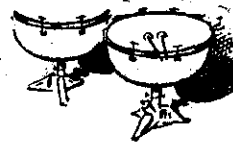


Notes on a Distant Drum



THERE'S a show running in London at the moment called "Expresso Bongo." It's quite a good show, a satire about the rise and fall of a rock-and-roll hero named Bongo Herbert. Somewhere about the middle of the second act, his manager sings a song which goes, "Nothing is for nothing, nothing is for free, join the human rat-race made for you and me." Now I don't want to suggest that the conditions for a professional musician in England resemble a rat-race. You just have to be quick to survive.

So, when I left the Royal Academy of Music, where I'd spent the last two years, I was very lucky indeed to get a job almost straight away with a travelling ballet company, as a member of the orchestra, playing timpani. I didn't meet any rats, but we did race all over England, from one end to the other. The orchestra had twenty-five players. Most of them were like me, fresh to the job, on the up and up.

We met for the first time on a Monday morning, and rehearsed the whole repertoire in three hours; we did a show that night, another rehearsal on Tuesday morning, and then the routine. Routine meant six evening and two matinee shows a week, and each Sunday we moved on to the next town.

It didn't take too long for Geoffrey, the conductor, to knock us into shape. We were willing, we were still enthusiastic. Besides, the dancers always had their own troubles at the beginning of a tour, so they didn't listen too much to the music, to start with, anyway. We played about fifteen ballets a week—Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday might be act two of *Swan Lake* and *Coppelia*; on Thursday *Giselle* and two or three short ballets; on Friday and Saturday *Sylphides*, *Nutcracker* and *Graduation Ball*. There were others as well, which were danced or not, according to the good or bad health of the various solo dancers.

All the ballets had their awkward spots for each of us: for example, I never could enjoy *Swan Lake* till the cellist had finished her solo in the famous *pas de deux*, after which we could all relax and carry on.

My own *bête noir* was a ballet called *Symphony for Fun*, for which the music was Don Gillis's *Symphony 5½*. This was a little more serious for me than *Swan Lake* was for the cellist: after all, hers was a solo passage and the orchestra generally managed to follow her, perhaps not all at the same time, but well enough. Mine was a question of rhythm. If I didn't get it right, everybody went out of step. This usually doesn't matter so much in the concert hall—but with dancers on the stage the effect could be chaotic. However, I mastered it after a while; in fact, I became so blasé that I could even play it with my eyes firmly fixed on the stage.

And that's a sore point with theatre musicians. Most pits are so built that the player's placed too low to see the stage, or has his back to what's going on. For example, imagine how frustrated you'd feel if you were playing in the orchestra for *My Fair Lady*; the public

have to book 12 months ahead to see the show—while you're on the spot, eight times a week, but you'll never see it.

With us, it wasn't quite so bad. There were always four of us who could keep an eye on the stage—the harpist, the conductor, the percussion player and me. The harpist sat on the extreme left of the pit, and usually outside it, because there was no room for her anywhere else: I sat on the extreme right. Because I always needed a lot of room for my three timps, I used to dash from the station on Sunday afternoons to the theatre where we were playing for the week, and stake out my claim in the pit. Then the timps would arrive, and I'd set them up, extending the legs as far as they'd go. This would need a tall stool, so I'd find the highest I could, and I'd be right for the week, with plenty of room, and a good view as well. Vic, the percussion player, sat behind or beside me, depending on the size of the pit; and as he always stood up to play, he was all right too.

After two or three weeks, we knew the repertoire well enough to spend most of the time watching the stage—in time we became quite good judges of a ballet dancer's form. For me it was a valuable experience, not without its lighter moments. There was the night when in the *Dance of the Little Swans* from *Swan Lake*, the oboe played the tune a bar too early, and stayed like that for the whole of the piece. The rest of the orchestra followed the oboe, quite easily—the difficulty was for the four sweating girls on the stage to lose, somehow, a whole bar for which they had steps. If they didn't manage it, they'd have to dance on for another bar after the music had stopped. After the usual guffaw at any mistake made by another player, Vic and I realised the true position, and watched the girls with some anxiety—the trouble was that dancing all the time, they couldn't come to an agreement about which steps to miss out, and confusion reigned for a few minutes. Luckily, dancers and orchestra did succeed in finishing together, to our general relief.

The same piece provided our bassoon player with an opportunity. As you know, that bit of *Swan Lake* begins with a couple of bars of oompah, oompah, before the tune starts—however, the unfortunate bassoon has to oompah right through to the end. Our bassoon became a bit fed up with this, especially as she had to play it three or four times a week. So to relieve her feelings she fixed a collection of wires, batteries and a light to her instrument, so that every oom was illuminated by the flash of a red bulb on top of her bassoon. The premiere of this proved very popular with the orchestra and dancers, and also, unfortunately, with the audience; so she had to remove it.

Pits and theatres varied greatly from week to week. We played in cinemas, which was tough on everyone; small stages and no dressing rooms for the dancers, insufficient equipment for the stage staff, and a cramped pit for us. On the other hand, we played in some very pleasant theatres, usually in the larger towns. My favourite was the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin. I've never

The first of a sequence of three talks broadcast from the YC stations by PETER ZWARTZ (right)



N.P.S. photo

played in a theatre which had more atmosphere, or which was so much on the performer's side. To begin with, there were sufficient dressing-rooms, including a bandroom for the orchestra—we didn't always get one in the smaller theatres. Lack of a bandroom meant no place to store instrument cases except in the corridors, where they'd be kicked or damaged by dancers in a hurry—no place to wash one's hands, or wash and hang one's clothes.

This aspect of touring looms larger after a couple of weeks away from home. But the Gaiety had a bandroom, a special bar for performers only, as well as the ones for the public and one of the most pleasant pits I've played in. It was separated from the audience by a brass screen rather like a monkey cage, and during the show, someone in the front row would always lean over and talk to us. It was just big enough to be cosy—we all had enough room, and still kept that feeling of physical contact which can be one of the more agreeable things about playing in an orchestra. And the theatre itself was full of fun, and friendly red plush and gilt, the tiny galleries at the top, the thick red curtain which swished, past my head five or six times a night, and best of all, the Irish National Anthem.

I don't know where our conductor had found this particular arrangement—in the fortnight we were there, I never once recognised the tune of it, and the orchestra members got quite used to the kind but puzzled enquiries of the public, who didn't recognise the tune either.

Other theatres which I can't forget are the Coventry Theatre, which had a shower, an unheard-of luxury. And the one at Bournemouth which had a mechanical pit—you came in through a door from underneath the stage; when everyone was on board, someone backstage pressed a button and the pit rose till the conductor gave a signal to show we were high enough. This one gave us a few happy moments, when the conductor and the man backstage couldn't agree on the right height—we sailed up and down for some time, in full view of the audience, till a compromise was reached.

On the whole, most of the pits were inadequate, even for our small orchestra—acoustically speaking, they were terrible. The sound either stayed with us, boxed in the pit, or drifted under the stage and into the curtains and drops on stage. However, the public wanted ballet, not music, and the dancers had no sympathy for us.

We had some very good dancers; Anton Dolin, who did a magnificent Albrecht in *Giselle*, and John Gilpin, perhaps the

best English male dancer today. I'll never forget his creation of the male role in a new ballet we did called *Witch Boy*. The story is based on a play called *Dark of the Moon*, which is the American folk legend of Barbara Allen. It's very interesting to watch a ballet being built from nothing, as I saw it with *Witch Boy*. The choreographer has to pass on his ideas to the dancers by demonstrating them himself—the method of notation of ballet steps is still in its infancy and our company didn't use it. So I watched the choreographer dancing a few steps on an empty stage without music, being imitated a few feet behind by the dancer selected for the role: all around was the scenery for the evening show, probably *Swan Lake*, or the forest glade of *Sylphides*. Endless repetition, till the body and feet of the dancer could remember the steps. Then on to the next sequence.

Later they danced to the music—in this case a very difficult modern score played on the piano. Gradually the whole company learnt their steps, tried it alone, and worked in ensemble. Still the ballet had no meaning for me, because nothing was rehearsed in its proper order. But the first time I saw it danced right through, I was tremendously impressed: more so when I watched the lighting rehearsal of the stage, a few days before the opening, and lasting till the early hours. The company learned *Witch Boy* in about six weeks, working on it three hours a day, beside their normal classes and performances. We gave the première in Manchester, and it proved a great success, especially for Gilpin, who danced a difficult role magnificently.

Our company was asked on one occasion to give a performance of *Sylphides* for one of the independent television companies. I don't think ballet's a success on television, not yet, anyway. There are so many technical difficulties to overcome. A ballet dancer's a very strong animal, capable of tremendous strength and stamina—we used to admire them from very close quarters in the pit. Even on a stage, with ordinary stage lights twenty feet above, they perspired prodigiously.

In the television studio, a dancer faces lights many times more powerful, and at much closer range. To add to his discomfort, he's hemmed in by the small floor-space on which he must dance. I saw quite a lot of ballet on TV, and later was associated with one ballet performance—and not once was it televised from a proper theatre stage. The last televised ballet I saw before leaving England was a performance of *Giselle*, with an imported Russian dancer, and stars of the Royal Ballet. They did as well as they could on a pocket-handkerchief stage—but the overall effect was ludicrous, and not fair to the dancers; the limitations imposed by lack of space were too great even for artists of their calibre to overcome.

Do you remember the film of the Bolshoi Ballet, in which Ulanova danced the Dying Swan? I'm sure you noticed, as I did, that a lot of the effect was lost by the cameraman who insisted in photographing the ballerina from close up. Later on, when I was working with the London Philharmonic Orchestra we played for a TV programme on which Tamara Tamanova danced the same piece. Exactly the same thing happened. Now I feel that ballet gains its effect from being seen in the mass. TV, like the cinema, uses the close-up a great deal, and sometimes with striking results—but not in ballet. The time they get round to affecting a compromise, that's when I'll enjoy watching ballet on TV.