

MUSIC TO MY EARS

The Mirth, Girth, and Worth of "Fats" Waller

by Irving Kolodin

AIN'T MISBEHAVIN', the revue at the Longacre Theater, is worth even more than the accolade of "Best Musical of the Year" that it bears as a Tony Award winner. This is a show that is giving theatergoers an insight into something they haven't enjoyed, in revue form, in years—a multisong sampling from the richest period of American popular music.

For those who weren't present when Thomas "Fats" Waller was producing the musical's great songs in the Twenties and Thirties, *Ain't Misbehavin'* is also a celebration of one of the most generously gifted men ever to set pen to paper in pursuit of musical pleasure—his and the world's.

As an instance, one may mention the creative history of the title song itself, which has come to be the embodiment of all that is characteristic of the man (though some may prefer another song among the hundreds he wrote). A robust fellow (a 300-pound six footer) whose foot pressure on the organ was estimated at 20 pounds per pedal, Waller was a connoisseur of beverages in many forms and colors. He lived thirty-nine music-packed years, of which 45 minutes, one morning, were devoted to creating "Ain't Misbehavin'."

Most track records for the creation of durable music are more fictional than factual. Who, after all, held a stopwatch on Schubert while he created the lilting line that gave wings to Shakespeare's "Who Is Sylvia?" or on Brahms as he jotted down his Waltz No. 15 in A-flat major? The crafting of "Ain't Misbehavin'" in less than an hour is attested to by Andy Razaf (born Andrea Razafinkeriefio), who was there, writing the words, when it happened.

The outcome may have had high-level repercussions some years later, when the celebrated Symphony No. 7 ("Leningrad") of Dmitri Shostakovich appeared with a much repeated theme (11 times in one sequence) in the first movement. Its first five notes bear a curious likeness to "Ain't Misbehavin'."

Clearly preposterous, some may say: Where on earth could Shostakovich have ever heard "Ain't Misbehavin'," let alone remember it (subconsciously)? My answer would be: He'd have heard it in the same time and circumstances that he heard Vincent Youmans's "Tea for Two" and by letter, discussed his

instrumentation of it with conductor Nicolai Malko, when Moscow was a fox-trotting town, in 1928–1929. [See the current *Musical Quarterly*.]

Of the hundreds of records made by Waller between October 1922 and September 1943 (he died in November 1943), only a fraction were made at the organ. Thus it is difficult to pass judgment on the statement by Ashton Stevens (Chicago's celebrated drama critic) that "the piano was the instrument of Fats Waller's stomach and the organ that of his heart." I do cherish an organ version by Waller of "Thou Swell," whose throb is certainly from the heart, but that is also true of more than a few piano performances by him.

I had a memorable conversation with Waller once in 1938, when he was appearing at the Yacht Club, on New York's Fifty-second Street, with his favorite small ensemble (Herman Autrey on trumpet, Gene Sedic on tenor sax and clarinet, Al Casey playing guitar, and "Slick" Jones on the drums). At an appropriate break, he came over and sat down at the table where I was having an early snack and collecting material for a newspaper piece.

I asked if in truth he was fond of playing Bach and if he had actually made (nonreleased) recordings of Bach. He laughed but didn't say yes or no. He did say that one of the lasting recollections of his young life was being taken by his father to hear the great Polish pianist Paderewski in Carnegie Hall. (The year, 1918—when Fats was fourteen—is attested in Maurice Waller's affectionate recollections of his father, *Fats Waller*, recently published by Schirmer Books.)

When he asked where I was going later in the evening, I replied, "To the Metropolitan, to hear Strauss's 'Der Rosenkavalier'." His already lively expression became even more animated. "Hey, man," he said, "take me along, will you?" "Sure," I said. "Let's go." But reality took over as he said something about "the job," and the idea lapsed.

Maurice Waller's book is memorable for its many honest observations of and insights into a difficult parent, and one revelation especially stands out. The lore has long circulated that in the Twenties Fats often sold song ideas for eatin' money and that more than a few of them became hits. Maurice Waller

provides two examples: "Sometimes I'd inadvertently play a song he had sold to another composer, and all hell would break loose. One afternoon I was playing 'I Can't Give You Anything but Love,' and he heard me. Dad came storming down the stairs in a rage. 'Maurice, I don't want you to ever play that damn song. I don't want you to even whistle it. Do you understand?'" Maurice also recalls a moment when his father was present as "On the Sunny Side of the Street" came over the radio. Another steaming rage. Both songs, of course, bear the name of the late Jimmy McHugh as composer. As two of America's most performed, best-loved songs, they unquestionably contributed to McHugh's fame and fortune.

At his best, the mirth in Waller did not rest upon his girth or the tilted derby or the baby voice he used in "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter" (perhaps his best-known best-selling record). The humor was in the music itself: in its offbeat lapses and pickups, in the echoes of the Bijou Theater kind of musical background to silent films (of which he played his share when he was growing up); in the ability to parody the sentiment in Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust" with a little accent here, a touch of tremolo there, that made it say something different without saying it at all.

All these were one part of the implicit, mischievous humor in the man: The other part, the banter, the self-deprecation, the catering to audience expectations, was part of the "sell"—as it was then practiced by others, including Louis Armstrong—the appeal to the eye of those who couldn't hear what he was doing so brilliantly for the ear.

As Fats grew older, he wasted his physical being through all forms of self-indulgence—including self-re-creation. Maurice Waller tells us that his father "constantly talked about his admiration for Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F*," the clear implication being that he was torturing himself for not having done comparably well with his own gifts.

A Fats Waller piano concerto? What a wonderful idea! But the worth of the man remains in what he did on his own, and in his own way—not as a second George Gershwin but as a first, inimitable Fats Waller. ©

DANCE

The Adventuresome Dutch

by Walter Terry



Kylian's NDT in *Sinfonietta*—"Expresses both emotion and motion."

“I SCREAMED ‘Bravo!’ at my own matinee,” confessed Jiri Kylian, co-artistic director and principal choreographer of the Netherlands Dance Theater (NDT). “I usually look at a performance and then go backstage and make corrections, but for the first time in my life I was so excited I cheered my own dancers!” Audiences at 1978’s Spoleto Festival USA also cheered the Netherlanders with standing ovations at every performance in the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. The enthusiasm was wholly justified, for the Dutch company’s absolutely brilliant execution and Kylian’s superb choreography made their presentations the dance peak of the second annual American counterpart of the Festival of Two Worlds, founded 20 years ago in Spoleto, Italy, by the continuing artistic director of both festivals, composer Gian Carlo Menotti.

The NDT, established almost 20 years ago by American teacher and choreographer Benjamin Harkarvy (presently artistic director of the Pennsylvania Ballet), has always been adventuresome. Until Kylian took over, in 1975, the accent was on modern dance, but now the NDT has a brand-new look. Although Kylian trains his dancers strictly in classical ballet and frequently incorporates *sur les pointes* in his choreography for the girls, he fuses this discipline with the movements of many other dance styles.

The NDT program for the Spoleto festival was composed of four distinctly different ballets, three by Kylian and one by Hans van Manen, a principal choreographer of the primarily classical Dutch National Ballet. Van Manen’s *Grosse Fuge* (Beethoven), one of his

most popular works, is a piece of striking dance architecture.

Kylian’s *Stoolgame* (music by Arne Nordheim) begins with a fierce battle between two men in which one is killed. The survivor defies the fallen one, and in the dazzlingly imaginative ritual of wild communal worship that follows, low stools, instead of women, are manipulated into a myriad of patterns that make the stools occasionally appear to be parts of bodies.

Symphony in D (from Haydn’s “Clock” symphony) is one of the funniest ballets I have ever seen. The pointe work of the girls is as strong as that of a classical ballet troupe, the virtuosity of the men is breathtaking, and Kylian has come up with gestures, statements, passages, and entire movements of kinetic humor that had Charleston audiences rocking with near hysterical laughter. Yet in his *Verklaarte Nacht* (music by Schoenberg), the same choreographer created movements that were understatements, haunting evocations of love and sadness and hope.

The NDT also participated in the Ballet Gala of the two-day celebration honoring Czech composer Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) on the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

The undisputed hit of the gala was *Sinfonietta*, choreographed especially for the occasion by Kylian and danced by the NDT. In *Sinfonietta*, Kylian captured in movement what the music is all about. No other choreographer at the gala came close to realizing the same degree of music visualization, dramatization, and mood from his own selected score.

The Kylian ballet begins with a semi-climax (the dancers’ great leaps are done first in unison, then in succession) that almost knocks you out of

your seat; then it moves to a gentler, less dynamic section; and finally it builds to a full climax. At the ballet’s close, the dancers fairly soar on diagonals across the stage, the boys interspersing leaps with great lifts of the girls so that vast arcs of elevation are extended into both time and space. At the very end of the ballet, these free-flying figures draw together in a mass formation of almost rhapsodic stillness as the dancers, backs to the audience, step slowly toward a distant horizon.

SEEING Jiri Kylian’s *Sinfonietta* and the three other ballets he presented at the festival, I discovered not only that the NDT has changed radically since Kylian took charge but also that Kylian is very probably the finest choreographic talent to bless the dance world since the passing of Kylian’s mentor, John Cranko, of the Stuttgart Ballet. All too often, this generation of so-called contemporary ballet choreographers contrives instead of invents, clutches at novelty instead of reaching toward discovery, instructs dancers to writhe from pose to pose (if they’re lucky enough to be given a pose) with no concern for sequence of movement or kinetic logic.

Says Kylian, “The most important thing is not to lose the logic in dance. Logic is absolutely essential. There must be truth not only in *emotion* but also in *motion*. One has to find the ways movements want to go... One shouldn’t force them to go somewhere else.”

Kylian’s choreographic logic in expressing both emotion and motion and the thrilling physicality of his superbly trained and physically attractive dancers made the other dance events at Spoleto USA pale, fade, disappear.

This season of Spoleto Festival USA was not as stirring dancewise as last year’s inaugural season. Certainly the Janáček Ballet Gala did not sustain the high level achieved by Wishy’s Scriabin Gala, of 1977. But in one sense, the festival was more important this year, for it reintroduced the Netherlands Dance Theater to America, this time in a new guise, in superlative form, and under the direction of a master choreographer. Jiri Kylian’s *Sinfonietta* was itself worth a trip (from anywhere) to Charleston. ●