

Neither silent, nor are they lambs

In anticipation of the Danish Royal Ballet's U.S. tour, Katharine Kanter reports on the second Bournonville Festival of the century in Copenhagen.

The Royal Ballet of Denmark will tour the United States in June. Between June 9 and 14, they will dance at the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Los Angeles, and between June 16 and 21, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Bournonville's "La Sylphide," "Napoli," and "A Folk Tale" will be performed, as well as some of his shorter works.

As the monstrous film "Silence of the Lambs" reaped Oscars, and Euro-Disneyland prepared to inject yet another strain of green slime into the European public, a somewhat different event was taking place in Denmark: the second Bournonville Festival of this century. There were neither lambs, nor were they silent.

March being the 150th Anniversary of Bournonville's masterpiece "Napoli," Frank Andersen, director of the Royal Ballet, invited the world to a nine-day celebration, where all of the choreographer's surviving works were performed.

August Bournonville (1805-79) was, along with his school-friend and colleague Jules Perrot, the greatest choreographer of the last century. Born in Denmark to an ardent follower of the French-American patriot Lafayette, the ballet master Antoine de Bournonville, and trained in Paris by Prof. Auguste Vestris, he was driven by a determination to bring classical ballet, as a dramatic form, up to the standard of the other Muses. That he succeeded was proven by the tremendous week in Copenhagen.

Bournonville is a dramatist who can organize even people who think they hate classical ballet, and the effect on an audience of seeing all of his works in such a compressed time period, is very similar to the kind of power that Shakespeare unleashes. His ballets are real plays, except that there is music, and there is mime, and there is also dancing. And the dancing part is important, but it is not the only thing. In fact, in pieces like "Far from Denmark," there is only a little dancing at the end, and it would be just as beautiful without it.

It is life that Bournonville represents, each person on stage, as in Shakespeare, having something essential to do

there, so the audience is drawn into the play, instead of repelled and rejected outside the framework.

Even his floor-patterns have an open-ended living structure, so that if a spectator knew what he were doing, he could almost walk up onto the stage and join the action. Whereas, in the Russian-style ballet, which is what most people think of as "classical ballet," and which is what is seen everywhere in the world except in Denmark, the basic structure on stage is simple, arithmetical multiples, men and women lined up like pawns on a chessboard, the monotony broken by soloists' variations of depressing "virtuosity." Among Petipa, Balanchine, or Forsyth in this respect, there is little to choose.

The drama, in most of Bournonville's ballets, is shaped around a conflict—a dissonance—which comes from inside the individual who does not fit in with the silly townsfolk, as Gennaro in "Napoli," or who has a tragic flaw, as James in the "Sylphide." The former grapples with the problem and becomes the greater for it; the latter flees into the forest of romantic urges, and is crushed. Of the 10 or so surviving works, all save the "Sylphide" end joyously, but all are only a thread away from tragedy, the most striking example being "La Kermesse à Bruges."

The notion of relief

What is hard about dancing, is to work out the right technique to do this, to get away from gross physical effects, and free movement to the greatest possible degree from constraints like gravity which drag it down and away from the world of ideas. The main instrument through which the Bournonville technique, which is radically different from Russian technique, achieves this, is through the principle of relief, or shading, called in French *épaulement*. This is related to the techniques in painting, which Leonardo da Vinci called *contrapposto* and *chiaroscuro*. This begins, appropriately enough, with the head, the heaviest single part of the body, leading a very slight rotation of the entire spinal column in the direction the dancer is moving. While in Russian technique the artist dances *en face* (staring at the audience), in

Bournonville he moves through different gradients of the folding and unfolding of circular action, which, seen from the theater, is different degrees of shading of the open or crossed forms (*effacé or croisé*). This is why the eye never tires of Bournonville's *enchaînements* (chains of steps): The natural principle of *chiaroscuro* draws the eye into the action, rather than thrusting itself upon the eye. Furthermore, basing the center of gravity entirely on the position of the head, makes the most sense physiologically, protecting the spine from shocks. In the Anglo-Russian school, which prevails everywhere else in the world, if the dancer jumps, for example, he throws out the arms and legs first, and only on landing do the head and center of gravity somehow come back into agreement.

What is known today as the Anglo-Russian school, is nothing but the fruit of a century of war and destruction, during which there has been a shift in the aesthetic, away from Bournonville's spherical shapes and rounded movements, which give an idea of warmth and life, toward a hard, cold, glittering aesthetic which is strictly geometrical, as though the human body were a stick figure or a doll. Hence the emphasis today on the fifth position, so turned out that the feet are almost pointing backwards, and for women, the physically ruinous hyperextensions, where the leg is lifted to 180 degrees—a pure figure of plane geometry so dead, it might be inorganic matter. The human eye can become addicted to this kind of spectacle, just as adolescents become addicted to Satanic rock videos.

Plainly, life is more beautiful than death, and living, growing forms are more beautiful than cold, rigid, dead ones. That is the reason why the aesthetic in the Bournonville school is better than the Anglo-Russian aesthetic, not because it is a few decades older. The compromise between the two schools which has unfortunately been instituted in the children's Academy in the Royal Theater, is not working. The older children, especially the girls, are poker-rigid in the torso, and the harder school, Bournonville, will get so watered down, that if this goes on, within a few decades, no one will have the eye to judge it anymore.

An excellent new production

The one entirely new production presented during the festival, was a re-staging of "Napoli," by Frank Andersen and Henning Kronstam (Acts I and III) and Dinna Bjorn (Act II); the latter act, all of the original steps for which have disappeared, was re-choreographed by Miss Bjorn, admirably. Avoiding flat surfaces and straight lines, she has given more relief to the groupings, more interesting things for the Naiads to do, and thereby a more powerful dramatic outline to the whole. Americans will see this production, which took off with the audience in Copenhagen like a rocket, on the upcoming tour. Two of the world's most sensitive and beautiful dancers, the ballerinas Lis Jeppesen and Heidi Ryom, danced Teresina on different nights. Gen-

naro was danced first by Mr. Hubbe, coarsely, then by the American Lloyd Riggins in what is by far, the most powerful and moving interpretation I have ever seen, one which galvanized the entire cast.

People who have only seen Russian-style ballet will be very surprised by the Bournonville *pas de deux*. Not only do the man and the woman both dance, rather than the man just carrying the woman around, but for Bournonville, voyeurism is a serious mental illness, so there is no point to put a *pas de deux* on stage just to show sex. For Bournonville, the *pas de deux* does not literally represent the love between two individuals: That storyline is only a metaphor, to get across the idea of love which is greater than the private, the particular, important though that be. (That is why Beethoven's *Fidelio* is a great opera, because there is a great conflict, and not an operetta about young love.) The quality of love in a Bournonville *pas de deux* is the unselfish joy in the joy of others, a fearless joy in the beauty of the world, but to get that across to the audience, a dancer has to struggle with himself, against narcissism and the craving for applause. This is why I believe more and more, that a real Bournonville dancer has to be a special kind of person, with great inner humility and respect for life.

Outstanding performers

On the upcoming tour, American audiences will have the chance to see on stage with the Royal Ballet, principals who are probably the most outstanding mimes in the world, including Kjeld Noack, who is celebrating his 60th year on stage, Sorella Engelund, whose 25th anniversary with the ballet took place while we were in Copenhagen, Kirsten Simone, and the great teacher Flemming Ryberg. The leading young dancer in the company is a highly intelligent American, Lloyd Riggins, who has been studying in Denmark for six years. Like most true artists, he excels in ensemble work and in the *pas de deux*. With Henriette Muus, an unusually poetic dancer and the most committed to Bournonville among the young ladies, whether leading the Ballabile like a gust of fresh wind in Act I of "Napoli," or dancing the "Flower Festival" in a demonstration, this pair made time stand still. Another studious young American, the soloist Caroline Cavallo, also shows great promise.

One of the most remarkable features of the festival is the fact that people traveled by the busload, from Germany, Sweden, and England to take part in the week's performances. These were ordinary people, for whom a week abroad in the midst of the greatest economic depression of the century represents a considerable sacrifice. That they were willing to do so, shows that it is precisely in the midst of war and depression, that people look, not for escapism, because that is not what Bournonville offers, but for something which can give them more depth, more inner strength to face reality, than the lies and pap served up by the corrupt mass media and corrupt politicians.