

BARNSTORMING WITH BALLET

LAST October "The Listener's" London Letter described the formation by the Arts Council of the St. James's Ballet, a small company of 25 members (three of them New Zealanders) designed to take ballet to towns where a full-scale performance could not be given. Here now is an account of their adventures, written from the inside, and brought up to date, by the musical director, **TREVOR FISHER**, formerly of Wellington.

THE St. James's Ballet Company met with such success on its initial tour of three months that its engagement was extended for another four, and will be resumed next September. Although it is true that no ballet can exist in Great Britain without subsidy it sometimes happens that a company very nearly pays its way, thus performing a financial feat in an age when high costs handicap the presentation of even the most popular forms of art. The St. James's Company performed this feat, in spite of the extra expense involved in frequent moves from place to place.

But only the most drastic economy and the months of careful planning by the director, Alan Carter—in his own time—made it possible to keep the deficit to an unimportant amount. This economy, however, enforced by the limits of the guarantee, had obliged the young director and his assistants to rehearse a new company in a newly-created repertoire in the record time of five weeks. The first few performances were rough enough for dancers and musicians to feel embarrassed by the enthusiastic applause with which they were rewarded: although it must be acknowledged that touring in itself involves such strain that sheer endurance itself deserves some recognition. However long the journeys, however inadequate the hall, however imminent the opening of the doors, daily class was held and frequent rehearsals took place. While the stage staff grappled with inconvenient theatres, the company rehearsed in Y.M.C.A.'s, and while one pianist attended the other sought a piano in some other corner of the town, for the music—by Couperin, Chopin, Brahms, Bartok—involved virtuoso playing. The electrician alone required sometimes an hour or two to make serviceable the primitive lighting facilities, to light up the dressing-rooms, to connect the wardrobe mistress's iron, to give the pianists a lamp, as well as to provide the means for a complex lighting plot. Stage manager, assistant stage

manager (who was also a dancer), lorry driver and coach driver unloaded the heavy dimmer, the skips, other equipment and luggage (including a suitcase full of music)—hung the curtains—apparently in thin air, assembled the props, and when the show was over, took everything down, repacked the lorry, and sometimes drove on to the next town in the early hours.

SUCH barnstorming is not unknown to New Zealand companies, but judging by my own recollections the difference lies in the greater variety of scene and the extremity of the English locale. Halls ranged from jerry-built cinemas and converted barns to 17th and 18th Century theatres, from school assembly halls to sumptuous art centres, and stages varied as much.

So dirty and dark were some premises, so dismal the cupboard-like dressing-rooms, where as like as not there were no hooks on which to hang the elaborate costumes, no mirrors, no running water (or if running, seldom hot), that to me, playing Chopin's B Minor Prelude which introduced the ballet *Visions*, it was a miracle of illusion that at 7.30 the curtain rose, not on the disorderly carpenter's shop of the previous few hours, but on a calm scene, lit by a shaft of moonlight against a deep blue night-sky, a scene elegiac and romantically nostalgic. The audience, quite unaware, as it should be, of the prosaic adjustments, the unprosodic language, and the amount of perspiration that had evoked this picture, and which were still its mainstay, saw—quite simply—classical ballet.

NEVER more forcibly did this occur than at Newton Abbott, where, despite the ecclesiastical ring of the name of the town, we had to clamber, by way of a steep path pitted with sharp stones, to an ex-chapel that should by all counts have been called Hell's Kitchen. The stage was an unsteady platform—the dressing room, still littered with a previous company's rubbish, was immediately above—the place was gloomy and sordid. But County crammed in, the poetic vision appeared at 7.30, ovations and an excellent supper atoned for architectural sin. By way of contrast, we visited in the same neighbourhood Dartington Hall's Barn Theatre, shaped inside like a coffin (a very comfortable, streamlined one, the sort that it would be a pleasure to be buried in), and fitted with such elaborate lighting equipment that normally three men were required to work it, operating under the stage according to telephoned instructions from the *régisseur* in his box at the back of the audience. Our one electrician therefore had a certain amount of leaping about to do, since our lighting plot was a feature of the programme. It was here that the present director of



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music of the BBC heard us and came round afterwards to compliment the musicians and dancers.

EVERY theatre was unique: Gorleston's, which was also a circular dance hall; Preston's, a huge indoor swimming pool, which when covered in, seated 2,500; St. Ives' Guildhall, a beautiful modern concert-hall-cum-theatre with acres of space and any amount of up-to-date equipment; Newquay's Cosy Nook, perched on the ledge of a cliff; Bridgwater's Arts Centre, with its auditorium hardly larger than the stage; Whitehaven's Cinema, the floor of which dipped in the centre, so that the front stalls climbed upwards to the stage; Maryport's church schoolroom, where one changed in a washhouse across a yard slippery in the drizzling rain; and Hertford's picturesque Corn Exchange, with its one lavatory reached only through the ballerinas' dressing-room, and very popular in consequence.

"The piano's been tuned!" exclaimed the eager organiser, at nearly every place. So it had been. But the missing ivories, the squeaky pedal, the broken hammer, did not come under the category of tuning. Pianos were, however, nearly always good and in good order. They too, however, like the halls and the stages, ranged from top to bottom; from Britain's Biggest Bechstein (carted from Manchester to Preston at a cost of 16 guineas for the one show) to the minutest minipiano that two tall pianists have ever played a duet upon. At Runcorn the piano was so woolly that no "fixing" on earth would give its notes a recognisable pitch, but from the lumber of a back room we hauled out the carcass of a Brinsmead which, although sans a leg, sans music-rest, sans pedal, sans a few strings and many ivories, at least, produced a hard clear tone.

At Swindon there was a lovely Bosendorfer, somewhere else a first-class

Bechstein (with its back leg removed, so that, for reasons of space, its posterior might sit on a corner of the stage; this at least made for intimacy), and at some modern school a superb Steinway which, also for reasons of space, had to be placed so that the pianists had their backs turned to the stage—a position intolerable for accompanying ballet, and only mitigated by using the "organist's mirror."

MOST of the ballets were accompanied by one piano alone. In the first place we felt it to be inartistic to rearrange solo music by Couperin, Brahms, Chopin, and Bartok for two pianos. In the second, two pianos were seldom available, and if available, either too different in quality, or too cumbersome to be placed conveniently in the generally small theatres (placed centre in front of the stage they obstructed the view, and their lamps also spoiled the black-outs). One or two works were arranged for one-piano duet, and most of our overtures and interludes were duets (movements from symphonies and sonatas by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, marches and polonaises by Schubert, Hungarian Dances by Brahms). Critics, who in the provinces can spread themselves more freely than their London colleagues, either ignored the music, or dismissed it with the observation that accompaniment was by piano only (as if to say, we usually expect a symphony orchestra), or treated it on the same level as the ballet. Thus the *Wigan Observer* remarked: "Two programmes are being given, . . . the ballet music being supplied by two highly skilled pianoforte exponents, Trevor Fisher and Noreen Stokes. The former is the company's musical director, belongs to New Zealand . . . The music of Chopin, Bartok, Hawkins, Dvorak, Offenbach, Couperin, Brahms and Tchaikovsky finds its true expression in the work of the facile fingers of these two pianists." And the report then went on with the following gem of a sentence: "The dancers bring all the grace and variety of terpsichorean expression to their aid in the various ballets and divertissements, their gestures and posturings, their poise and their fine balance, being allied in a quite remarkable foot and toe work from the spin to the aerial leap."

THE repertoire of the St. James's Company includes: *Introduction to Ballet*, a balletic demonstration of class work with spoken commentary, written by Annabel Farjeon, with music by Donizetti arranged by Trevor Fisher; *Visions*, to music by Chopin; *Ritornel*, to music by John Hawkins (specially commissioned); *The Catch*, to Bartok's Rumanian Dances; *Variations*, to Slavonic Dances by Dvorak (these first five being choreographed by Alan Carter); *A Quiet Spot*, to music by Offenbach, arranged by Fisher, choreography and story by Pauline Grant; *The Beggar's Rhapsody*, to music by Brahms, with choreography by Angelo Andes; *The School for Nightingales*, to music by Couperin, choreography by John Cranko; the Pas de Trois from *Le Lac des Cygnes*; a Pas de Deux, with choreography by Stanley Newby, to movements from Bach's orchestral suite in B Minor arranged for piano duet by myself. On the present summer tour two

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