

BALLET IN LONDON, NOW

*They Queue Up In
All Weathers*

BRUCE MASON, who wrote this article for "The Listener," has recently returned to New Zealand after service in the Navy, and these are his impressions of ballet in London some months ago, before the European war ended.

IT has been a good season. The Sadler's Wells Company comes every six weeks, and sometimes the International and Ballet Rambert as well. These three make a tripartite division of the body balletic, and each has its following. I found it impossible to do them all, so enrolled under the Sadler's Wells aegis, thus qualifying to stand in the queue outside the New Theatre, munch ersatz sandwiches, and quaff quasi-beer, talk nonchalantly of Bobbie (Helpmann) and Margot (Fonteyn) and enjoy the buskers, looking blandly askance from their outstretched caps and ignoring the appeal behind their jaunty routines.

The ballet public is like no other. Its enthusiasm is unbridled, its erudition scholarly.

"You remember Bobbie's entrechat six? What? Giselle, silly. . . . Yes, the one after Margot's adagio. Well, he only did a quatre last night. I know. Poor lamb. Must be so tired. . . ."

They come in their droves, these balletomanes. The siren wails, searchlights prick the sky, flying bombs roar along their appointed path, to crash and shake the earth: the queue is still there: expectant, garrulous, alive.

Dora of the Early Doors

The benevolent genius of the New Theatre is Dora. To thousands she has no other name. She wears a faded green coat: her figure is a little untidy now, and she is losing her teeth. She comes early, about 7.30, to begin her daily chore of sweeping and fumigating inside, then setting up her seats outside. By 7.35 the first balletomane has arrived. "Hullo, dear," she says. He salutes her, buys a ticket and disappears. Dora attaches it reverently to the first seat in the long queue. It is then sacrosanct, inviolate until claimed. People drift in and out, greet her, buy, go, until by 2 o'clock, there are no seats left. Dora enjoys her people. Not because of the dance, which she never sees, but because "they're all real, nice folk. Know how a body feels."

To a balletomane, there are only two kinds of people: dancers and non-dancers, with himself perhaps a pontifex minimus between the two worlds. This is strict enough, but it has nothing on Dora's great division of humanity, which for precision and austere grandeur, may rank with the great philosophical canons. "Well, what I say is, people are either nice to you, or they're not, and that's all you need to know about them." She disposes thus of rich and poor, great and lowly with a graceful finality.

Up the Stairs

At six-fifteen Dora opens the doors with a slightly negligent air. The queue



ROBERT HELPMANN in "Hamlet," a ballet which is conceived as a dream epilogue to the play. Hamlet in death finds no respite from the fearful problems of his life.



MARGOT FONTEYN as Odile in "Swan Lake," presented in London in its full three-act form.

breaks ranks and advances on her, a disordered phalanx. She whips round, arms outstretched like a crucifix, formidable, farouche.

"Nah then! Back you get! You can't all go up at once! 'Ave some sense now. Come on: in line there. That's it, Charlie. Come on, old dear. Thankin' yew." They obey. She gives them a look of swift appraisal, then raises her arm slowly. It is a tense moment. Not a sound, hardly a breath drawn. She drops it. The queue bolts forward like a tension spring released, each member of it sprung to carry him panting and cursing up the 87 stairs into the gallery where he collapses with the long wheezing sound of a bursting barrage-balloon. He sprawls a moment, listening to his heart. In the middle distance is the stage, which he can just see. Above, around, below, the crowd jostles, shouts, scimmages, exhales. He closes his eyes. "I'll be damned if I'll ever go through this again." But he will. To-morrow night.

What is it that brings them here in all weathers, war and peace, sickness and health? I can say only what I feel myself: that a fusion of colour, sound, and movement into a harmonious whole is an intensely rich and exciting experience.

A Young Art

As for the ballet itself, I prefer the modern idiom. I found Giselle slightly ridiculous and the full three-act Swan Lake tedious and even "corny" with its stylised periphrasis of speech, hand on heart for love, finger on temple for thought, and its concatenation of writhing hand movements to express more complex emotions. But ballet is a young art and its tradition no older. Sever the invisible umbilical cord which ties it to the past, and the fledgling dies quickly. It is nourished and fed by its tradition. Unfortunately the early choreographers

did not fully understand their medium, and how to render experience through it, and they have left us, in addition to the indispensable technical basis, much useless lumber. They conceived ballet as another form of narrative art, an extension of operatic and dramatic techniques. But the dance is not explicit enough for mere narrative. So the bare bones of the story were clothed in the exciting flesh of bravura technique; *les grands divertissements*. Diverting certainly, but distracting and irrelevant. Thus the second act of Swan Lake is merely a dance recital, brilliant and purposeless; the second act of Giselle an endurance test with which it is impossible to identify yourself except for a feeling of sympathy for the tiring ballerina. Where technique is uppermost, there can be no ultimate satisfaction.

No Depths of Divine Despair

Nor has this problem even yet been resolved. The modern choreographers certainly are far more masters of their craft; the perfection of Fokine's *Les Sylphides*, and Massine's *Le Beau Danube* was never approached last century, and in England now, de Valois, Ashton, and Helpmann are showing that their grasp of the medium is sure and exact, and that they are capable of mature work in it. But there are still many things which the ballet fails to "get over." Just as in opera, it is difficult to achieve any identity with the corpulent, ageing diva whose tiny hand is frozen, so in ballet there is something not quite *comme il faut* about a young woman dying delicately on the end of her slippers. There are no depths of divine despair in ballet, because long before these depths are plumbed, you either laugh, or feel defensively reverent and pious about it all, both equally ruinous to any atmosphere, any

illusion. I have found ballet gay, witty, charming, and occasionally pathetic, but never really moving or tragic.

—But Satire is Different

The choreographers have realised this, and either cut themselves clear of the formal tradition (Kurt Jooss, Mary Wigman) or work within the framework in a limited field. In England, this field has been satire: keen, but never mordant or bitter, satire of a peculiarly gentle kind. Social satire they do not attempt: the class struggle cannot be resolved *sur les pointes*, or with a *tourbillon en l'air*. No: this is something sly, pointed, elegant. The *finesse* of *Facade*, for example, originally a *verse suite* by Edith Sitwell, set to music by William Walton, and admirably extended into the dance by Frederick Ashton. It is witty, urbane, delightful. Or the superb clowning of *A Wedding Bouquet*, choreography by Ashton, music by Lord Berners, and a lunatic libretto by Gertrude Stein. Or again, the low comedy of *The Prospect Before Us*, and the strained nervous hilarity of *The Rake's Progress*. This is the authentic spirit.

But this does not overrule much good and serious work. I am thinking of *Quest*, another Walton-Ashton collaboration, a dance transcription of *The Faerie Queene*, Book I. Or Helpmann's *Hamlet*, with the florid Tchaikovsky music, not the play without the words, as so many believed, but a dream fantasy in the mind of Hamlet as he lies unconscious, near death, with his life passing fluid and timeless before his eyes. And there were others.

Ballet has not yet come of age, either in England or America. In Russia it may have, though I cannot speak of it with any authority. But, whatever its limitations, they can keep a place in the queue for me, anywhere, anytime.