After weary search in pursuit of every possibility from the famous revue choruses and their trainers to the hodge-podge of ideas that emanated from the intelligentsia, it became perfectly clear that there was as yet no discoverable American Bolm, no choreography and no way to bring either of these suddenly into existence."

It seemed that nothing remained but for the composer and the artist to work out the ballet themselves. Retreating to a farmhouse in Vermont they took the music and the scene designs and set to without story, plan or dancer. Their procedure is described by Mr. Jones:

"Carpenter would play the music giving me an impression of the changing orchestration. He played each passage over and over again for hours. This would give me certain ideas of movement for which I drew tentative designs, to be discussed with him. Countless series of patterns were made during six months of gruelling, unremitting labor. From these we selected the final succession of designs, one growing from the other, parallel with the progress of the music.

"Large and typical body actions were chosen for the opening scene,—the movements of laborers, which lent themselves perfectly to choreographic pattern and to our rhythm. Using the figures of workmen, we elaborated their gestures until a complete scene was achieved with crescendo and climax.

"The musical ideas in the pleasure part suggested definite impersonations in a gaudy carnival spirit which later fell into a natural sequence. Here again the mass and individual movements were woven into a pattern that culminated in a high point of action inevitable both from the music and the design.

"For the finale, a re-emphasis of the first scene, we invented a larger expression of the work movements, bringing the whole

ballet to a more released and noble climax, the suggestion of a meaning beyond the visual present."

The dance designs are thus not only a part of the music but of the whole stage setting, the first expressing in action the meaning implicit in the second. The completed choreographic manuscript was at last inserted between the pages of the musical score. It contains all the dance figures with indications of pattern changes definitely tied to the numbered bars of music. The play of light was also planned with these designs, and the line of their changes was paralleled with the score.

It then became essential to find a dancer to work out, bar by bar, the action of the individual performers through these choreographic patterns. His task was to execute in detail the passages marked *strut*, *Charleston*, *trot*, or any pantomimic directions indicated by the composer and designer. Mr. Carpenter and Mr. Jones finally selected Samuel Lee, an American, a dancer, a producer of Broadway revues, who is noted for his direction of Irving Berlin's shows. The manuscripts were passed to him and from these he planned the execution of the figures, the transitions, the dovetailing of individuals with crowds.

"*Skyscrapers*" according to Mr. Jones "is still without plot, without story. It is not parody, it is a fantastic extravaganza—an interpretation through music and design of a feeling about the American scene of today.

"Because we regard this ballet frankly as an experiment, it is impossible to generalize about the method. Europe has her way of making music, ballet, opera. Ours might be as inappropriate over there as jazz seems to me on a conventional concert program. To us this appeared to be the only method; no other existed, therefore we had no choice. And we were borne up by a certain exhilaration in the work because here in America all these—music, dance, drama—are still in the making. It is extraordinary that we should have had the opportunity to try it out on so large a scale. Good or bad it stands revealed as an experiment, toward what end we don't yet know, nor can anyone foretell."

By M. L.