

## DANCE



David Anzellag

*Henrietta Muus and Lloyd Riggins, the two leading Bournonville dancers of the upcoming generation, in "La Kermesse à Bruges."*

on my left, who looks like a journalist, and ask what paper he writes for. "I'm no writer," he says. "I'm an automobile engineer from Germany. I found out about Bournonville in 1978, and ever since then I have been coming up here as often as I can. I even spend my holidays up here." Around us in the theater, a busload of sixty-three English balletomanes, fifty Germans up from Hamburg, a similar number down from Stockholm and Malmoe—not art freaks, but normal people, hit by the worst economic depression of the century, for whom this week means a considerable financial sacrifice. After *La Kermesse*, a German couple run up to me, a complete stranger, on the street, and grab me by the shoulders: "*Jetzt endlich verstehen wir warum Ballet ist Kunst!*" ("Now we finally understand why ballet is art!"), they exclaim.

Bournonville is a dramatist who can organize even people who think they hate Classical ballet. The effect on an audience of seeing all of his works in such a compressed time period, is very similar to the power which Shakespeare unleashes. His ballets are real plays, except that there is music, and there is mime, and there is also dancing. And the dancing part is important, but it is not the only thing; in fact, in pieces like *Far from Denmark*, there is only a little dancing in the final Act, and it would be just as beautiful without it!

You would not want to see a Bournonville ballet, if your only interest is to see one star doing his or her big variation. Since it is life that Bournonville presents—each person on stage, as in Shakespeare, having something important and different to do there—the audience is actually drawn into the play, instead of repelled and rejected outside the framework. Even his floor-patterns have an open-ended, living structure, so that if you knew what you

## Bournonville Festival in Denmark

March of this year being the 150th anniversary of choreographer August Bournonville's masterpiece *Napoli*, Frank Andersen, director of the Royal Danish Ballet, invited the world to a nine-day Bournonville Festival—the second in this century—where all the surviving works were to be performed.

I am sure that I speak for every member of the audience, every journalist (there were 140!), teacher, or historian present during that week, in saying that we were deeply moved, not only by the works themselves, which represent a truly Schillerian theater, but by the total commitment of everyone involved to reach out to the soul of the people.

August Bournonville (1805-1879) was, along with his schoolfriend and colleague Jules Perrot, the greatest choreographer of the last century. He was born in Denmark, the son of a Frenchman, Antoine de Bournonville. Antoine was an ardent follower of La-

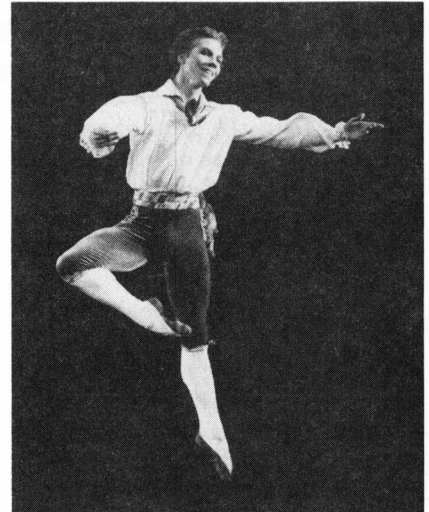
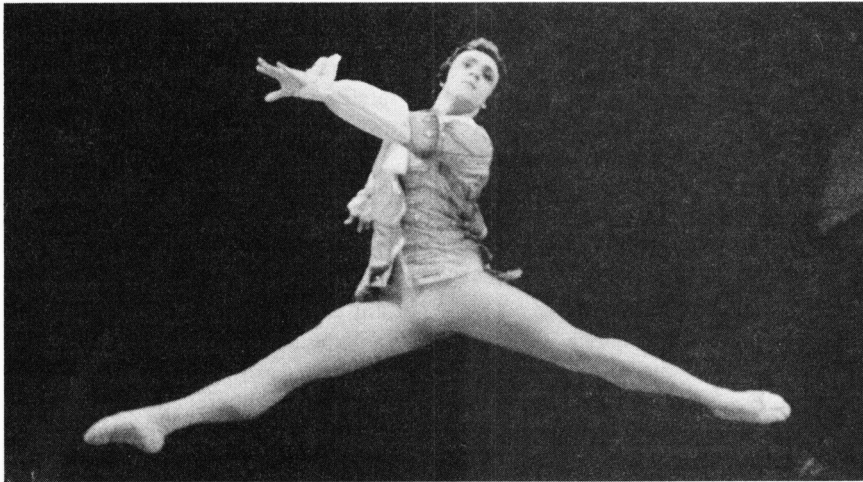
fayette; he became ballet master to Gustav III of Sweden, the king whose murder—dealt with by Verdi in the opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*—was a grievous blow to those Europeans who fought for the ideals of the American Revolution.

Along with Perrot, Bournonville studied at the Paris Opera in the 1820's under August Vestris, the great Milanese professor, and danced in Paris until around 1830, when he returned to Denmark to take charge of the Royal Theater. Like his friend Perrot, Bournonville was driven by an iron will to bring Classical ballet, as a dramatic form, up to the standard of the other muses. That he succeeded, was proven beyond all doubt by the tremendous week in Copenhagen, forging a complete theater which changes and uplifts anyone willing to open his mind to it.

Imagine the following scene. The curtain is about to go up on *Napoli*, its 150th anniversary. I turn to the man



**Anglo-Russian school (right):** *The spine is under enormous pressure due to the unnatural position of the hip-joint. The dancer's torso, like a Barbie Doll, looks simply stuck onto the legs, displaying the body as though in a glass show-case, with no relief or shading. Bournonville jeté (left):* *The powerful curve of the épaulement follows the spine's own S-shaped line, carried through by the eyes, the inclined head, and the leading hand. So difficult is the épaulement for today's Russian-trained dancers, that even in Denmark only a handful of ballerinas, notably Henriette Muus pictured here, have ever mastered it.*



were doing, you could almost walk up onto the stage and join the action.

In the Russian-style ballet, which is what most people think of as "Classical ballet," and which prevails everywhere except in Denmark, the basic structure on stage is simple, arithmetical multiples. It is "Cartesian," if you like, and anything outside—including you, the spectator—is a kind of disruptive force breaking up the picture postcard. There are  $x$  number of girls lined up like pawns on a chessboard, and  $x$  number of men, and they all do the same poor few movements, and that is the *corps de ballet*. Then the man and the woman in the leading roles will run on *en diagonale*, and they

**Anglo-Russian school (above):** *Although this jeté is restrained by 1990's standards—it is typical of Russian style: the agonised expression, poker-rigid neck, the arm stiffly thrust out with no follow-through from the spine, the equal importance given to face and crotch, the lack of direction or intention, in the jump, which seems to be over the dancer. Bournonville (right):* *Jeté (Lloyd Riggins, bottom) and contretemps (Johan Koborg, top), both from the Royal Theatre. The facial and neck ligaments and muscles are relaxed, the direction ("intention") of the jump is crystal-clear; light plays over the face and eyes, while the dancer is manifestly over the jump and in command.*

will perform basically the same limited number of boring steps as the corps, except that as soloists, they will have to jump higher and do it more often, and then they will, of course, get more applause.

In most of Bournonville's ballets, the drama is shaped around a conflict, a dissonance, which comes from inside the individual, who does not fit in with the silly townsfolk, as Gennaro in *Napoli*, or who has a tragic flaw, as James in the *Sylphide*. The former grapples with the problem and develops greatness of soul, the latter flees "into the forest," and is crushed like a broken doll. Of the ten or so works which remain, all except the *Sylphide* end joyously, but all of them, especially as they have been staged by Hans Brenaa, are only a thread away from tragedy.

### Principle of Relief

What is hard about dancing, is to work out the right technique to do this, to get away from the gross physical effects, in order to free movement to the greatest possible degree from constraints like gravity, which drag it down and hold it back from expressing ideas.

The Bournonville school is a technique—not a stylistic feature—which takes years of study to master if you have been trained in another school. It is neither in the footwork, nor in the phrasing, though that is problematic enough, that the fundamental difference between the Russian and the Bournonville schools lies. It is in the principle of relief, or shading, called in French *épaulement*. This is directly related to the techniques in painting which Leonardo called *contrapposto* and *chiaroscuro*.

This begins, appropriately enough, with your head, which is the heaviest single part of the body, leading a very slight rotation of the entire spinal column in the direction you are moving. So you never really dance *en face* (staring straight at the audience) in Bournonville, you are always in different gradients of the folding and unfolding of circular action, which, seen from the theater, is different degrees of

shading of the open or crossed forms (*effacé* or *croisé*).

That is why the eye never tires of looking at Bournonville's *enchainements* (chains of steps). To use a musical analogy which is perfectly appropriate, it is constantly modulating in lawful, but unpredictable ways, between major (*effacé*) and minor (*croisé*) keys. There is a natural, intrinsic principle of *chiaroscuro* which is common to Leonardo and Raphael, and which draws the eye into the action, rather than thrusting itself upon the eye. Furthermore, basing the center of gravity entirely on the head, as Bournonville does, makes the most sense physiologically, because it protects the spine from shocks.

In the Anglo-Russian school, if you want to jump, for example, you throw the arms and legs out first, and only when you finally land, do the head and the center of gravity somehow come back into agreement. If you have spent the first ten years of your dancing life in the Anglo-Russian school, your body has actually hardened into what German orthopedists call a *fehlhaltung* ("uncorrectable deformity"). Then, if you want to dance Bournonville, you have to unlearn it, and it is very hard. The whole feeling for the dance, the joyous movement of the torso following the steps, has been crushed out.

Hence the emphasis in today's prevailing ballet on the fifth position, so turned out that the feet are almost looking backwards, and on hyperextensions, where the leg is lifted *à la seconde*, and even *en arabesque*, to 180°—again, a pure figure of plane geometry which is so dead, it might as well be inorganic matter: for the hyperextension divides the human body strictly in half, instead of maintaining a complex series of proportions, of relations, based on the Golden Mean.

Plainly, life is more beautiful than death, and living, growing forms are more beautiful than cold, rigid, dead ones. That is the reason why the aesthetic in the Bournonville school is superior to the Anglo-Russian aesthetic, and *not* because his school is a few decades older!

### Beauty in Movement

The Royal Theater made available to journalists and teachers archive film, including the entire series of Bournonville Schools produced in 1967 by Danish television, and instructed by Hans Brenaa (1910-1988). I had already seen these remarkable films at the television station in 1990, and studied them again closely. Hans Brenaa, of course, had to work with dancers whose basic training was Russian, and in these films, only the late Miss Lander, Flemming Ryberg, and Arne Bech stand out. On a second viewing, two things hit me: Miss Lander does not dance very turned out, rarely closes the fifth position, dances often out of the third position rather than the fifth, and her fourth position is definitely an opened out third, *not* an opened-out fifth. All of these things today would be considered heresy, heinous flaws almost. And yet, her dancing is more graceful, more peaceful, her *épaulement* a more integrated part of every step, than in almost any dancer active today.

Secondly, in these Brenaa films, made when Flemming Ryberg was about twenty years old, you could already see his exceptional ability, the joyous freedom, but there was still a slight stiffness in the torso and neck from the Russian school. We then saw other films, made over the next fifteen years, where you saw how he ceaselessly worked on that problem in his own dancing. Now, twenty-five years later, what Professor Ryberg teaches is not a mere compilation of experience, facts, and details. He has so worked on the *épaulement*, on the placement of the head, that what he now teaches seems as new and spontaneous, as if it had been composed in that moment: a re-thinking of what he has learned, closer still to what Bournonville calls the eternal, natural laws of beauty.

Because the beauty of Bournonville is in the movement, and in the drama, it is not necessary for a dancer to be physically beautiful, as it is in the Russian school, where it is all statuesque posing. The most astonishing example of this is one of the stars of the Royal Theater, Heidi Ryom, who is not a



young woman, and was never, even in her youth, pretty. I have been coming up to Denmark for six years now, and every year, Miss Ryom has broken out onto a higher level, not only refining her technique to the point, that the words ethereal and immaterial are not adequate to describe her—in *The Conservatoire*, during the Festival, she was, frankly, beyond applause—but also,



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stage, it is a public event, and you, the dancer, have to communicate to the audience what you are communicating to your partner. You are not actually representing the love between two individuals; that storyline is the metaphor to get across the idea of love which is greater than the private and the particular, the individual, as such—important though that be. That



Bettmann Archive

**Anglo-Russian school (right):** Again, the pose is restrained, for today the raised leg would be smartly pressed against the ear. It remains a hyper-extension nonetheless, the beauties of which might be better appreciated in a red-light district. The torso is completely flattened, the port de bras purely decorative, the figure stares woodenly ahead—a display dummy. **Bournonville school (left):** The arms are raised to shoulder level only for a compelling aesthetic or dramatic reason, as here, in the gesture of listening. Note the extremely expressive eyes, and the magnificent bow-like curve of the port de bras. (Lis Jeppesen, the leading Bournonville ballerina, as the Sylphide.)

pushing herself to an ever greater emotional freedom.

Between the idea of *pas de deux* in Bournonville or in Jules Perrot, and *pas de deux* in most other authors, there is a startling difference. It is not only the fact that the man and the woman both dance, instead of the man just carrying the woman around. For Bournonville, there is no point to put a *pas de deux* on stage if you want to look at sex, because voyeurism is a serious mental illness. Once it is on

is why Beethoven's *Fidelio* is a great opera, because there is a great conflict, and not an operetta about young love!

The quality of love in a Bournonville *pas de deux* is just such a fearless joy in the beauty of the world; but as a dancer, to transmit that, you have to struggle with yourself, against narcissism, against the craving for applause. To dance like that, you have to be like that yourself, you cannot fake it; which is why I believe more and more that a real Bournonville dancer, like the real

interpreters of the characters Giselle and Albrecht, has to be a special kind of person, with great inner humility and respect for life.

Lloyd Riggins, the young American who has been studying in the Royal Theater for six years, excels in the *pas de deux* and in ensemble work. During a little demonstration in the old Court Theater, he and Henriette Muus danced a fragment from the *Flower Festival at Genzano*. Although often danced, this piece is especially tough because Bournonville used a musical score far too sickly, too melodic, for the dense choreography, especially in the *adagio* section, which leaves the dancers very exposed without a score to lift and carry you. Against these obstacles, Miss Muus and Mr. Riggins, ideally suited, made time stand still.

In the *adagio* section, there is a part where the woman looks at the man out of the corner of her eye, and then drops it when he catches her eye. Most dancers just make a quick movement of the head, and then drop the eyes. People laugh, but nothing more. As this pair have danced it, it was not only witty, but very moving; if the woman waits until the ray of light from the man's eye strikes the ray from her own eye, and only then casts down her eyes, the tension is very great, and the audience gets the idea of love, beyond flirtation. Like a gust of fresh wind sweeping the stage, the same pair was unforgettable leading the Ballabile in Act I of *Napoli*.

It is now four years since Hans Brenaa died. Then, prophets of doom all over the world predicted, or should I say gloated, that this would be the end of Bournonville, and with that, the decline and fall of Classical dance from sheer boredom. They are proven wrong. It is precisely in the midst of war and depression that people look, not for escapism—because that is not what Bournonville offers—but for something which can give them more depth, more inner strength to face reality, than the lies and pap served up by corrupt politicians and the corrupt mass media.

—Katharine Kanter