Reviews

A CENTURY OF RUSSIAN BALLET: DOCUMENTS AND EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS, 1810-1910, *selected and translated by Roland John Wiley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. x + 444 pp., illustrations. $65.*

Wiley succinctly states his purpose in the Preface: he is giving us a survey of the development of Russian ballet based on a dozen printed libretti. The libretti, fully translated, are reproduced here, and along with them are selections from the writings of contemporaries that tell us something about the social context of the time, various critical viewpoints, and the lives of the people who created and performed the works. The author provides an introduction to each section. By making these primary source materials available in English, Wiley has done us a great service.

The accompanying material is of the greatest interest. Brief selections from Adam Glushkovsky's memoires of Charles Didelot were quoted by Mary Grace Swift in her biography of the choreographer, *A Loftier Flight* (1974), but this extended excerpt is most welcome. The stories of several ballets are narrated, and sayings of the master are recorded:

> I do not want the glory of a work to fall upon anyone else but me, and to have a spectator say, "I was at the theatre yesterday and saw the most charming decorations, wonderful machines, magnificent costumes," and have not a word to say about the ballet.

A delightful section describes the ballroom dancing of Didelot's time.

Of special interest are selections from the memoirs of two Russian dancers, Timofei Stukolkin and Anna Natarova. Wiley rightly notes the extensive attention paid by writers to foreign artists in Russia in the nineteenth century, while native performers who played important roles were largely ignored. Stukolkin, while naming his own parts, modestly says little about them. But how joyfully he describes Fanny Elssler: "Her every movement and gesture was [sic] full of truth and the most realistic life and drama . . . ." His description of the genesis of *The Little Humpbacked Horse*, in a conversation at a Saturday tea party, is nicely revealing of how ballets can get created.

Natarova's discussion of her student years is both charming and informative. An "external student" at the beginning, she was assigned to a "classroom lady," who housed eight girls in her apartment; later she was transferred to "state-supported status." Her descriptions of what the school provided in the way of dancing clothes and food are detailed and amusing (gifts of goodies from relatives were most welcome). Of special interest is her description of Cesare Pugni aiming to please Jules Perrot with the right musical phrases for a new ballet.

The views of contemporary critics are especially significant. Sergei Khudekov, in addition to describing the shenanigans of balletomanes, compares choreographic styles, noting St. Léon's lamentable preference for ballets without narrative content in contrast to Petipa's carefully conceived dramatic works, their stories accessible to the public and "suitable for arrangement into mime." "Nowadays," Khudekov laments, "attitudes have changed: external sharpness and brilliance are essential, not interior content."

But in her memoirs, Ekaterina Vazem applies different values to the situation, claiming that Petipa's knowledge of classical dance was "superficial." St. Léon, on the contrary, had a vocabulary of steps "which required genuine filagree work from a dancer," a skill that was beyond the grasp of his successor. Today the assessments of both Khudekov and Vazem sound curiously inaccurate. But then, considering how unsure we are about much of Petipa's original work, what do we really know about the choreography of the still earlier St. Léon?

A letter from Sergei Diaghilev to the *Petersburg Gazette*, dated 1 January 1904, urges a revival of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Did Diaghilev remember that letter in 1921 when his own company produced *The Sleeping Beauty*?

There are eight pages of black-and-white illustrations, most of them familiar. Pictures of the decors of *Raymonda* and *The Magic Mirror* make us long to see how the dancers looked in them. Portraits of dancers are pleasant. But photographs of dancers dancing at this time do exist and they would have been more appropriate. There are some pleasant surprises, however—one a delightful photograph of Mathilde Kshesinskaya as Esmeralda with her pet goat.

There are many intriguing delights to be found here. The selections tell us much about this century in Russian ballet; they also raise provocative questions, few of which are dealt with by the author.

In spite of the many riches this book has to offer, there are some disapointments. The libretti themselves are certainly valuable, though some are more significant than others. Of the twelve, we already know a good deal about eight—*The Captive of the Caucasus*, *La Fille de Danube*, *Esmeralda*, *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, *The Little Humpbacked Horse*, *La Bayadère*, *Raymonda*, and *Le Pavillon d'Armide*. All are given detailed summaries in Cyril W. Beaumont's *Complete Book of Ballets* (1937). Another, *The Sleeping Beauty*, was completely translated by Joan Lawson and published in four installments in *The Dancing Times* (December 1942-March 1943). The two translations are not signficantly different. New to English readers, however, are *Raoul de Créqui*, *The Vestal*, and *The Magic Mirror*. We are especially grateful to the author for these. But others remain quite unknown. *Satanila*, for example, might have been an interesting choice.

Wiley notes in his preface: "As the libretti are expressions of style, they would by themselves produce an accurate outline of balletic conventions in nineteenth-century Russia . . . ." He suggests that they reveal the develop-

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ment from Didelot's dramatic pantomime to Taglioni's romanticism, to Perrot's drama, to Petipa's spectacular fairy tales, and finally to Fokine. For this author, style is defined by subject matter. Not a word is said here about dancing, about its technique or its role in the telling of the story. Indeed, in perusing the libretti, the reader may well wonder how some of their detailed dialogue was handled.

For example, from *The Vestal*:

> "It is the gods' will!" the high priest says, consoling [Flac, the father]. "You must be happy, not sad, if only that it pleases the gods to receive your daughter as a servant of Vesta! Such an honour is not granted to all, but only to the elect of the great goddess!" Flac disregards these words of solace and ponders how to save his daughter. . . . [He] resolves: "I shall hide Amata!"

How specific was the conventional pantomime of the time? How much was the audience expected to rely on the words of the libretto? How much did it matter? No such questions are considered.

In the light of his focus on content, it is not surprising to find Wiley writing in his Postscript that the stylistic advance made by Fokine's *Pavillon d'Armide* "is modest, and resides perhaps in the choreography, but more likely in the anti-academic visual evocation of seventeenth-century France and most clearly in that merging of dream and reality which Fokine and Benois conveyed more forcefully in *Petrushka* . . . ." At this time, 1907, Fokine was already formulating his ideas of balletic reform, his concern with expressiveness, with movement as "the development and ideal of the sign." How far had his theories evolved at this time? To what extent did the choreography of *Pavillon* reflect his maturing ideas? Wiley does not discuss choreography.

Even before *Pavillon*, Alexandre Gorsky had begun his movement experiments in Moscow. But Gorsky rates only a vague, passing mention from the author; no suggestion of the nature of creative undercurrents already at work.

There also seem to be some needless, minor translations. Since Didelot's ballet has so long been known in the west as *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, why turn it into the *Captive*? And, granting that no one can really do justice to Pushkin in English, why try again? Wiley has the ballerina Istomina "now turning inward at the waist, now turning out." Contraction and release? Not likely. But then what was it? Further, I don't find any "inward" or "out" in Pushkin's Russian.

Footnotes contain references that are not always complete. Lillian Moore should have been identified as the editor of *Russian Ballet Master*. A bibliography—at least of relevant works published in English—would have been helpful to suggest further reading. For example, Anatole Chujoy's "Russian Balletomania" in *Dance Index*, No. 3 (1948) contains some good source material. Persons who appear only as names in the text are given birth and death dates in the index, but no more. Yet more is available; Swift's book, for example, provides interesting descriptions of the dancing of Evgenia Kolosova from Didelot's time. But here she is simply "a dancer," and *A Loftier Flight* is mentioned only in a footnote, so it does not even appear in the index.

Despite such objections, however, *A Century of Russian Ballet* is a valuable work that should stimulate further research and further thinking into this fascinating period of dance history.

Selma Jeanne Cohen
International Encyclopedia of Dance

THE BALLETS RUSSES: COLONEL DE BASIL'S BALLETS RUSSES DE MONTE CARLO 1932-1952, *by Vicente García-Márquez. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. 343 pp., illustrations. $50.00.*

On 26 January 1952 the final curtain descended upon Col. W. de Basil's Ballets Russes, a troupe that had once been one of the world's most popular and influential companies. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo—its equally significant rival—lasted a decade longer until 14 April 1962. By the '50s, the reputation of both companies was at a low ebb, and after they disbanded few scholars rushed forth to chronicle their rise and fall. *Sic transit gloria mundi*?

Perhaps. Yet "glory" occasionally returns, if at times in unexpected forms. Here, for instance, is Vicente García-Márquez's *The Ballets Russes*, the second history of the de Basil company to appear in a decade. And it has been published not by some small scholarly press, but by Alfred A. Knopf in a handsomely designed, beautifully illustrated edition. Suddenly, readers—especially younger balletgoers—seem curious about the Ballets Russes, not only about their glamorous dancers (among them, the scintillating Alexandra Danilova and the "baby ballerinas": Tamara Toumanova, Irina Baronova, and Tatiana Riabouchinska), but, more significantly, perhaps, about their choreography: the achievements of Léonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska, and Michel Fokine, and the creations of such younger choreographers as George Balanchine and David Lichine.

The first person who really prodded dance writers to take a fresh look at the post-Diaghilev Ballets Russes was the Washington, D. C., critic and historian, George Jackson. As a result of his encouragement, two books were published: my own *The One and Only: The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1981) and Kathrine Sorley Walker's *De Basil's Ballets Russes* (New York: Atheneum, 1982).

García-Márquez, a Cuban-born cultural historian who now lives in Los Angeles, retells the story that Sorley Walker first told. Therefore skeptics may wonder why a second book on de Basil is needed at this time. Indeed, in many ways Sorley Walker includes more in her account than García-Márquez does. For one thing, she offers valuable appendices: lists of all the company's productions, dancers, and conductors; García-Márquez has no appendices whatsoever. Sorley Walker provides readers with a complete biography of Col. de Basil; again, there is no equivalent in García-Márquez. Sorley Walker also has fuller discussions of the baby ballerinas and of the com-

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