
Review

Let's bring back Bourmonville!

by Katherine Kanter

During the week of May 18, this writer was fortunate enough to attend the classes given in the Royal Danish Theatre in the so-called "Danish" or "Bourmonville style," and to discuss with persons, some of them very old, who have devoted most of their lives to defending this beautiful and important method of dancing.

Few people believe today, that classical dancing has not always been such a bore, and as for the professors from the Bolshoi and Kirov Theaters, busy as bees teaching the "incomparable Russian style" throughout the world, they would not be so unwise as to bring up three awful subjects: first, how much they have done to stamp out the old French and Italian, or "Bourmonville" technique, second, how boring they are, and third, just how many high-spirited and intelligent students they have bored stiff and scared out of the profession! Nowadays, when one says "let us go to the ballet," one's friends shrivel under the nightmarish imagining of skeletal "feminine" figures, tricked out in garish clothing, their limbs clanking tensely across the stage, their hollow eyes staring ever ahead, not at the audience, but as into a looking glass suspended somewhere in space, swinging from one stiff pose to another like storks at feeding time, or perched seemingly endlessly on one noisy, squared-off pointe shoe. Comic relief is afforded by the variations of the gentlemen, who at least look as though they had eaten within the past year, hurling like bullets through the air, turning six pirouettes, four double tours-en-l'air, to disappear into the wings, lungs bursting. In the background, loud circus music.

How is it possible, that people like Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert "stooped" to write such a lot of dance music, if dancing is really just a chic form of body building?

Part of the answer will be found in Denmark.

Auguste de Bourmonville (1805-79), who founded the Danish ballet, was the most prominent figure in the Scandinavian opera houses of the century. He was born in Denmark to a French army officer, Antoine de Bourmonville, who, in

his son's words, "became enraptured with the Revolutionary principles of Liberty and Equality, and knew no greater hero than Lafayette." Antoine had his son, Auguste, trained both as a singer and dancer in the Paris Opera. Auguste returned to Denmark in 1830; besides choreographing a large number of original works, he set up a school, which continues to this day in the Royal Theatre, and which is one of our few sources of rather precise information as to how people danced at the time of Beethoven, i.e., before both music and dancing fell to bits.

The reason is that a student of Auguste, Hans Beck, wrote down in a notebook, albeit in a rather stodgy way, the classes as Auguste taught them, except for the important fact that the music has been lost, as Auguste played the violin himself during the classes, and sometimes also improvised. These classes were given without interruption for 100 years, until, in the early 1950s under the direction of the Russian professor V. Volkova, Bourmonville was "phased out."

As the people, like Hans Brenna, now 78 years old, who objected to this "phasing out," are still alive and kicking, and as they have been proven right by the rather dubious effects upon the Company and upon art of the last 20 years, Bourmonville is now being "phased back in" at the Danish Opera, luckily for Denmark, and for art.

How did people dance in Beethoven's time?

Well, first of all, as Bourmonville is a fair witness, they danced. They did not pose. They turned to the left, they turned to the right, they swept from one corner to the other, and they filled the depth and breadth of the stage with movement. They did not wave their arms around like Dying Swans or Dying Snakes, but kept their arms low, so they could follow through the action of the legs with the back and shoulders. They did not undulate the neck in some bizarre, opposed direction to the feet, like a cobra watching a mouse. The glance of the eyes, the head, simply followed through the movement, in the direction of the working foot. So simple, so logical, so harmonious!

The glance is very important. The enthusiastic glance, where the arms and shoulders underline the direction in which one is moving, the direction of the glance, gives the full weight and intention to the dance step; it is the idea of the love of the work. Whereas, when the Russians teach today, the eyes stare straight ahead, no matter where the head is turned, while the arms point off somewhere, away from the action.

Is there life beyond the looking glass?

Dear Reader, you may have seen photographs of a typical Russian ballet class or rehearsal today, with the entire company fixed with glazed eyes upon the looking glass which lines one of the walls of the room. They scarcely dare to change position, for fear of losing contact with the Holy of

Holies, the mirror. When they get onto the stage, they are truly bewildered!

There is another point: What the Russians call "épaulement" (the moving of the shoulders, French "épaule") today, means arbitrarily wiggling your shoulders about in a way that looks, alternately, chic or expressive, depending on the Mood you happen to be in. You then indolently dangle your arm like a dandelion stalk knotted about its flower, and this is called a "port de bras". . . . Today, the more flexibly you are able to shiver, or dangle, or entwine, the better you are said to be at épaulement. But what was called "épaulement" at the time of Beethoven, meant, simply, that the torso did not merely decorate the movement, but was part of it, underlining it and following it through, so that no matter which way you turned, there was shading, there was vigor and fullness, and as your arms were always rounded, no straight lines, no broken angles, the audience saw no dead spots, no flat patches, even when the entire *corps de ballet* had its back to the audience.

Can you imagine, what depth that gave to the picture as the audience perceived it, when there were 50 or 60 persons trained in that way, moving on stage?

No pansies, no poses!

I have not yet referred to the beauty of the "enchainements" (the chains of steps) themselves. During the classes which Mr. Fleming Ryberg gives to the Danish Company, one can observe the enchainements which Auguste de Bournonville choreographed for the daily classes. How sharp is the contrast with the usual lesson given by a modern Russian or Russian-trained professor! In the Russian class—let me be crude, but effective—the enchainement is a series of walking or running steps, into which surge like icebergs, strings of difficult, academic poses which are held as long as possible so as to Look Intensely Attractive, and of course, Difficult. To preserve the "purity of the pose," most "Russian" steps today, jerk in and out of the unstable fifth position, rather than flowing out of the fourth, as Bournonville did, intent as he was on preserving the purity of the trajectory, i.e. the curve in the air or over the ground. Meanwhile, the typical Russian accompanist will be thumping out the equivalent of Strangers in the Night on the piano as he stares out the window into the street.

One often finds, in the Bournonville enchainements, which can be as long as five minutes, two "*temps*" (systems of counting time): one more brilliant, one more lyric, instead of a square sequence of steps all alike unto themselves, and within the enchainement itself, some steps are very clearly more "resonant," while others are restrained, exactly as in the well-tempered musical system, some notes are "stronger" than others, like C and F#; to give a simple example, for the ladies to step up on point (on the tips of the toes), is the equivalent of a register shift in the voice, to the third or

highest register, and this is a highly "resonant" step. Now recall these terrifically athletic Russian enchainements, with the ladies jumping up and down on and off point the whole time like bunny rabbits: The accent is quite lost.

Many steps which are no longer to be seen on any stage, are commonly practiced in the Bournonville class, especially those steps which have exactly the function of the ornament on the note in music: *petite batterie*, i.e., the brilliant, jewel-like beating of one leg against the other, and not just *batterie* on one step, or in one direction, but in myriad steps and directions. I think these steps are no longer practiced, first, because they must look effortless, and they are not, and second, because the audience must really concentrate hard to see them; like the almost unseen shifting of the épaulement, they do not "make a big effect." These sparkling steps are cunningly set off against the larger, soaring steps, like the *grand jête en attitude* (a jump with the front leg fully extended, the back leg bent); if it is practiced with the "Bournonville" use of the arms, head, and eyes, as we have described above, one sees, in the mind's eye, the dancers soaring joyfully above the globe of the earth. The same jump, in the Russian style, with the arms stretched out, the eyes pointing somewhere between the arms, the center of gravity thrust forward, is simply an explosion of animal-like energy. It may have style, but it lacks beauty.

During this correspondent's stay in Denmark, which coincided to the 25th Festival of Danish Ballet, I saw two full-length compositions by Auguste de Bournonville: a very witty and clever reconstruction by Mr. Ryberg and Mr. Bruce Marks, of his *Abdallah*, and his famous *Sylphide*, the title role of which was danced by Miss Lis Jeppesen, one of the few individuals who is able not only to portray, but also to represent with her own self, the idea of love in every gesture.

If one is to judge, not only by these works, but also from the stated opinion of Bournonville himself, it is likely, that Bournonville was not, by any means, the greatest choreographer of the early 19th century. But only his works have survived, and what they tell us, is that what the cynical art critics today dismiss as a mere style, the "Bournonville style," is not a style at all, not a lot of tricks that one adds on to Russian technique. It simply means, this is how people danced, when they still knew how to dance. It is something which is not a question of taste, or opinion, it is something which was once the universal form of the art, and which is intrinsically superior in both form and content, to the sort of flat-footed nonsense that drives people away from the theater today.

Now the Danes, who, fortunately for the rest of the world, are under the mistaken but patriotic impression that they are doing something typically Danish, are engaged in an energetic effort to bring this art back to life. I think they should be enthusiastically supported by civilized people everywhere.