

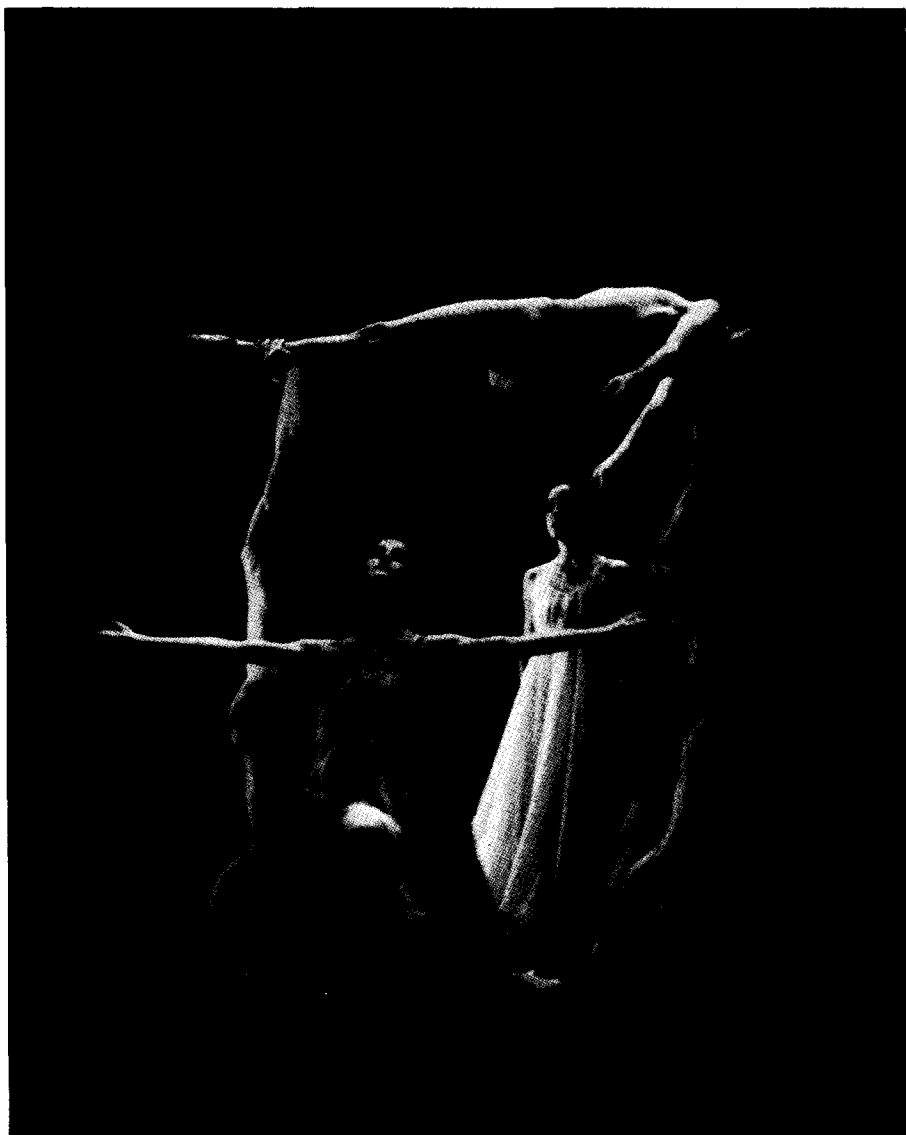
BALLET WEST, in its New York debut this spring at the City Center, was the most exhilarating ballet company to hit Broadway since Jiri Kylian's Netherlands Dance Theater visited us a year ago. Bruce Marks, artistic director and frequent choreographer of the Utah-based company, is not yet in Kylian's class as a creator of major work, but he is plumbing the primal depths of dance.

Ballet West brought to New York from Salt Lake City an approach to classical dancing that could only be called lusty. Part of this is certainly due to the fact that the company hails from the Rocky Mountains and that about 30 percent of its dancers are graduates of the University of Utah. But a greater part is due to Marks's own remarkable background.

Bruce Marks was trained in both ballet and modern dance at New York City's High School of Performing Arts, which numbers among its former students such luminaries as Arthur Mitchell, Edward Villella, Ben Vereen, Liza Minnelli, Louis Falco, and Eliot Feld. While still a child he danced—brilliantly—with Pearl Lang's modern dance company, and after graduating in 1953 he became Lang's partner. He danced with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet from 1956–1958; he went to the American Ballet Theatre in 1961 as a principal dancer, excelling in both modern ballets and in such classics as *Swan Lake*; and, in 1971, he joined the Royal Danish Ballet (a signal honor for a foreigner), where he mastered the 19th-century ballets of August Bournonville.

The Utah troupe has long been a pioneering force in American ballet. It was founded in 1963 as the Utah Civic Ballet by Mrs. John M. Wallace and Willam Christensen. Christensen also founded America's first college ballet department (hundreds of colleges did have modern dance programs by then) at the University of Utah in 1975, and helped his brothers, Harold and Lew, build the San Francisco Ballet into a company of national stature. (Harold recently retired; Lew remains as co-director with Michael Smuin.)

Marks inherited Willam Christensen's post of artistic director two years ago. His stamp is already upon the company. The new works are characterized by eclecticism both with respect to repertory—which includes Bournonville and Balanchine ballets, 19th-century classics, dance Americana (ballets with



JACK WARTOSIAN

African Sanctus—Admittedly harsh and choreographically crude, but powerful.

American themes), and modern dance—and with respect to the varied ingredients Marks pours into his own works.

Sanctus, choreographed to David Fanshawe's *African Sanctus*, with set designs by David Barber and costumes by Charlie Shurtliff and lighting by Greg Geilmann, is Marks's most important choreographic statement yet to be seen in New York. The men dancers bring a proud masculinity to the stage that is reminiscent of Ted Shawn and his Company of Male Dancers of the 1930s. The women are utterly feminine but have the strength of American pioneers.

All the dancers are expertly trained in both classical ballet and modern dance

and provide an air of robust health that is wonderfully refreshing. Ballet and modern dance mix with African tribal, Moslem, and Christian ritual forms.

Using a structure similar to a Catholic mass, the ballet looks at and synthesizes various faiths and expressions of faith. In the mix of religions, Marks attempts to convey our need—more apparent in ancient religions than in contemporary religions—"to dance out" the magic of legend, the hope of myth, the passion of belief that characterize fervent religious expression.

For *Sanctus* the stage floor is raked so that audiences may see projections of great cabalistic symbols decorating the



JACK WARDMAN

Vivien Cockburn and Mohomed Bahiri in an elegant Pas de Dix; Stacey Swaner and Mark Lanham, reveling in the challenges of Le Corsaire.

ground, circular patterns that change from scene to scene. In the parts of the ballet that used groups of dancers I noticed Delsartian movement principles—first adapted to dance by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn and, to a degree, by Isadora Duncan—that have filtered down into the movement vocabulary of modern dance. Thus, “oppositions” in the confrontation of limbs and bodies suggested strength and conflict; “parallelisms” suggested unity; and “successions,” movement in waves through a body or group of bodies, suggested continuity and eternity.

Admittedly, *Sanctus* is harsh, choreographically somewhat crude. But Marks's work possesses the strength that has been sapped from many other forms of American ballet in their search for elegance of mien and purity of step.

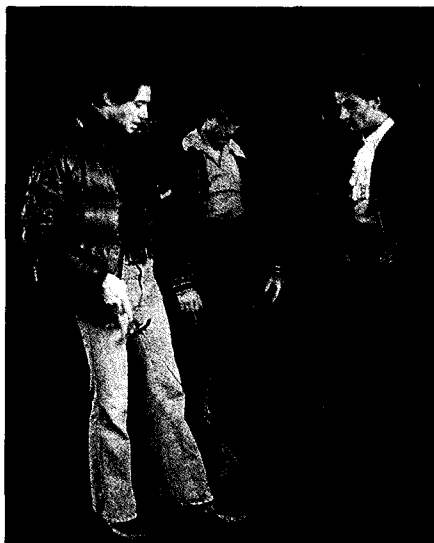
Young Stacey Swaner and Mark Lanham danced the incredibly demanding *Le Corsaire* pas de deux brilliantly. Although one noticed a gaucherie here and there—they did not display the polish of, say, Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev at the peak of their partnership—Lanham and Swaner projected the virtuosity of this bravura piece, reveling in its challenges.

Ballet West's production of George Balanchine's *Pas de Dix* has rarely been performed with such élan in recent years. Bournonville's *Flower Festival at Genzano* pas de deux, staged by Toni Lander, Marks's wife and a great Danish ballerina, shamed almost every other American presentation of this Danish

delight that I have seen. On the opposite side of the ledger, I found Marks's *Don Quixote* ponderous and awkward, as were some other “misses,” but the credit side was rich and strong.

Paris, Leningrad, and New York may have something to teach Salt Lake City about ballet, but the Utah-based company has plenty to show New York about the zest of the West in classical dance.

Of course spirit and creativity among non-New York based companies are not exclusive to Marks's troupe. Many other ballet enterprises flourish far from Broadway and its unceasing pressures for ever bigger, and not necessarily better ballets.



MARKS

Marks, Joseph Clark, Mohomed Bahiri talking.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music will try to prove this point in the coming 1980–1981 season, with *Ballet America: A National Celebration*. For this special series, the large and lovely opera house will host the San Francisco Ballet, the nation's oldest professional ballet company (October 14 to 19); Los Angeles Ballet (November 13 to 16); Cleveland Ballet (January 20 to 25, 1981); Ohio Ballet (March 12 to 15, 1981); Houston Ballet (April 7 to 12, 1981); and a regular visitor to BAM, the Pennsylvania Ballet (May 5 to 10, 1981).

As in the case of Ballet West, each of these organizations possesses highly individual characteristics. True, they include in their repertoires such classical ballets as *Giselle* or *Swan Lake* or *Nutcracker*, but every production bears the imprint of its director, its teachers, and its —as well as the imprint of its home. For just as climate, geography, and environment played a large role in the evolution of ancient ethnic dance forms, the place in which a troupe is based is instrumental in the making of its character.

Michael Smuin, the young co-director, with the veteran Lew Christensen, of the San Francisco Ballet, puts it this way: “It doesn't hurt to be 3,000 miles from New York. We can't copy what's going on there because we never see it, so we have to be inventive. We have to create new choreography, new music, new designs. Sometimes it's tough going, but it sure is healthy!”

—Walter Terry

ANY REVIEW of a new repertory production ought to be an interim report. In a true rep company, a new production ought to be seen only as the first performance in a series that recurs and ripens through more than a single season and as only one example of a permanent ensemble's varied work. In neither way does it resemble the usual go-for-broke, one-shot production that makes it or not first crack out of the box.

This report is doubly interim, then, because of the above and because in this case the company itself is new. The BAM Theater Company—its name acronymically derived from its home, the Brooklyn Academy of Music—has taken a deep breath and dug in for the long haul, against the odds for rep success in the metropolitan area. Clearly its aim is to be what is possible only to repertory: a "living museum," fixed yet progressive, of plays worthy of remembrance. The artistic chief is David Jones, an associate director of the Royal Shakespeare Company in England, whom I've admired since his RSC production of Gorky's *Enemies* in 1971. At BAM Jones means to work with a stable group of actors, directors, designers, and others. His first season will include five productions, and two are now in repertory.

BAM opened with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Jones. Some first bite. This late play is so steeped in artifices of romance that it calls for an audience almost as skilled in its conventions as the audience for Kabuki theater in Japan. The story can live only by mile-high suspensions of disbelief. Leontes, king of Sicilia, apparently happily married to Hermione, becomes murderously jealous of her amiability to their guest, Polixenes, king of Bohemia—so much so that Leontes puts his pregnant wife in prison and tries to have Polixenes killed. In prison Hermione gives birth to a daughter, and Leontes, suspecting the child's paternity, orders her abandoned to the elements. Hermione is reported dead. The daughter is secretly brought up in Bohemia as a shepherd's child, meets and loves Polixenes's son, is returned to her father. Her mother, who has really been hidden, is "restored" to life, and Leontes recovers reason and love.

With a considerable stretch, the symmetries and coincidences of the plot, like the notorious bear that kills off an old courtier conveniently, might be taken as



Murray, Maraden in *The Winter's Tale*; Dempsey, Jon Polito, Hart, Bayer in *Johnny on a Spot*.

part of the pastoral atmosphere, the way that comparable matters are accepted—even treasured—in the vastly superior *As You Like It*. But Leontes's ragings in the first two acts are so real and vile that they prepare *against* the light, fanciful matters that follow. Coleridge, contrasting Leontes with Othello, spoke of the Moor's "solemn agony" but of Leontes's "wretched fishing jealousies." Those jealousies are so fishy that they would be a shaky start for a tragedy, which indeed is what Victor Hugo called the play, shakier still for a romance.

What this comes down to in actual theater practice—never mind the literary value of Shakespeare's verse for the moment—is that, within a very few minutes, Leontes has to become scorchingly jealous without one wisp of convincing evidence, has to do it credibly if the play is not to collapse, yet has to stay within the bounds of our sympathy so that, when he recovers at the end, we can accept him back.

This opening comes off splendidly under Jones's hand. I should say, his ear: He is one of the rare Shakespeare directors today who believe that the theatrical life of the play lies in plumbing its language, not in imposing directorial concepts to make up for Shakespeare's deficiencies or to keep him up-to-date. That belief faces a particularly hard test in *The Winter's Tale*, and on that score Jones comes off well. In the ridiculously short time he has had to blend an ensemble as such, he has worked to center his company on principles of language-as-theater, and none has responded bet-

ter than Brian Murray, the Leontes.

I can't say that Murray's performance makes the evening: The show falters when it gets to Bohemia because of some weak actors and because of some of William's least funny writing for clowns. But before Bohemia, Murray, principally, makes the evening possible. He carves stature out of the air with voice and presence. A veteran of the RSC, Murray has been acting (and directing) in New York for several years, sometimes well and sometimes pallidly. Touched by Jones, he is a new, big actor, who gives us a lot to hope for.

Marti Maraden has lovely dignity as the wronged Hermione, and Sheila Allen (Mrs. Jones), as the queen's loyal friend, puts fine force into that loyalty. David Gropman's raked stage, on which Jones moves his actors with sharp economy, is pleasantly simple in Sicilia, but an abstract awning from a SoHo gallery somehow slips into Bohemia. Bruce Coughlin's music misses at the moment when Hermione's "statue" comes to life—a few feeble guitar plinks where some woodwind chords would have made wonder.

With the second play, John Lee Beatty's setting, visible at once because there is no curtain, announces a change of acting styles as well as place. It's a huge, wood-paneled anteroom of a Southern governor's office, with three sets of doors and an elevator. Whenever you see plentiful doors, especially swinging doors, prepare for bustle.

Johnny on a Spot is a farce by Charles MacArthur, co-author of *The Front Page*