

World of Dance

Walter Terry

Contest in Moscow

"EVERY TIME you danced," said the Soviet Union's most famous ballerina, Maya Plisetskaya, "I gave you my twelve points." The Bolshoi Ballet's star was addressing the Iceland-born Helgi Tomasson, who represented the United States (as a principal dancer of the Harkness Ballet) at the First International Ballet Competition—or, as the Russians themselves call it, "Olympics of Ballet"—this summer in Moscow. Awards—for duos, solo male, solo female—were given in gold, silver, and bronze, and Tomasson won the silver in the male soloist category.

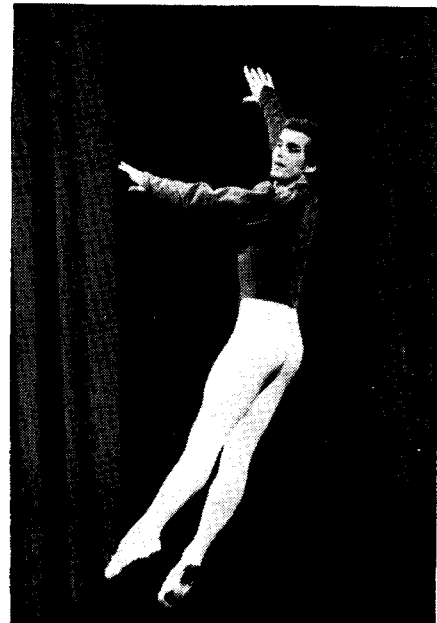
At his own expense, he took along his wife, Marlene Rizzo (also a Harkness dancer), and had his parents babysit in Iceland (both his wife and his son are Americans, and he will be in due course). He found that he needed Marlene not just personally but professionally. "Almost every one of the eighty-nine entrants—they came from nineteen different countries—had teachers or coaches or trainers with them. I could have done the same, but I didn't understand that, so Marlene worked like mad seeing that lights and their cues were okay, that my rehearsal tapes were played at the right speed, and that everything went smoothly. (I was under terrible pressure, for I really felt that I was representing America.)

"They—the contestants—were not

just first-class; they were the best that their countries—those with state theaters—could produce," he reports. "Here were the highest standards of dance I had ever seen. Unbelievable! I rehearsed every day, but I tried to see all the contestants. One fascinating dancer after another. It was nerve-wracking, but I couldn't stay away."

Tomasson arrived in Moscow with five solos. Because of a misunderstanding caused by translation of contest rules from Russian to English, he did not know that if he lasted until the final stage of the competition, he'd need a sixth. He did, of course, reach the finals and the closing gala, but what to dance? He elected to do the solo from the "Black Swan Pas de Deux," a work originated in Russia and one that many of the contestants were doing. But he had no costume. He sent for one in New York, but his cable never got through. So at the last minute, with the permission of that great ballerina of just yesterday, Galina Ulanova, chairman of the board of judges, he was given access to the Bolshoi Ballet wardrobe. He was proud to dance in a costume worn by the Bolshoi's major young *danseur*, Vladimir Vasiliev. For "Black Swan" he had only two hours of rehearsal, yet earned a tremendous response from the public.

"Black Swan" was a popular vehicle for all contestants, but Tomasson recalls seeing six or seven excerpts from



Helgi Tomasson, who represented American ballet at the First International Ballet Competition in Moscow.

Le Corsaire, one after another, and a day that was devoted almost exclusively to *Don Quixote*.

For his own offerings in the three stages of the competition, with two solos for each stage, his dances were: (stage 1) solos from Anton Dolin's *Variations for Four* and Brian Macdonald's *Zealous Variations*; (stage 2) a solo from Jerome Robbins's *Dances at a Gathering*, in which he was rehearsed by Robbins himself, and a new solo, to Berlioz's score for *Romeo and Juliet*, created especially for him by Norman Walker; (stage 3) "Black Swan" and a solo from Balanchine's *Sylvia* "Pas de Deux." The biggest successes for him with the public that jammed the Bolshoi were the Dolin, Robbins, and Petipa solos.

He rehearsed three to four hours each day in one of twenty-six studios at the Choreographic School. Time was allotted in the Bolshoi Theater itself for rehearsals in a stage-size studio. He practiced with tapes he'd brought along, but performed with the Bolshoi Orchestra. He had ten minutes with the conductor to set tempos for each final rehearsal. "There was only one conductor," he reports, "and a wild variety of tempos for just one ballet. But he never missed; I was amazed."

For his daily ballet lesson, he worked either with a taped class made in America or took class with the Danes present. "I could have had class with the Russians," he says, "but it would have been dangerous to work, at this late stage, in a ballet style and method different from what I was used to."

The audiences, he tells, picked favor-



The committee of judges takes a vote. At extreme right, Galina Ulanova, who served as chairman.

ites from the start. He was one that the audiences applauded when his name was mentioned. As for the dancers present, he says, "Choreographically, with all my new pieces, I was a gold mine. The dancers from all the countries crowded the wings as I danced Robbins or Walker or the others, and they whispered 'Amerikanski!' There were other whispers, too. The audiences were very knowledgeable. If anyone hopped at the end of a *pirouette*, you could almost hear a mass whisper, 'He missed a point.' But they were marvelous."

Except for "Black Swan," Tomasson had planned a non-Russian repertory. "I felt I couldn't compete with the Russians in *their* repertory, so I brought something of an American repertory to show them *our* way of doing classical ballet." Using this approach, he won a silver medal from a board of twenty judges that included ten Russians (Mme. Ulanova, Pliset-skaya, Chabukiani, Khachaturian, Sergueff among them), and Chauviré (French), Flindt (Danish), Haskell (British), De Mille (American) among the rest.

Tomasson's award was not only the silver medal but also 2,000 rubles, equal officially to \$2,200. But aside from being taxed on it (300 rubles), he was not allowed to change it into other currency or take it out of the country. He had one day in which to spend it, so he and his wife settled on sable skins (on which he had to pay U.S. duty). "It's enough for part of a stole," he says.

But the rewards were in his medal, in the competition itself, and, most of all, in the prestige that the Russians bestowed upon the four-day (three days of contest and the concluding gala) affair. "They felt it was as important as the Tchaikovsky Competition," says Tomasson. "You've probably read that Londoners were incensed when the Bolshoi Ballet arrived there without the new *Swan Lake* that had been promised to them. But I can tell that to the Russians the competition was far more important than getting a new *Swan Lake* ready for export. The next competition will be held in three years, instead of four, that's how successful it was."

Competition winners were: Duos, Nina Sorokina and Yuri Vladimirov of the Soviet Union and Francesca Zumbo and Patrice Bart of France, gold medals; SOLOISTS, Malika Sabirova, Mikhail Baryshnikov of the Soviet Union; silver medals for soloists Tomasson, U.S.A., Loipa Araujo, Cuba, and Hideo Fukagawa, Japan. (Bronze medals were won by contestants from Japan and the Soviet Union.)

TV-Radio

Robert Lewis Shayon

Cosmic Nielsens

UP THERE at Tranquillity Base, *Eagle's* television camera could afford us, from its fixed position, only a limited view of the astronauts' activities as they danced man's first lunar choreography. No one could quarrel with that particular barrier to our vision: to creatures on spaceship Earth it was manna from the moon. Down here at the TV receiver's end, network reporters and commentators deployed their cameras along a rather narrow intellectual range; their rigidity was a matter of institutional policy—and disappointing. The moon landing was fraught with deep currents of ambivalence—rip-tides of incredible and even thrilling technological achievements crossing sluggish drifts and backwaters of Earth's poisoned psychic as well as physical environment. Television's encoding of that multidimensional event was depressingly one-dimensional.

It was all sunshine and public relations and hurrah for our side. From the Sea of Tranquillity, where the flag was planted and the plaque enshrined (nationalist prestige in a collectively explosive world), to the White House, Disneyland, the Vatican, and the man in the street, there was no area of darkness or even earth-shine—just progress, mechanistically defined, laden with the attitude that today is no time for critics and cynics. Walter Cronkite, for CBS, who seemed unflaggingly exhilarated despite his wearying task, illustrated the dominant mood when he exclaimed, shortly after the *Eagle* had touched down on the surface of the moon: "People have the audacity to say nothing new is going on these days. I'd like to know what those kids are saying who pooh-poohed this. How can one turn off from a world like this?" Later he held up a copy of the next morning's *New York Times* to show the camera the historic record-

sized headline: MEN WALK ON THE MOON. It was the same edition that ran two full pages of comments from public figures under the heading: REACTIONS TO MAN'S LANDING ON THE MOON SHOW BROAD VARIATIONS IN OPINIONS.

In some of the press handling of the moon landing there were context, a search for meaning, a sense of relatedness. On the networks there were tension, suspense, bits of information, marvelous pictures, impressive simulations, and artful animations—but one would be pressed hard to say the coverage was not a full-blown commercial for the government, NASA, the space industry, and the broadcasters.

Wherever explorers go in the future accompanied by television cameras, they will be actors, making their nebulous exits and entrances for the benefit of multi-planetary audiences. Nowhere will there again be pure events (if ever there were); everything hereafter will be stage-managed for cosmic Nielsens, in the interests of national or universal establishments. Vision filters, however, ought to be more than one-focus affairs. One of the sharpest contrasts in television's coverage of the moon landing was that which distinguished the language of numbers—used almost exclusively by the astronauts and their earth command—from the often inadequate verbalizations of the network commentators. The spacemen, making computer talk, spoke a kind of quantitative poetry—eloquent, pellucid, terse.

The reporters, at moments of highest tension, were admittedly speechless, or remarkably colloquial. One, when the lunar module successfully fired the engine that lifted it from the moon's surface, cried out, "Oh boy! Hot diggity dog! Yes, sir!" The emotion was genuine and understandable, but one can spin an implication off his remark: Man talking numbers and commanding things is master of sophisticated communications; man relating to other men is sadly tongue-tied. This is the state of the world and this is television, alas! But is despair in order?

Perhaps when space ships are shuttling between Earth and moon and crews in controlled environments will be readying for farther reaches into space, television will have winged its way over its public relations barrier and will give us a deeper representation of such events, as well as a poetry of qualitative experience to match the brilliance of the quantitative mode in the realm of science and technology.

