

DANCE INVASION OF AMERICA

THIS has been an extraordinarily full season which will go down in the records marked by the new incursion of the ballet. Since 1916 and 1917 that phase of the dance has been more or less confined to our magnificent motion picture houses in attenuated imitations. The Monte Carlo Ballet Russe, which is closer to the Diaghilev organization than any other one in existence at present, has been much needed in order to clarify many

of the conceptions and misconceptions that have arisen during the past seventeen years.

A new dance has grown up in America which is utterly different in technic and in mood. Following that, a series of German dancers have made as deep an impression as any foreigners who have come over. Nevertheless, the Ballet Russe is still the only group that is working in cooperation with artists, musicians and choreographers in the attempt to build a theatrical unit rather than an evening of divertissements. They have given us Chopin, Borodine, Stravinsky in music; Benois, Roerich, Dérain, Picasso in décor. For those who still regard the dance as entertainment, sweetness and beauty—and apparently there are many—they have filled the need.

Of the nine ballets they presented in their first "season," I have seen six, which means that Balanchine's well-received *La Concurrence* can only be mentioned. The pretty pictures in *Les Sylphides* were too pretty. In the others, Baronova showed fine technical virtuosity in *Jeux d'Enfants*, and Massine's entrance and complete performance in *Le Beau Danube* was impeccable. He has a vigor which entirely avoids the usual prettifications so many of the ballet gentlemen exhibit. *Petrouchka*, with its cold grey sky in contrast to dazzling costume, its excellent characterization by Woizikovsky, and its unified narrative form, stood out from the rest as the only one that had some emotional content, some beginning, middle, and end. In this sense it is not ballet at all but approaches the modern dance.

At this point it becomes necessary to note several distinctions so that any criticism of the ballet may have some justice. Otherwise I can mention only spots of brilliant technical virtuosity and then stop. The most important is that, in the present day, the ballet is a museum piece and must be regarded for its historical significance. The grand ideas launched by Fokine and Diaghilev around 1909 through the inspiration of Isadora Duncan have scarcely moved a fraction of an inch since then. The technic that expressed fairies and ideal romantic love and quaint dreams continues to do so, more or less. Taken as an example of what was happening twenty years ago, the Ballet Russe has decided interest. One becomes aware of the desire to get away

from the mechanical divertissements that entered Russia from France; to present a story that will be clear in development and in meaning; and to work with musicians and artist-designers in order to enhance the beauty of the story being told. Taken, then, in an historical sense, the attempt was valuable if the ballet was ever expected to get out of the doldrums.

There is, of course, another side to this which is far less favorable. One has already been mentioned: that none of the ideas have reached their expected fruition, and that there has been no discernible growth for a number of years. Meanwhile the world has smashed and is trying to recover. People themselves have changed since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And there has risen a new approach to movement out of the human body, out of human relationships, out of natural physical coordination, to express modern life, just as a new technic of painting has come forth.

But to the Monte Carlo. Their three new ballets, each one in a different vein, may explain some of this criticism. The first, *Le Lac des Cygnes*, was a choreographic poem on Tchaikovsky's music, full of brilliant toework and balance chiefly by Alexandra Danilova. As a technician she can be excellent, but the theme of the ballet was as insufferable as any I have seen. It relates the tale of the young prince (Lichine) who fell in love with the Queen of the Swans. There is no form, but that lack we have become accustomed to in the ballet, since the type of movement itself prevents a structural development. It is full of the usual stops and starts. The postures and attitudes are close to a romantic, sentimental Corot. The love scenes were full of sweetness and light.

The new vein the ballet might have developed to perfection, if it had continued, was found in *Les Matelots*, with music by Kochno and choreography by Massine. This immediately brings us to one conclusion: that almost alone in humorous themes does the spark of vitality enter. The serious themes are still in the lowest phase of the romantic period, but here there was a sparkle and a brilliance continually delightful. Part of this was due to the fact that the traditional ballet method was used only by one of the characters. The rest used movement that was close to

life and vitalized by the difficult ballet training which brought it to a peak of excitement. Woizikovsky again had a leading part and proved that his body was capable of thrilling impossibilities. There was also Shabelevsky, tense, perfectly balanced, often breath-taking in the feats he accomplished with complete clarity and finesse.

The third was the heralded *Le Tricorne*, taken from Alarcón's novel *Los Sombreros de Tres Picos* and using music by de Falla, scenery and costumes by Picasso, and choreography by Massine. Alarcón's tale could scarcely be found and the ballet itself did not follow the printed synopsis, so that it lacked the continuity of *Petrouchka*. Nevertheless Tamara Toumanova and Woizikovsky, in tensely tight Spanish movement, conveyed the spirit of the tale extremely well. It was exciting for their performances alone. Lichine gave a clever characterization of the old Governor but did little in the way of movement.

Three other dancers remain. Vecheslova and Chabukani made a brief temporary exit from Soviet Russia and shivered Carnegie Hall almost to the ground. They presented nothing new in theme and they danced in the traditional ballet technic to painful music. But they brought something of Soviet Russia which covered every sin. They had the unleashed but nevertheless inwardly controlled activity of two animals. Whether you were a pedagogue or a cow it was utterly impossible to resist them. If they didn't succeed in pulling the strings off your own decorous restraint, there was something the matter with you.

The last is an American, Martha Graham. If she presented nothing but *Frenetic Rhythms*, that would be enough. She has reached the point where the physical possibilities of the body are in themselves an exciting pleasure and because of this has grown richer in technic and deeper in approach than in anything else she has done. The first of the "three dances of possession" presents a sharp mental conflict between the body's own desires and its submission to a social form. The second is the negation of the body because of its spiritual possession, and the last is a physical possession. They present the mood with compelling force and are the most thrilling solo work (in form and in technic) that Miss Graham has so far given us.

Of her other new solo, *Transition*, little more can be said at present than that it is itself a transition. It needs some explanatory note to clarify its present stage. Nevertheless, technically it has more than a few moments of brilliance. The new group dance, *Celebration*, is likewise transitional—more lyrical and freer in its movement than anything preceding it, but containing too much simultaneous action in the group-units to follow the form in all its variations. The level she has reached in technique, however, is an enviable one and whatever she produces in the future in this vein will increase her stature as an artist.

Paul Love