

## COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

### *A PLEA FOR ENGLISH BALLET.*

'To-day a respect for tradition is not regarded with the dire suspicion or open revolt that it has been subjected to in the immediate past, and sanity is on the verge of being regarded as an acceptable condition of even the artistic genius; a variety of further reasonings are bringing back law and order into our lives. We need not trouble to enumerate these, but one more superficial point may be mentioned, namely, that such a state of mind encourages a sense of proportion in all walks of art and life.'

Ninette de Valois, *Invitation to the Ballet*.

Even the best authorities now seem inclined to the view that the Red Air Force isn't made exclusively out of cardboard and string; and Philip Jordan assures us from Moscow that workers read Poushkin in restaurants. And so it should not come as a surprise to learn that one of the Soviet Government's first measures after the German invasion was to order the State Opera and Ballet into the safety of the interior of the country (rather naturally they refused to go). In England, however, the Sadler's Wells Ballet has never received any official help or recognition, and with the B.B.C.'s theories about the sanctity of supply-and-demand before one, there can be no justification for counting on enlightenment from another semi-State venture like the proposed National Theatre. And now, at a moment when the ballet in England seems to be triumphing over the obstacles of private enterprise, the demand for man-power has created difficulties for the Company of a far more critical order. Of course, our problem is quite different from that of the U.S.S.R., yet one may still hope not to see Margot Fonteyn in the uniform of the A.T.S.

That officialdom should be chary of admitting exceptions to its rules is in the nature of things. But that so few people seem to realize, without prompting, what is actually involved reveals clearly a state of general ignorance about the very nature of ballet, and of the kind and quality of effort it involves.

Of course English Ballet has never engaged the attentions of those sections of the community, both financial and artistic, which wield power in this country. The Russian Companies which visited England between 1920 and 1938 offered attractions which it would have been foolish of the fashionable world to neglect; for their artistic achievements, which were considerable indeed, were seldom permitted to obscure the problem of cash returns. At any rate, English Ballet grew up in the last ten years almost unnoticed by the influential public, with the result that it has gathered about it a faithful and enthusiastic audience (of comparatively limited means) which has from the first been deprived of the help it might legitimately have expected to receive in forming its likes and dislikes: except such help as the Company has itself been able to give in its public classes and demonstrations. And so, in the absence of a critical public which might have undertaken even the most elementary clarification of terms and aims, and lacking of course all but the most meagre financial assistance, the Company has been forced to an excessive degree to rely upon its own resources and to shape its own development. And thus, while the Company's artistic management (Ninette de Valois, Constant Lambert, and Frederick Ashton) give every appearance in their work and writing of being people of considerable foresight and wisdom and also of being prepared to welcome informed and constructive criticism from outside, they are faced with a public whose enthusiasm is unquestioned, but which is composed in the main of people who would make no claim to critical acumen; or else of people of limited artistic training who are baffled, in the absence of competent assistance, by the very complexity of ballet and who come to doubt in the end whether ballet is an art at all. And such a state of affairs leads naturally to a situation in which there is no wide comprehension, at a critical moment, of the fact that ballet is of all arts the most precarious and delicate and that its very existence depends on the maintenance by *individual* dancers of its tradition and continuity. For the ballet, unlike any other art, has no life or being apart from its executants.

And yet, should it happen that the Company is allowed to survive intact (and my remaining remarks must assume this), then the way in which English ballet has developed and the apparently unsatisfactory nature of its existence are not without their important

redeeming features. In discussing the lack of attention that the ballet has received from the (theoretically) critical sections of the community and in touching on the confusion or adulation of the public which is interested, I carefully phrased my remarks in rather mild terms. Quite enough has already been said and written about the need for critical standards and the deplorable consequences of balletomania. Under the circumstances it seems far more profitable to approach the matter from quite another angle, and to ask what it is reasonable to hope for in the present situation and how—and this is obviously the crux—this hope can be realized. And if one naturally feels a certain diffidence in offering to consider such large and in certain respects specialized topics, the complete lack of competition makes the task a little easier; indeed, it seems safe to say that if the problem of the function and importance of ballet is not discussed here and now, there seems no reason to suppose that it is ever going to be discussed.

Of course, if any encouragement were needed, it comes above all from the Sadler's Wells Company itself. The last programme of ballets which the Company gave in London (and it was already without two of its leading male dancers) included the complete versions of *Le Lac des Cygnes*, *Giselle*, *Coppelia*, and also the first performances with orchestra of *The Wise Virgins* (music by Bach choreography by Ashton) and *Orpheus and Eurydice* (choreography by de Valois). When one adds that on occasions the performances were first-class, and that at the final performance (the third of the day) *Le Lac des Cygnes* revealed Fonteyn as unquestionably one of the really great dancers, certainly finer than any of her contemporaries in the de Basil Company, and if one realizes finally the strain of continuous dancing and travelling, then the Company's achievement is seen in its proper perspective. Indeed it is now possible to speak without any misgivings of a genuinely English classical ballet. But the main point to note is that this achievement is partly the consequence of the self-dependence mentioned above. The lack of immediate recognition from financial or artistic circles not only threw the Company on its own resources, but gave it freedom to develop those resources as seemed artistically wisest. The financial world isn't overstocked with artistic enlightenment, and all too often the artistic world seems content to conduct its affair on a stock-exchange morality; and consequently the Sadler's Wells

Ballet was fortunate in being entrusted to the virtually dictatorial care of Ninette de Valois and Constant Lambert. With the result that it has now reached maturity without finding itself at the beck and call of any particular clique or interest, and having from sheer necessity cultivated a self-critical humility which is all too rare in the artistic world to-day. It is undoubtedly the way in which new choreographic undertakings have always been conceived and checked in relation to the classical tradition that has given the Company its vigour and assurance. As Miss de Valois has written :

' The very youthfulness of English choreography places us under the influence of recognized schools of production laid down by our contemporary masters. It is possible to believe that their influence may be felt and shown more in England in the future than in any other country, and, provided such inspiration does not become a thoughtless and hysterical imitation, it is the best thing that could happen. But the balance will have to come from the choreographers themselves under the guidance of a few far-seeing music and ballet critics.'

Unfortunately, while the English choreographers have undoubtedly exercised a considerable discretion in their work, they have so far lacked the critical guidance demanded by Miss de Valois; and in some respects they have suffered in consequence, as in the standard of décor they have been able to maintain.

Admittedly many varieties of competence are required of the ballet critic, and his work will have to start on an almost blank sheet. For instance, one of the first tasks which badly needs clearing up is the precise, or even approximate, significance of the term ' classical ' as applied to ballet. The confusion may be illustrated by saying that a Romantic ballet, like *Giselle*, is generally held to provide the ideal vehicle for a classical dancer, like Margot Fonteyn. On the other hand, by contrast *Le Lac des Cygnes* is a Classical ballet, despite the fact that Tchaikowsky's music exhibits intrinsically romantic virtues. The issue here is perhaps not the most important, but it reveals clearly the need for a careful survey of the ground before any extended or satisfactory criticism of the ballet is possible. For, in the process of solving these difficulties, one would be compelled to determine (if possible) the relation of the ballet and of ballet standards to other arts, particularly music and

sculpture; and from there to consider to what extent the dancer's style (classical, *demi-caractère*, etc.) is bound up with a more or less profound sensitivity to other arts. And, if one ever reached this stage of omniscience, there would still remain—or would it by then have solved itself?—the recurrent question of the inherent unsuitability of some music for balletic treatment, and if so wherein this unsuitability lies. And so far I have omitted altogether such diverse difficulties as the rôle of lighting in ballet-production (the question raises itself forcibly, after seeing *The Haunted Ballroom* and *Apparitions*); or the significance of the central-European school of dancing. And having satisfied himself that he has mastered something of the general confusion surrounding ballet (and I need hardly say that an understanding, if no more, of the technical side of dancing is essential), the critic has still to apply his knowledge to an actual ballet, and to be prepared to offer practical criticism of any work. Miss de Valois has suggested the following table as a basis for analysis (I purposely take my quotations from Miss de Valois' book, *Invitation to the Ballet*, as my concern is with English Ballet, and she more than anyone else can speak for it); one is to consider

- ' (1) If the music concerned demands the collaboration of movement to complete its meaning.
- (2) If so, how far does the choreography fulfil its mission of interpretation regarding the following points :
  - (a) General musicality.
  - (b) Phrasing.
  - (c) Climax.
  - (d) Orchestration.
- (3) The relationship existing between the scenario and the music :
  - (a) A natural counterpoint of the musical composition.
  - (b) An uncomfortable imposition.

If the scenario responds to (a), has the choreographer succeeded in achieving a fusion of scenario and choreography which can be held to emphasise the already existing collaboration between scenario and music? If the scenario is in class (b), has he allowed the choreography to predominate to the point of reducing the scenario to a minor rôle in the background?

- (4) If the choreographer, in construction, has not misled the dancers, to what extent do the artists interpret the music and show emphasis, shading and precision as reflected by the orchestration of the ballet?' . . . and so on.

Actually, the difficulty of ballet criticism may be great, but it is far from being insuperable; and my emphasis on the complexity of the problem is intended not as a deterrent, but as a means of suggesting that ballet and ballet-criticism demand, of their very nature, a multitude of talents and interests. Ballet is essentially an impure art, and it is this impurity which gives it a potential importance, in relation to the other arts, which has for too long been forgotten.

That the importance of the ballet in its bearing on the other arts was once clearly understood is clear when one remembers that the Diaghileff era of ballet arose out of the movement associated with the journal, *Mir Isskoustva*. Diaghileff came to the ballet from the midst of other arts, and his subsequent productions revealed his conviction that ballet is a focus of various forms of artistic activity, rather than in any way an exotic growth. Only so long as the ballet draws its strength from the best that is being thought and done in other art-forms, in music, painting, sculpture, architecture and even literature—in short, only so long as it lives and grows within the larger artistic context can it retain its vitality and equilibrium. And that, for no particular fault of its own, it is not doing to-day. Indeed, it is a feature of the artistic activity of this country to be disrupt and unco-ordinated. In an age of specialisms, the arts permit themselves all too little interchange of ideas, and cater for largely distinct subdivisions of the community. And the effect of this on the ballet, and above all on the ballet public, cannot be other than deplorable. It means not only that the ballet runs a danger of becoming parochial, but that its public is tending to a rigid exclusiveness of interest (like Mr. Haskell, who claims to have no interests outside the ballet except travelling—with ballet Companies). For balletomania is simply the product of an ingrown enthusiasm, unchecked by contact with other sources of interest; and as such it runs counter to the very nature of ballet itself, whose tentacles should always be groping into the remotest corners of the artistic world.

In short, the need for a new *Mir Isskoustva* is not only pressing, but there is reason to believe that it has a potential public. This

is not the place for a blue-print of such a publication (though one is contemplated; post-war planning should not be the present monopoly of Mr. Greenwood), but a few very general considerations may perhaps be made by way of conclusion. As far as the ballet itself is concerned, there can be little doubt that the time has come (or it may soon be too late) for a clarification of the issues involved, and 'for the guidance of a few far-seeing music and ballet critics.' And this task can only be undertaken, for reasons that are obvious enough, in a journal appearing regularly (bi-monthly?) and allowing for the exchange of expert and even amateur opinion; the elaboration of a critical method and vocabulary cannot be achieved overnight or by any one person, but implies careful and even prolonged nurture. But, as has been implied, the problem of ballet criticism and appreciation inevitably leads elsewhere, and even though ballet were the ostensible end of such a journal, it is clear that one would almost equally be called upon to deal with music and visual art in their own right. In fact the journal envisaged would concern itself with almost any artistic activity, though with ballet as its focus of attention. And as such there is no reason to suppose that its influence would be small or in any way limited to a specialized audience. To mention only three unrelated instances which suggest themselves, such a journal, had it been in existence during the last few years, might have offered T. S. Eliot the incentive to develop, in print and even in practice, the few fascinating hints he has thrown out on the subject of ballet; it might have interested John Piper in stage décor; the recent production at the Old Vic of *The Tempest*, which had obvious balletic leanings, might have been entrusted to Miss de Valois. And in each case it would not only have been the ballet that would have gained by the association. For needless to say the production of such a journal implies correlated activity; the analytic and instructional classes for the Gallery which the Sadler's Wells Company used to run before the war would only be one of a number of undertakings which before long might reasonably extend to lunch-time concerts and art exhibitions (and not necessarily confined to London).

And this last proposal leads to the final consideration encouraging the whole scheme. Undoubtedly there exists a public for all forms of art which has until recently been untouched. The extraordinary success of such experiments as the National Gallery

Concerts, the art-exhibitions organized by the British Institute of Adult Education, the discussion-groups organized by the Army Educational Corps, the Pelican books, C.E.M.A.'s. dramatic activities and concerts, the ballet itself when on tour—the genuine interest which has greeted this wealth of war-time artistic activity testifies to a perhaps unsuspected integrity and vigour in the community as a whole. And yet no real steps have been taken to co-ordinate the artistic supply of the country, or to foster a critical understanding of art or of its function in society. There is no central body; there are, with one or two exceptions, no journals. The moral is plain. If the public for art is not to be lost, and if it is to be protected from the financial and artistic racketeers, some step has to be taken very soon. Not only does the public need (and the public I have in mind is so far without any entrenched prejudices or debased standards), not only does it need, for all the arts involved, the guidance of informed opinion if each individual is to be able to develop his own critical resources; it also needs a common centre of gravity to draw its multitudinous enthusiasms together and revitalise them. And no activity caters legitimately for a wider variety of artistic interest, and none, of its very nature, fosters a more catholic and all-embracing concern with art, than ballet. But the next step does not lie with the Sadler's Wells Company; it is only the vitality and quality of their work during these last ten years that makes it possible to envisage next steps at all.

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## THE 'THIRTIES REPLY

*FOLIOS OF NEW WRITING, Spring, 1941 (The Hogarth Press, 5/-).*

The chief interest of the Spring number of *New Writing* lies in a section containing four discussions of Virginia's Woolf's recent essay, *The Leaning Tower*. Roughly speaking, Mr. Upward writes as a Marxist, Mr. MacNeice as one of the poets criticized in the essay, and Mr. Coombes as a member of the working class, while Mr. Lehmann, who was closely associated with Mrs. Woolf in publishing much of the work under discussion, adds a postscript summing up the debate. The whole controversy makes dis-