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# Ballet's Brightest Hope

by Walter Terry.

**T**he comparatively small Netherlands Dance Theater would not be performing in New York's vast Metropolitan Opera House this month if it were not for the gigantic talent of its artistic director and chief choreographer, Jiří Kylián. At the moment, Kylián (rhymes with "vermillion") is the most promising ballet choreographer of his generation (he was born March 21, 1947, in Prague, Czechoslovakia), and his talent is all the more rare since he works in the field of ballet, not modern dance. The training of almost every modern dancer includes elements of choreography; in ballet, with few exceptions, the dancer is taught only to perform, not to create. Thus ballet's great choreographers are born of an inner compulsion, an urgency, a necessity to speak through movement.

The magnitude of Kylián's talent first exploded on the American scene when the Netherlands Dance Theater performed his ballets at the 1978 Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina. The NDT, founded by the American ballet master Ben Harkavy at The Hague in 1959, had been well received in earlier U.S. appearances under other artistic directors and with different choreographers. But nothing in the past equaled the shouting, roaring, and standing ovations that greeted all performances in Charleston. Kylián himself, who had assumed the artistic directorship of the company less than two years before, was overwhelmed by the response. At that time, he said, "I screamed 'Bravo!' at my own

matinee. It was the first time in my life I was so excited I cheered my own dancers." His ballet, *Sinfonietta*, set to the music of the Czech composer Leoš Janáček, was created especially for Spoleto. It was the hit of the festival and has remained an NDT favorite wherever performed around the world.

The instant success of *Sinfonietta* had directors of American ballet troupes besieging Kylián for requests, "Do a ballet for us" or "Let us have something you have already choreographed." Almost overnight, Jiří Kylián had become the hottest choreographic commodity in the dance world. To requests for his ballets, he said no. To requests for his company, he and his associates said yes. In 1979, the Netherlands Dance Theater returned to New York, but for the first time under Kylián's direction, and appeared in an enormously successful two-week engagement at the old City Center. The music, however, was on tape. For the upcoming Met season and subsequent appearances at the Wolf Trap Festival near Washington, D.C. (July 15 through 18) and at the Metropolitan Center in Boston (July 21 through 26), there will be a full orchestra, live, to support an all-Kylián repertory of seven ballets, three of them new to American audiences. Two productions, *Symphony of Psalms* (set to Stravinsky) and *Soldiers Mass* (set to Bohuslav Martinů's "Field Mass"), will utilize a chorus as well as an orchestra.

The nervous, almost desperate, eagerness with which Kylián is courted by directors of ballet companies, producers, and theater managers on a worldwide level testifies to a crying need the ballet profession is experiencing with respect to choreography. Oh yes, there



The Netherlands Dance Theater performing *Sinfonietta*, choreographed by Jiří Kylián (inset), his U.S. debut ballet.



are competent choreographers, a few really good choreographers, but where is the *great* choreographer? Does he exist?

Of course, there are choreographic geniuses at work. There are America's Russian-born George Balanchine, guiding genius of the New York City Ballet, and England's Sir Frederick Ashton whose choreography has accounted for the eminence of the Royal Ballet. Balanchine and Sir Frederick, though remarkably active, are each approaching the age of 80. America's Agnes de Mille is in her seventies and Jerome Robbins in his sixties. There are no other choreographers for ballet in the same class with this mighty, innovative, influential quartet except ...maybe Kylián. If Kylián is not yet

isolation from potential colleagues, and other factors militated against his efforts. But Feld has not become the second Robbins (with whom he had been compared)—or even a first Feld.

In the mid-Sixties, there were many who believed that Gerald Arpino, principal choreographer for the Joffrey Ballet, was destined to become *the* choreographer of the era. He turned out some highly effective ballets, and still does, and he is skillful in infusing sports or rock or sexual explorations into ballet. But glibness, a sense of superficiality, and more than passing brushes of tastelessness replaced the rather touching innocence and genuine imaginativeness of his very early ballets.

The San Francisco Ballet's Michael Smuin (in his forties) and the Cleveland

and the American John Neumeier, director of the Hamburg Opera Ballet. But for the present, Jiří Kylián is clearly the anointed one among the world's young choreographers.

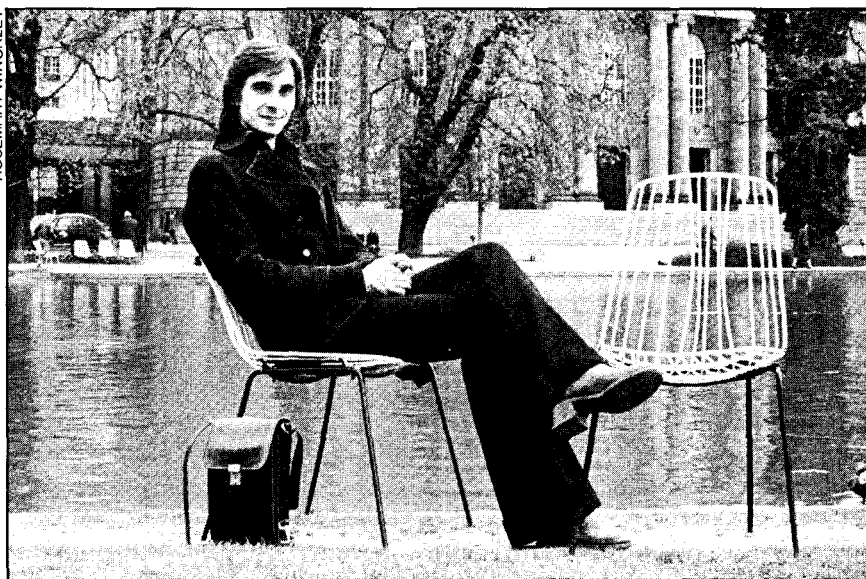
**T**hough Kylián's international recognition has arrived only recently, his urge to be a choreographer dates from when he was nine years old. "I'd come home from school," he says, "put on some music and dance to it. I was far less interested in becoming a professional dancer than most dance students. Way back then I started being excited about other people making interpretations of my thoughts and my ideas."

At 15, Kylián entered the Prague Conservatory where he had his first training in the arts. Subsequently, he continued his studies at the Royal Ballet School in London (1967), and in 1968 he joined the Stuttgart Ballet as a dancer. In Stuttgart, he was fortunate in having the guidance of the late John Cranko (1927-1973), who as a director had not only built the Stuttgart Ballet into one of the world's great troupes but who was viewed as one of the major young choreographers of our era. Kylián, without in any way being imitative of Cranko, seems to be filling the choreographic void left by Cranko's untimely death at 45.

Cranko's encouragement was important to Kylián, for he asked the young dancer to choreograph a ballet for the Stuttgart, but his influence was minimal. As a child, Kylián's first impulse to choreograph came not from seeing dances but from the arts of painting, sculpture, drama, and, of course, music. Today, he says, "My original inspiration for choreography came from a combination of these arts, so when I left Czechoslovakia I was confronted, for the first time, with ballets by such leading choreographers as Cranko, Jerome Robbins, Kenneth MacMillan, Glen Tetley, and Hans van Manen. I found this inspiring but it did not change my basic inspiration. Watching the dance works of other choreographers has not affected me."

Elements of the musical, the pictorial, the dramatic, united in an incandescent physicality, are what startle, capture, and finally enthrall the viewer at a first exposure to Kylián choreography. The first time the curtain rose on *Sinfonietta*, I was lifted by the sight of a company of dancers exploring space in great unison leaps. Here was a

ROSEMARY WINCKLEY



Kylián insists, "Watching the work of other choreographers has not affected me."

there, he is, at the present, closer to Olympian levels of choreographic accomplishments than anyone else among makers of ballets.

Where are ballet's choreographers? Where are the equivalents of modern dance's continuing output of dance makers (although "prime" choreographers are in scarce supply there also)? When Eliot Feld burst upon the ballet scene as a choreographer with his *Harbinger* for the American Ballet Theatre in 1967, the very title of his ballet suggested that a thrilling new talent was only just beginning to reveal itself. A few subsequent ballets appeared to confirm that promise, and soon afterward Feld was funded sufficiently to form his own company. Perhaps the pressures of running his own enterprise diluted his choreographic energies. Or perhaps some combination of over-confidence,

Ballet's Dennis Nahat (in his mid-thirties), both made their first solid impacts as choreographers in their days with the American Ballet Theatre. But neither has yet projected that elusive quality of incandescence that seems to radiate from almost every movement, phrase, passage, scene, or complete ballet that Jiří Kylián touches. Mikhail Baryshnikov, when he first assumed the directorship of the American Ballet Theatre a year ago, said, unhesitatingly, "Kylián? If we could get him, I'd give him our ballet theater!"

The choreographic paramountcy of Kylián might suggest that there are no other ballet-makers on the horizon. There are. Some may make it: Danish-born Peter Martins of the New York City Ballet; the Dayton Ballet's Stuart Sebastian; the Boston Ballet's Bruce Wells; Singapore-born Choo San Goh;



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ballet that opened with a climax but it never occurred to any of us to question whether this young, new choreographer could keep up the pace. With irresistible kinetic logic, the unison leaps metamorphosed into patterns of successive vaultings as if one were seeing, somehow, the continuing beat of the heart. A gentler, more contemplative section followed, and here were Kylian's images and figurations making statements of pictorial beauty. And, yes, he did top his opening climactic sections with a superclimax in which spatial pathways were traveled not only with the great leaps that had introduced the ballet but with racing, soaring lifts as the men thrust the women onto a plane of action that no human could attain unsupported. And then a resolution into a simple walk of hope for tomorrow.

In his intensely dramatic *Ariadne*, the women, in long skirts, move to vocal music. Their actions are a seamless integrating of classical ballet steps and modern-dance movements. All too often, with some other choreographers, we see a tormented coupling of two techniques and styles with modern-dance movements balanced precariously on ballet *pointe*, or we see modern-dance patterns divested of earthiness by the introduction of balletic lightness. Not so with Kylian.

In fact, in his comic *Symphony in D* (to music of Haydn), Kylian uses the *pointe* work of the female dancer as "a setup" for his mockery of ballet's most idiotic moments. For other creations, he says, "I use the *pointe* only when it is needed. I'm really very old-fashioned in the sense that I believe in expressive dance and if there is a reason, a motivation to use *pointe*, I use it not for technical display but for its expressive values.

"There are ballet dancers who reproach me because I don't use the *pointe* in all my ballets, but lately I've developed a style—I hate to use that word—that is *unthinkable* to do on toe. The dancer can move very fast when in place with the toe shoe, but with the speed I need to cover ground, they could never do it on *pointe*. They'd be in real trouble."

Does this mean that there is a recognizable look to Kylian choreography, a trademark? "I'd prefer to think I *didn't* have a style," he says. "I like to change my ways from ballet to ballet. But of course you cannot avoid your own handwriting. *Symphony in D* and *Ariadne* are as different from

each other as ballets could possibly be, yet they are both babies of mine. I suppose there are some points at which they meet. And, yes, I'm aware that there can be 'Kylianisms' in my choreography. But it is difficult to avoid. For example, I love to make duets; and I have a hard time making myself do solos or pas de trois or something other than pas de deux, but it happens because I'm drawn to the relationship of two people.

"I also like to use dancers with their backs to the audience—*Sinfonietta* ends that way—but I fight to avoid copying myself. It's bad enough to be guilty of imitating oneself but it is even worse when I see others copying me. It doesn't make me angry if I observe another choreographer taking my steps, but it disturbs me to see my movements turned into clichés."

Kylian insists, moreover, that his choreography depends heavily on the

**"I'd prefer not  
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performers themselves. "The dancers who do my dances," he says, "are *not* 'second casts' of myself. I create for them and they interpret my dances in their own ways. You know, the bodies of different dancers inspire different qualities of movement. With the same ideas and the same music and with two different interpreters, two different performances result. I like this because each dancer places a different aura around my dances, touches them with a different magnetism."

The core of Kylian's choreographic inspiration may well be found in nature itself. "It's man as part of nature—or not a part of it—that concerns me. What our world is doing today is getting further and further away from nature. It is wrong! I still believe that people have feelings and emotions that are tied to nature, dependent on nature; and these are the points that interest me and that I am trying to explore."

When I first met Kylian three years ago, he was intensely concerned with doing a ballet about the aborigines of Australia, who are among the closest to nature of the world's remaining primitive peoples. The project oc-

curred to him almost eight years ago, and it cannot be realized until a commissioned score is completed a year from now. But the remoteness of an aboriginal culture in Australia and a Czech-born Dutch choreographer is erased by the concept of man and nature. "They are," says Kylian of the aborigines, "the closest to the soil, to the earth of all peoples. And this is because they are not interested in 'development.' They don't want to develop. They want to *stay*, and that is the extraordinary strength that radiates from them when you meet them."

His ballet about the aborigines will not be ethnic dance in any way. "Strangely enough, it will have little to do with the formal culture of the aborigines themselves. What my ballet is about is what happened to me when I was with them. Seeing the aborigines, talking to them, and just being there recalled so many of my childhood feelings, the almost puristic feelings one has at the time of puberty. It was a return to *navet * in the best sense of that word."

Kylian is by no means unaware of his swift rise to international recognition as the most exciting choreographer to emerge on the world stage in a long, long time. This soft-spoken, intense, and vital young man with a keen sense of humor, attempts to explain, without arrogance, the reasons for his success: "I think it's a combination of many factors but I believe the most important thing is that I try to portray the normal side of people. No, not 'normal,' that word has such bad connotations—so let us say 'average.' What I try to do is provide portrayals of the ordinary person, his basic needs, his emotions, his relationships. The second important aspect of my work is that I want to see people in their closeness to nature. Thirdly, I think my choice of music contributes to the success of my ballets. I rarely use ballet music; I take concert pieces for my dances and I try to penetrate the composer's own world and see if I can find how *he* would have danced to his own music if he had been so inclined.

"Lastly, I think what is important to my ballets is a 'down-to-earthness' from which the spiritual emerges, as if from the soil itself. It is like a plant, a flower. The roots are solidly embedded in the ground, they are covered with dirt, but the flower that comes from it is beautiful and spiritual and sweet-smelling and quite wonderful. But you must never forget its base." ■





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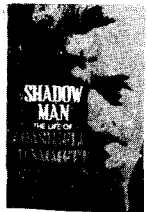
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# Sleuthing Hammett

by Anthony Burgess



**Shadow Man:  
The Life of  
Dashiell Hammett**  
by Richard Layman  
Harcourt Brace  
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Clark 267 pp., \$14.95

Since Dashiell Hammett's death just 20 years ago a nonreading generation has grown up that prizes *The Maltese Falcon* as a great old movie (the definitive version with Bogart, not the earlier essays) and has seen the saturnine author himself, enacted by Jason Robards, in the film *Julia*. The books themselves are in print and are paying off the debts with which Hammett died burdened, along with a pulmonary cancer, emphysema, pneumonia, and diseases of the heart, liver, kidneys, spleen, and prostate gland. Posthumously he has become a glamorous literary figure.

In life he tried to fulfill, without pretensions and with a certain scorn of the adulation of men like André Gide ("I wish that fag would take me out of his mouth," he said to Malraux), an aim that Raymond Chandler strove for with equal success, though he had Hammett's example to emulate—the conversion of a popular genre into genuine art. *Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse*, *The Glass Key*, and *The Thin Man*, as well as *The Maltese Falcon*, are admirably shapely pieces of writing, with dialogue a little truer than life, an implied ethic that places greed and violence against a backcloth of quixotic decency, and rounded characterization in the tradition of serious fiction. Like Chandler, Hammett reached art the hard way—through a long apprenticeship to lowly craft. He was a pulp man first—*The Black Mask*, *True Detective Stories*, *Mystery League Magazine*—

and before that he was a Pinkerton operative.

Sam Spade may have been an extravagant invention, but he never does anything that a real-life op would reject as implausible. Hammett once went to the trouble of listing, in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, technical errors that made a good deal of pulp crime unacceptable. Thus: "The automatic pistol . . . is not a revolver. A pistol, to be a revolver, must have something on it that revolves." Again: "Federal prisoners in Washington D.C. are usually sent to the Atlanta prison and not to Leavenworth." Again: "The California State prison at San Quentin is used for convicts serving first terms. Two-time losers are usually sent to Folsom." Again (here was the sharp ear matching the eye): "Even detectives who drop their final g's should not be made to say 'anythin'—an oddity that calls for vocal acrobatics" and "'Youse' is the plural of 'you.'" Literary seriousness begins with a concern for accuracy.

Hammett began to get his critical rewards with Dorothy Parker's rave in the *New Yorker*: "It seems to me that there is entirely too little screaming about the work of Dashiell Hammett. My own shrill yaps have been ascending ever since I first found *Red Harvest*, and from that day the man has been, God help him, my hero. . . ." How badly the Parker prose-style wears; how well the Hammett:

At one time or another I've had to tell everybody from the Supreme Court down to go to hell, and I've got away with it. I got away with it because I never let myself forget that a day of reckoning was coming. I never forget that when the day of reckoning comes I want to be all set to march into headquarters pushing a victim in front of me, saying: "Here, you chumps, is your criminal." As long as I

can do that I can put my thumb to my nose and wriggle my fingers at all the laws in the book. . . . This is my city and my game. I could manage to land on my feet—sure—this time, but the next time I tried to put over a fast one they'd stop me so fast I'd swallow my teeth. Hell with



Hellman and Hammett at "21" in 1945. Layman

that. You birds'll be in New York or Constantinople or some place else. I'm in business here.

That is Sam Spade talking. Spade