

# One of the greatest choreographers

by Katherine Kanter

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## **The Bournonville Ballets, a Photographic Record 1844-1933**

Compiled and annotated by Knud Arne Juergensen  
Dance Books, London, 1987  
179 pages, clothbound.

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Buy this book if you have any interest at all in pantomime, acting, or dancing.

Auguste de Bournonville (1805-79) is one of the greatest choreographers of his century; thirteen ballets by him that have been kept up by the Royal Danish Ballet are the only living proof of what ballet was like before the Ballets Russes de Diaghilev made it into a kind of Grand Cirque. Bournonville was trained in the Paris Opera in the 1820s, but today, in France, only the Russian school is taught, unfortunately.

This new book by Juergensen, brings together old photographs of Bournonville's ballets, including some that have dropped out of the repertoire, arranged in such a way that you can see for yourself what changes in interpretation have taken place over the last 150 years. It is exciting, for several reasons: First, you can see, taking into account the vagaries of old photography, just how much weight the old dancers gave to the expression of the face, the eyes, and the attention to detail, down to the hands. Nowadays, all over the world, the emphasis is on the legs and the body.

Second, you find out astonishing things. Can you imagine, a ballet, "Pontemolle," with "a series of dances depicting the different epochs in the history of Roman art, from Ancient Rome through the Renaissance, to end with the Rococo period"? Who would dare to do that today, unless he wanted to make a cheap pastiche? Bournonville dared it, and only someone who had carefully studied da Vinci and Raphael, as he had, could pull it off. It is also wonderful to see, how Bournonville dedicated one of his ballets to each nation: Norway, Flanders, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, and so on, using the national dances of each, and then building those dances up to the level of art dancing.

Juergensen was trained as a dancer himself, and now stages Bournonville ballets outside Denmark. His remarks are therefore more hitting than those by passive "critics." For example, what he says on mime is something that actors, opera singers, everybody in the theater profession, who wants to fight their own egomania, should think about:

"Bournonville's special mimic 'epaulement' . . . may look rather stylized to our eyes today, but in his own time provided the dancers with a language through which they could 'live' within the roles. This particular 'mime d'ensemble' . . . was expressed from *inside*, that is, through beautifully modeled groups, as opposed to the 'outward' conventional dramatic gestures directed at the audience which have become so predominant in today's performances. The Bournonville mime, in its origin, was given stronger dramatic and realistic accents. Bournonville's original strong accenting of this so-called 'dramatic truth' was soon considered a little old-fashioned in style." Juergensen shows through a series of photographs, how one character, from "Napoli," the street singer, has been turned from almost a tragic figure, into a clown, since the turn of the century.

In 1933, Harald Lander was named head of the Royal Danish Ballet, and, according to Juergensen, subjected Bournonville's pieces to such heavy changes and revisions that he decided to stop the tale told by the book at that date. Juergensen does not believe that Bournonville was such a 'light, comic' author as he is usually made out to be; he believes he had more depth. Nor does he seem to be too enthusiastic about Lander's changes.

This writer is not really able to judge whether his argument is all true, but he has made a very good case for it, and the photographs, as he has set them out, are very telling. I think he has published this book to help dancers get back to a way of thinking closer to Bournonville, and I think the book does succeed in doing that. It is a fine piece of work which should be bought and studied carefully by people in all branches of the theater profession.

## **Books Received**

**Kennedy, Oswald, Castro, Khrushchev**, by I. Yefimov, Hermitage Press, Tenafly, N.J., 1987, \$13.50 paper, 334pp.

**The Juarez Myth in Mexico**, by Charles A. Weeks, The University of Alabama Press, University, Ala., 1987, \$24.95 hardbound, 204pp.

**The Spanish Civil War as a Religious Tragedy**, by Jose M. Sanchez, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1987, \$22.95 hardbound, 272pp.