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Dance:



STAMPING OUT OPTIMISM

by Jack Anderson

FOR APPROXIMATELY a decade, a little company known, after its founder, as the Robert Joffrey Ballet has been regarded as a company "on its way up." Surviving grueling tours and financial crises, its fortitude has finally been rewarded. This year, under the new title of City Center Joffrey Ballet, it has been named a constituent company of the New York City Center of Music and Drama. The only other ballet group ever to have received such an appointment is the prestigious New York City Ballet itself.

The fall season at City Center demonstrated that the Joffrey Ballet possesses some of the best-trained and most appealing dancers in America. However, a closer look revealed that the repertoire is rather flimsy and, in general, the dancers are more interesting than the ballets they dance. A particular disappointment was the world premiere of "These Three," a ballet which, despite its use of topical material, already looked dated on opening night and exhibited a good number of the clichés which plague contemporary American dance.

Its choreographer was Eugene Loring, who in the 1930's made dance history by creating such works as "Billy

the Kid" and "Yankee Clipper," which proved to the skeptics of the day that classical ballet technique, although European in origin, could nevertheless express native American themes. "These Three" was Loring's first ballet for a New York company since 1953, and was awaited with interest.

It is based upon the 1964 murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. Loring did not wish to present literal danced biographies of the young men. Rather, he transformed them into quasi-symbolic figures, shown leaving friends and family to work for their cause, despite the jeers of a hostile crowd. The crowd eventually murders them. Yet at the end of the ballet, not three, but four new civil rights workers detach themselves from the crowd to take the place of the martyrs. They link hands, face offstage into the future, and the curtain falls on the implication that justice will prevail and that mankind will march ahead along the road of moral progress.

Loring's intentions and sympathies are irreproachable. Nevertheless, his ballet is sentimental and vague—so vague that the three heroes could almost as easily be delegates to a Ku Klux Klan convention. It is impossible to imagine this work as a challenge or inspiration to anybody, although its subject is one of the urgent issues of our time. Loring's simplistic approach reduces the whole problem to platitudes.

Of course, the New York dance audience believes in civil rights. In such generalized terms, everybody does. But what if Loring had grappled with more specific issues? What if he had decided to choreograph a ballet about inter-marriage? Or a ballet lauding black power? Or a tribute to Malcolm X? Or, preserving the subject he did choose, why did Loring not show *why* his three heroes decided to dedicate their lives to their

cause, *why* they were greeted with hostility, and *why* he is so sure their cause will triumph? Granted that ballet, being non-verbal, is seldom able to express intellectual debate and that there are no choreographic equivalents of Shaw or Brecht; nevertheless, the sheer physicality of ballet makes it able to express the emotional realities of a situation with extraordinary eloquence.

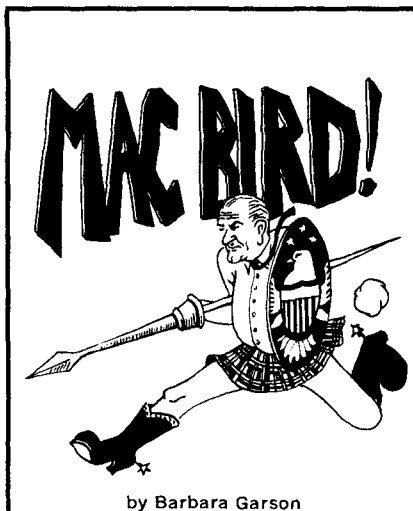
THE ONLY EMOTION "These Three" conveys is in the nebulous optimism of its finale. This sort of optimism has been part of American dance for a long time, at least since the 1930's, when Loring began his choreographic career. It is certainly present, and in context justified, at the conclusion of his 1938 ballet, "Billy the Kid," where an impressive human frieze suggests that, despite the disruptions of the lawless, the American pioneers will succeed in taming the Wild West.

This optimism, with its dogged faith in the future, is very American in nature. At this point in our history, it may also be pernicious, something we had best stamp out for the good of our psychic and artistic health. In a recent symposium on American dance (*The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, ed. by Selma Jeanne Cohen) dancer Pauline Koner sums up the optimism of her distinguished choreographic mentor, the late Doris Humphrey: "She never resolved her pieces on a negative note... No matter how desperate the material was, the resolution was positive."

What an amazing statements this is: *no matter how desperate the material*, there is a positive resolution to be found! It is disconcertingly close to such familiar slogans as "The power of positive thinking," "Never say die" and, if pushed to one possible extreme,

"America is God's country" and "We never yet lost a war." Every American is familiar with this optimism. It recurs in Sunday schools and Fourth of July orations—and perhaps even in our foreign policy, as we stubbornly maintain, or even intensify, policies which have not worked in the past.

What we may have to learn is that some "desperate" situations cannot be resolved "positively." If we do not learn to recognize this vicariously through our art, our blundering may force us to face it in reality. Conceivably, one



"... as political satire, the liveliest and most genially lethal I've read in years."
—Dwight MacDonald

"... although the play is bound to start a storm of protest (not all of it unjustified) and may even be suppressed by some government agency, it will very probably go down as one of the most brutally provocative works in the American theater, as well as one of the most grimly amusing."
—Robert Brustein
New York Times Sunday Magazine, Sept. 25, 1966

"I have nothing to say about the political truth of this play, but I am sure a kind of genius has gone into the writing."—Robert Lowell

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could argue that a man in a Nazi death camp or awaiting an imminent nuclear warhead may choose to die with dignity or in hysteria, and if he is able to die with dignity, this constitutes a kind of "positive" resolution. In actuality, the argument is sophistry and the term "positive" seems woefully inadequate, even perverse, in the face of such appalling alternatives.

Of all the arts today, dance seems to be the one which most frequently resorts to moral bromides. And these platitudes reside not, as might be expected, in such fairy-tale ballets as "Swan Lake" or "Sleeping Beauty" (which are deliberate fantasies and can be interpreted in the same broad fashion as one interprets classical myth), but in some of the works which sincerely try to deal with contemporary reality. Perhaps choreographers, because they daily come into direct contact with specimens of the young human body at its most beautiful and sensitive, naturally tend to be cheery in outlook. Whatever the reason, ballets like "Three Three," which attempt some kind of pertinent comment, often provide only an over-simplified view of reality.

In this respect, the other arts have fared better. Many recent, important developments in painting, theatre, "happenings," and literature seem to spring from an awareness that the world is fearsomely complicated, life is full of booby-traps, despair is real and possible, and the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Fortunately, there now are signs of comparable developments in dance.

THERE ARE TODAY a number of choreographers whose dances, while more abstract and less tied to specific current events than those of choreographers who tend to work in a more conventional style, nevertheless are better able to evoke reality in its complexity and ambiguity. Among the best-known of these choreographers are Merce Cunningham on the east coast and Ann Halperin on the west. In addition, there are younger dancers who have been influenced by them, or who independently have come to develop similar choreographic concerns. Typically, all these choreographers are occasionally denounced by their elders as being perpetrators of

dances which are formless, negative, childish, tasteless, and nasty. And, in fact, a few of them are.

Many others, however, have great theatrical power. If some seem deliberately unpleasant in theme and style, this may be a natural reaction to the vaporous humanitarian uplift they seek to displace. Among the disquieting dance images in New York during the past season were Kenneth King, as a soldier in "Camouflage," enduring endless military drills broken only by simultaneously ominous and meaningless telephone conversations; Joseph Schlichter in "Cube," completely nude, thrashing about in pools of colored paint; dancers inside an inflated plastic bag slowly dismantling a chair, in Steve Paxton's "Unfinished Work: Augmented," where a disheveled housewife raptly listens to Mahler *lieder* emanating from a loudspeaker clamped to her forehead; the dancers in Merce Cunningham's "Winterbranch" struggling through a dim, bleak landscape of the soul's winter, accompanied by an anguished roaring sound which will not go away; the cast of Yvonne Rainer's "The Mind Is a Muscle" performing pleasant gymnastic movements, but with such lack of customary accent and emphasis that the audience must constantly force itself to pay attention to the task of paying attention. In works such as these, artistic media are freely mixed and aspects of reality are cut-up and reassembled in theatrical collages which range in tone from solemnity to grotesque and sinister comedy.

And, yes, there is "optimism," too, although it is sometimes expressed in unexpected ways. This summer, for instance, Ann Halperin and her company, together with a group of architects, used actual sites in San Francisco as "kinetic environments" within which, blurring the customary distinctions between art and life, the dancers explored problems involving specific types of open or crowded space, and the architects evaluated these same kinetic environments as choreographic sketches contributing to the concept of a truly human city. What could be more radically "positive" than this?

Jack Anderson is an editor of *Dance Magazine*.

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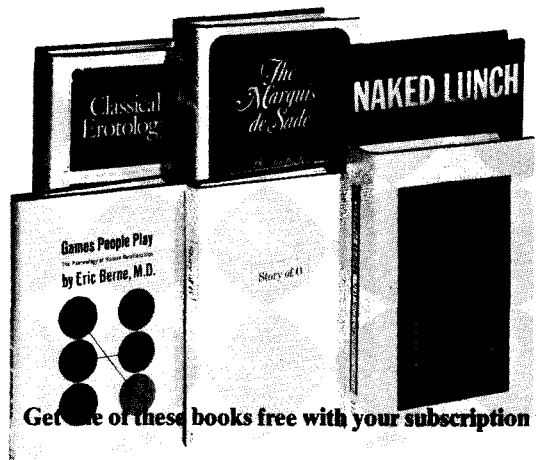
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LOVE AND HATE

by Paul Krassner

WHILE MOST elevator operators must remain content with asking what floor you want, the balding man who runs the lift in a building which houses the Janis Gallery has been given a special assignment of screening *his* passengers by age. You can get drafted at 18, but in order to view this particular collection of erotic art, you have to be 21.

Just in case the elevator operator occasionally fails in carrying out his mission, there's a Pop Pinkerton Guard upstairs, standing a few feet away from a photostat-poster containing an ancient description of incest (i.e., *The Holy Bible*, Book of Genesis, Chapter 20, Verses 30-36).

Actually, the Great Erotic Artist in the Sky and his colleagues were in no danger of being arrested, inasmuch as a private showing had already been approved by the Police Preview Board before the exhibit officially opened.

Larry Rivers contributed a sculpture *cum* portrait that was obviously a put-in: a mechanic-ish three-dimensional, nine-foot-tall Negro male, for whom electric light bulbs serve as hands and genitals, indulges in perpetual anal intercourse with a patient two-dimensional recipient of apparently neuter gender and race, boasting buttocks of red plastic.

This anti-creche was christened "Lamp Man Loves It" by Terry Southern, whose previous collaboration with Rivers was a comic strip called "The Adventures of the Vomiting Priest" that never quite came to pass.

Lamp Man's penis *per se* flashes on and off in a continuing dramatic display of alternating current and unnatural rhythm. There had been a

report that the bulb was turned off, but the Janis brothers claim that anyone who wishes to may turn it on. However, the bulb was out of order. Why wouldn't they replace it? They had called Larry Rivers three times during the last three days to come over and fix it himself.

A rare pleasure, to see gallery owners display such respect for an artist's integrity.

AT THE Village Theatre, LeRoi Jones was the star of "An Evening With Pure Hate." A telephone call had threatened that 50 Ku Klux Klanners were going to cross the New Jersey border, but they never showed up.

A group of Negro children began the proceedings with an unintentional parody of a combination *bar mitzvah* speech—greeting friends, relatives "and enemies"—and a Christmas pageant.

To his credit, Jones' poetry poked fun equally at white folks (Lyndon Johnson's mother committed fellatio on a nigger she picked up "downtown, in 1928, I got proof") and colored folks ("even the ones where the wigs slide").

But, whereas sticks and stones will break a white man's bones ("He owes you anything you want, even his life"), names will never hurt a Negro ("Roy Wilkins is an eternal faggot").

Here was Instant Erasure of all the good that had previously been accomplished in a movie featuring Ray Charles inspiring the white mother of a blind boy to go out and get him an operation, the message being something along the lines of "One Man, One Eye."

LeRoi Jones has a skillful voice and an impressive style in which to encase his definite intimations of anti-Semitism on the Left, a sort of convoluted converse to National Socialism on the Right. The Garden State KKK probably stayed away out of sheer confusion.

In the lobby of this former home of Yiddish melodrama, there was a table with cards for members of the audience to write questions on, but there was no question period.

Jones concluded with the reading of an as yet unproduced play he'd written, and the largely Negro audience loved it. Near the back of the orchestra, though, a young white couple reduced the entire performance to stereotypical absurdity by petting to anti-climax.

Simultaneously, at the Janis Gallery Lamp Man's light suddenly—magically—went on again. There had been a temporary black power failure.

Cinema:



IS HAPPINESS "LE BONHEUR"?

by Jonathan Middlebrook

"LE BONHEUR" is a movie about a provincial French couple, a provincial French mistress, and the husband's attempts to find and express a natural happiness which can include all three of them. The movie was made (written and directed) by Agnès Varda, a fact which has limited most reviewers' responses to fatuous surprise: "Only a woman could talk so frankly of love," etc. But Varda is tougher than her reviewers, and her movie at once criticizes and extends the vision of cinema 66.

Cinema 66 sees a world in a commercial art flash: chrome yellow, blue, even the Citroën gray of the *deux chevaux* is transmogrified by precise camera work into pop artifact. Varda doesn't make her stars clothes horses for Givenchy—exit at last Audrey Hepburn's posturings—but she resolutely seeks out fashion color on the objects that 1966 gives the little people to use in their daily round of creative toil. Varda sees trucks, coveralls, *café*-awnings, formica, and advertisements everywhere. And everything is clean. Unbeknownst to themselves—they are reflective sorts—François (cabinet-worker), Thérèse (housewife), their children, and Emilie (mistress), live in an idyllic world. Varda has the bell-jar of her camera over their world, examining it to the tune of W.A.—as she familiarly knows him—Mozart. Under the glass, similarities of certain Impressionist painters are magnified; Varda