

World of Dance

Walter Terry

A Poetic Epic

BERGEN, NORWAY.

THIS ANCIENT TOWN, sprawling by the sea and framed by soaring mountains, cherishes its buildings, its music, its lore, all of which span nine hundred years. But it is also, and long has been, the site of innovations; Edvard Grieg made new music here, and Edvard Munch shocked the world of art with the raw emotions, the almost psychedelic fantasy of his paintings. Norway, too, is famed for its drama—a theater with a history of adventure and protest.

At this year's Bergen International Festival—the seventeenth—Norway's arts came together in potent conjunction for an expression of "total theater" in a magnificent new creation called *Mot Solen* ("Towards the Sun"), a scenic poem inspired by both the life and the art of Munch. Edith Roger (pronounced "ROW-gher") and Barthold Halle wrote the manuscript (based to a great extent on Munch's prose poems) and directed this ninety-minute theater piece, with Miss Roger doing all the choreography. The score—his first for dance theater—is by Alfred Janson, a thirty-two-year-old composer who has already made his mark as a composer of incidental music for plays and as a jazz musician. Guy Krogh designed the décor, Sverre Bergh led the orchestras, and the projections of the Munch paintings and drawings were accomplished by Miroslav Pflug.

This multi-media masterpiece—pit music, singing chorus on stage, actors, dancers, projections (shifting pictures, as theme dictates, seen either on a back-drop, a translucent front-screen, or both)—has an uninterrupted, cumulatively hypnotic sweep to it, as it moves, without interruption by the usual intermission, toward destruction and, with it, new birth.

The opening lines (Munch's own words) were translated for me by Eva Krövel, dance critic for Oslo's *Aftenposten*, a major Norwegian newspaper:

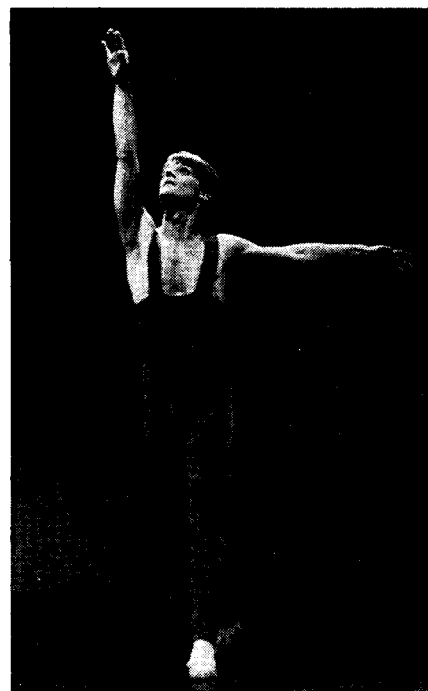
The earth loved the air,
The air, slowly through the ages,
devoured it.
And the earth itself became air
And the air became earth. . . .

The trees stretched their branches
toward the sky
And ate air.
The trees, freed of earth, loosened
from it,
And became human beings.

At the close of the work, he says,

Everything is light,
Everything is movement.

Miss Roger's choreography is truly the movement that Munch must have envisioned—the movement present in his words, the movement captured by his paintings. Yes, you will find the tools of ballet, of modern dance, or of dramatic gesture present; she has made them into a single language to convey



Jens Graff in the danced epic "Towards the Sun"—the ability to extend the vibrations of a movement or gesture beyond the confines of the body itself.

the elements of this "scenic poem." *Mot Solen* begins, for example, with patterns in which girls and boys in pairs, pressed body-to-body and lying on the floor, move in wavelike constancy, perhaps like tropisms, like evolving life forces.

Out of this is born the human being, and we are introduced to the most elemental of social units—mother-father-child. As the drama unfolds, the protective touch, presence, concern of the two adults for the boy (realized in a poignant dance for three) slowly withdraws: the mother, perhaps, in death; the father through the passage of time. An independent being, terribly young and vulnerable, is exposed to groups of gay, happy, jazzy, carefree teen-agers; but he is also affected by a group of men and women, in black Victorian dress, who march back and forth with self-righteous propriety (except that the men take time to ogle and slobber a little over tempting girls) reiterating, "Correct! Correct!"

The first romance is seen as an experience in shy tenderness and curiosity. As it fades, there is loneliness, and the Munch paintings shift character to the hues, lines, and distortions that mirror the heart's confusion and fears. There are erotic adventures, bright and harsh, which find the youth pulled by innocence and evil, by vitality and pleasurable decadence, by desire and uncertainty. Here, in both the Munch paintings and in dance movements and text, we are invited to share, emotionally, in a descent, or change, from naturalism and idealism to terrifying dis-



—Photos by Trygve Schoenfelder.

The acting chorus of "Towards the Sun" calls upon the hero and upon society to be "Correct! Correct!"

tortions. A chorus of girls, in red toe shoes, materializes and uses these *pointes* as weapons which stab the floor, the space around them, and even the males themselves.

During the inexorable descent, aspirations and despair alternate; the real and the nightmare overlap and intermingle in something close to madness. To the viewer, the pathetic, living figure on stage becomes inseparable from the shrieking canvases projected onto the stage in frightening size, imprisoning the boy from front and back, and—because we can see him moving or halted behind the front drop—he and the paintings become one in something approaching raw madness.

Yet, at the close, there is air and earth and light. And there is the youth, or is it Munch? Or is it the figure of recurring life, alone and reaching out *mot solen*, "toward the sun"?

The performers, with perhaps two very minor exceptions, were excellent. There were eleven dancers, a chorus of eleven actors and singers, the Bergen Symphony Orchestra, and the Norwegian narrator (not seen), Georg Loek-

keberg. In the dance troupe, the girls were exceptionally good-looking and technically strong, and the men were handsome, virile, and athletic. Both boys and girls were blessed with fluid body movements and a fine feel for the drama of movement. The star was a remarkable young artist, Jens Graff, a dancer with an almost perfect dance body, well formed, lithe, muscular without harshness, elastic yet completely controlled. His technique—with its high leaps, suspenseful balances, neatness of step and of body placements—and his ability to extend the vibrations of a movement or gesture beyond the confines of the body itself are characteristics of more than a dancer of ordinary skills. Graff is, indeed, brilliant, as both a dancer in terms of pure action and as an actor-dancer, a performer.

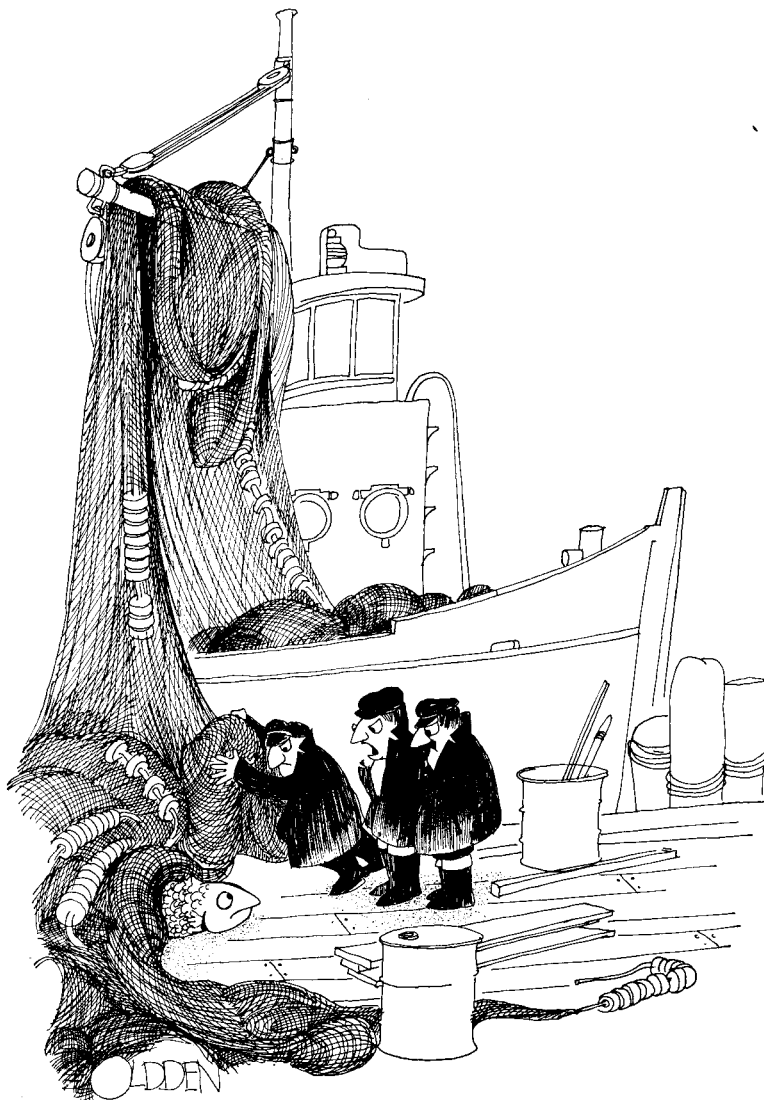
Surprisingly enough, Miss Roger, who is a director of drama and musicals at the National Theater in Oslo, and her frequent collaborator, Halle, don't have a dance company of their own. The one for *Mot Solen* was composed of dancers from various Norwe-

gian ballets, but under the inspiration of a great work of theater, they performed as if they were Roger-Halle disciples.

When I was last here in Bergen about eight years ago for the festival, I happened to visit a rehearsal of *Haugtussa*, a staging with dance, narration, and music of an epic poem from Norwegian antiquity, a story with a Persephone-like theme. I don't remember what I saw at the Bergen Festival itself that year. But I never forgot the rehearsal of *Haugtussa*, staged by Miss Roger and Halle. It, as total theater rooted in the humus of legend, has stayed with me all these years, and it was because of this memory that I was determined to see *Mot Solen*. As you can see, I was not disappointed by a second Norwegian epic, this one the fruit of contemporary sources, which achieved triumphantly that form of total theater with which American artists, and choreographers in particular, are profoundly concerned.

I wish American theatergoers could experience (it's not just a matter of seeing or hearing) *Mot Solen*, though even if they could get to Bergen, performances are over. But it would make superb television fare in, say, a ninety-minute special, for although its title is unknown, its raw, rapturous, recurring elements lie within all of us.

Another reason for coming to the distinguished—especially musically—Bergen Festival was to see the Prague Ballet, a five-year-old Czech group directed by the young, personable, articulate Pavel Smok, its chief choreographer. Well, I wish I *hadn't* seen it. I am tempted to use that marvelous phrase to be found in Mary Roberts Rinehart mysteries, "I draw a veil over what followed," but I guess I should report that the Prague Ballet is a small group of strong and quite talented young dancers in desperate need of a choreographer. The three Smok ballets I saw—*Serenade* (Josef Suk music), *Intimate Pages* (Janáček), and *Collage* (collaged by Smok) — were formless, totally without choreographic motivations, superficial. There were some splendid, in isolation, physical tricks, such as five double air-turns in a row and a Bolshoi lift or two, but they had just about as much pertinence as a scream would have in the midst of ordering groceries from a list. As for the ballet that let us in on the secret that mother, first love, music, and death were all the same mistress, the choreography was appalling, the characters not even of cardboard depth, and well . . . I draw a veil over the rest of the mystery of why such a group should be permitted to bear the proud name of "Prague."



"He's obviously been hiding there all along."

An essay review of Michael Crichton's
"The Andromeda Strain" (Knopf, 291 pp., \$5.95)

Is There a Lunar Microbe Stranger Than Science Fiction?

by JOHN LEAR

I am hardly the one to offer advice about advertising, especially not to the son of the president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. However, a man's choice of the medical calling suggests to me that he has some interest in mixing public service with personal fortune-making; and Michael Crichton is preparing himself to practice medicine. As a potential contributor to the commonweal he erred, I think, in allowing his newest book, *The Andromeda Strain*, to be advertised as a novel.

The Andromeda Strain has none of the ingredients normal to a satisfying novel. Its characters are wooden, their dialogue seldom stirs the sawdust, and the puppet-string plot on which they hang blows up into the sky for lack of any better place to go, floating into oblivion on an invisible cloud.

Those readers who are competent to turn the cloud inside out will find a lining threaded with fascination. But such readers, I suspect, will be few. The vast majority would have benefited, I think, if *The Andromeda Strain* had been frankly billed as a satire on America's plunge into extraterrestrial space exploration.

The Andromeda Strain purports to be a literal account of a strange micro-organism that comes to Earth unexpectedly on the spaceship *Andros V*. This microbe kills all but two inhabitants of a little desert town in the Southwest—one a lush who depends on aspirin and canned heat for his kicks, the other an eternally squalling baby. The town is quarantined by armed guard while a secret team of scientists runs a frantic gantlet of Orwellian ordeals to discover how the microbe works. Before they can classify it genetically, the microbe solves its problematical self by mutating into a benign presence, and is last observed

passing harmlessly over the neighborhood of Hollywood, California (possibly prophetic of the ultimate destination of Mr. Crichton's story). The epilogue to *The Andromeda Strain* reads:

Officially, the loss of *Andros V*, the manned spacecraft that burned up as it re-entered the atmosphere, was explained on the basis of mechanical failure. . . . In Congress, and in the press, there was clamor for safer spacecraft. As a result of governmental and public pressure, NASA elected to postpone future manned flights for an indefinite period. This decision was announced by Jack Marriott, "the voice of *Andros*," in a press conference at the Manned Spaceflight Center in Houston. A partial transcript of the conference follows:

Q. Jack, when does this postponement go into effect?

A. Immediately. Right as I talk to you, we are shutting down.

Q. How long do you anticipate this delay will last?

A. I'm afraid that's impossible to say.

Q. Could it be a matter of months?

A. It could.

Q. Jack, could it be as long as a year?

A. It's just impossible for me to say. We must wait for the findings of the investigating committee.

Q. What will this delay do to the Mars-landing target date?

A. It will certainly set the scheduling back.

Q. Jack, how far?

A. I'll tell you frankly, it's something all of us here would like to know.

The satire lies partly and plainly in the urgent note of the reporters' questions, as though the particular time when a man might reach Mars could have any real importance alongside



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