

AT THE OPERA

By DOUGLAS MOORE

EVERYONE who would like to see American opera established as contemporary entertainment should regard the recent season of the New Opera Company sympathetically. The score may not be as high as we had hoped. Some of the fumbles and misplays could easily have been avoided. But Mrs. Lytle Hull and her associates are to be thanked for an effort which appeared to be in the right direction and which resulted in some lively evenings at the Forty-fourth Street Theatre. Old notions about opera are hard to kill. We shall probably have to be content to see them curl up their toes in lots of two and three, but provided each new venture consolidates the gains that have been made there is hope for the future.

Apart from the economic problems which have never been and probably never will be easy, the artistic formula looks simple enough. It would be something like this: a theatre of moderate size where everyone can see and hear, reasonable prices, musical competence, with native singers, players and conductors preferred, stage directors American enough to have a bowing acquaintance with our language and our audience psychology, modern technic of scene design and lighting, and a repertory with some contemporary interest, consisting either of works in English or in translation, but if the latter positively no "operaese."

In terms of the above the New Opera

Company at least partly fulfilled our hopes. It was a joy to be able to see and hear so well. The prices were a little below the level of the Broadway musical show, probably not high enough to allay the suspicions of the swank patrons and too expensive to win the support of the mass audience that Mr. Salmaggi discovered and exploited several years ago.

The chorus consisted apparently of young American singers. They looked well on the stage, sang rings around the chorus at the Metropolitan, and were spirited and intelligent when the direction gave them a chance. The orchestra was superb. Graduates of the National Orchestral Association, they were young, alive, and responsive to the generally excellent conducting. With these two items alone the New Opera Company scored a triumph.

The principals, for the most part Americans, varied from very good to bearable as was to be expected. In an auditorium of this size when smaller voices are acceptable, some sacrifice of vocal opulence may be made for stage effectiveness, and this appeared to be the guiding principle. However the players, many of them inexperienced, were at the mercy of the stage directors and the results were decidedly uneven. I unfortunately saw only three of the productions, having missed *Così Fan Tutte*, but in *Macbeth*, Robert Silva, in *Pique Dame*, Glenn Darwin, and in *La Vie Parisienne*, Caroline Segrera, George Rasely, and Clifford New-

dahl proved to be first-rate singing actors. In the Offenbach production the principals were all so good that it is hardly fair to mention only these three.

In the vital matters of stage direction and production it is clear that the company followed no definite policy and that here as well as in the choice of repertory the results were most disappointing. As productions *Macbeth* and *La Vie Parisienne* were much more satisfactory than *Pique Dame*. In the Tchaikowsky opera the scenery was makeshift and unassisted by the lighting. The stage direction was the old fashioned kind that encourages singers to follow their worst impulses. Head wagging, arm sawing, emotional staggers, clinches and clutches above and below the knees had the audience snickering more than once. Americans are never going to accept opera staged this way unless Grace Moore and Richard Crooks are thrown in for good measure.

This opera was one of the two sung in English. The singers were unhappily only too clear in their diction for the translation used was "operaese" of the purest quality. German has for example lines like these; "She needs no mortal appellation who is divine" and "Forgive, oh bright celestial vision, that I have robbed thy peace of mind. Don't turn away from me, away in fear and anger, and to my grief be kind." No American director would put up with such stuff. Certainly an evening like this will never win friends for opera in English.

Macbeth was a warmed-over production from Glyndbourne, probably not so good as the original, which was a sensation in England, but excellent in spots. The use of lantern slides for Birnam Wood and several other modern touches gave an indication of what could be

done with resourceful staging. The acting was much better than in *Pique Dame* despite an ungainly Lady Macbeth and a likable Macbeth who was lacking in force. The opera was sung in Italian and perhaps mercifully so because the language of the bard suffers in translation to Italian and back, and the version sold in the lobby which would probably have been used has little of the ingenuity of Francis Hueffer's *Otello*.

From the viewpoint of production, direction and text *La Vie Parisienne* was by far the most successful. Felix Brentano the director collaborated with Louis Verneuil on an English adaptation of the book with lyrics by Marion Farquhar. The more or less obligatory modernization, for much of the book is topical, was tastefully accomplished so that the bouquet of the original was retained. The problems of this opera, although by no means easier, are naturally quite different from those of the Verdi and the Tchaikowsky, but this time there was a harmony between scenery, costumes, lighting, and acting which created a genuine atmosphere and the audience if not all of the critics appeared to enjoy it. The casting was excellent, the girls were pretty, the comedians likable, and the romantic young men not too stuffy. *La Vie Parisienne* caters to a somewhat special taste. It is frothy and insubstantial, possibly too much so for American audiences who love Gilbert and Sullivan but are still unconvinced about Offenbach. This production was a good sample and may possibly lead to others.

As for the contemporary interest of the repertory such novelty as there was lay in the relative unfamiliarity of all the works except *Così Fan Tutte*. An excessive caution seems to have dictated

the selection. Could not at least one American work have been included at the start instead of a promise for the future? And to rely upon two well tested Glyndbourne productions with Fritz Busch as imported attraction for fifty percent of the operatic new deal does not indicate a very adventurous spirit. By all means let us have the Glyndbourne productions duplicated here, as many of them as possible, but not as the chief feature of a new American opera company which is forming a constructive policy for future development. Why when we are trying to start something of our own must we always depend upon ready-made European réclame? That is the old snobbish principle of the Metropolitan. The opera wagon has been hitched to so many stars it is beginning to wear out. This is supposed to be the motor age anyway.

Considered merely as a production and not as part of a policy, *Macbeth* was a privilege to see. It is early Verdi to be sure and parts of it sound that way but the inspiration of Shakespeare cast a spell over the composer prophetic of the greatness to come in *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Up to the time of the banquet scene the warfare in thought and expression between Englishman and Italian is positively distressing. This is not apparent, at least to the Verdi lover, in *Otello*, but after all he was the Moor of Venice and the Italian style seems to suit the action of the play. But *Macbeth* is very Scotch, raw and gloomy, and to the point. A lot of mental readjustment is necessary for our audiences to accept a Lady Macbeth goading to murder by means of the most artful vocal *floriture*. The witches instead of being three, which is sinister enough, are made super super by expansion into

the entire female personnel and they are assisted by the corps de ballet. The early scenes are disappointing but after the banquet scene as the drama becomes tenser the instinct of the composer is so unerringly true that one forgets about atmosphere to marvel at the music. What a weird effect by the simplest of means Verdi obtains in the parade of apparitions as Banquo and his progeny confront Macbeth. How touching and beautiful the music of the Scotch refugees and of the sleep walking scene which comes after. The battle music too where one expects the all too familiar formula is unexpectedly contrapuntal and magnificently scored. Fritz Busch is to be thanked for rediscovering the opera and for directing it with an almost breathless reverence and devotion.

Pique Dame was given some years ago at the Metropolitan if I remember correctly. It was probably chosen for this season on the theory that Tchaikowsky is still a miracle worker at the box-office. The music is charmingly melodious but curiously undramatic except for the scene of the death of the countess where the composer was in excellent fettle. For the rest of the time one felt that it would all be fine in concert, just as you often think how well the symphonies would sound in the theatre. The book is part Pushkin (the gambling motif) and part Wagner (the high minded love affair), and it is all very unconvincing. It is difficult to justify the inclusion of this opera in the repertory upon any artistic grounds.

As for *La Vie Parisienne*, if we are to have entertainment opera, we shall have to get used to the French repertory of opera comique, at least for the lighter moments, and Offenbach although he is

sometimes guilty of music that acrobats and bareback riders have made their own is the most witty and charming of all. And if these operas can be made into such adroit and satisfactory productions we shall probably have a lot more of them.

Let us hope that the New Opera Company having taken the first hurdles will

go on. It is a fine thing indeed to give our American singers a chance to develop but if this can be done with a unified policy of admitted belief in the modern spirit and creative effort of American artists we shall have something far more important than a worthy undertaking. It might turn out to be a national school of opera.

WITH THE DANCERS

By EDWIN DENBY

MODERN DANCING

THE season opened with the Jooss Ballet, presenting eight or nine pieces by Jooss, and one brand new one by Agnes de Mille. First, *Miss de Mille's Drums Sound in Hackensack*. It is about New Amsterdam, the fur trade, how the cheated Indians found a Dutch girl in the jungles of Jersey, and what happened then. To show us New Amsterdam, Miss de Mille begins with a folk dance, adds a Puritan hop and a de Mille wiggle, and we all get the joke, and smile easily. When she comes to the serious parts, terrors of the forest and Indian savagery, she invents some gestures as simple as those an earnest child would hit on. Again everybody gets the point and is perfectly satisfied to go on watching until something else happens. So the piece comes out a hit. The stage Indians, either woodenly noble or tomtom-ish, I liked especially. I like Miss de Mille's work in general. Though her heroines are inveterate wigglers, she has a real sense of how the body dances, she composes properly, and she has a gift of rhythm completely congenial to Americans.

Jooss's works, however, one looks at very seriously. They are on the plane of "masterworks." Jooss has a great reputation too, as a leader in serious theatre dancing, and as a systematizer of modern technic. Just the same, watching the stage, what I saw was one dud after another. There is one exception — the famous first scene of his *Green Table*. This is brilliant and curiously different from all the rest (including the rest of the *Green Table*), different in rhythm, style, humor, and theatrical punch.

The Jooss dancers are engaging, accurate, lively, and devoted executants, without mannerisms or bad manners, dancers by nature. They were fine for Miss de Mille. But when they dance the Jooss choreography, what do you see them do on the stage? Well, the best thing you see is a controlled, clear, wide movement in the arms. (And they can stop an arm gesture more neatly than most good dancers). Their hands and necks are plain and good. The breastbone is held high and the chest is open. This upper third of the body is excellent. But below it, the belly is dull, the buttocks