

the switch had been happily enconced on the operator's leather seat behind a \$30,000 camera on a \$15,000 boom, running it up and down, back and forth, aiming it at first one relative and then another through the little glass peephole in the back. Whether he knew the purpose of the machine or was simply playing at its being some sort of gun we shall never know, because the family departed early next morning, tidying up behind them and hanging all the clothes back on the racks. They were never heard from again.

But the rest is history. Sam Botlick has always vigorously claimed that he personally wrote, cast, and directed the whole production and had been saving it as Hollywood's answer to de Sica and the rest of the arty folk-movie gang in Italy and France. But it is known to a select few that while flying over Southern California one February day en route to Honolulu in the private jet transport he had named *Miss Video*, Sam, purely out of a whim, had his pilot put down on the weed-grown Burbank airport and trekked all the way to his old studio just to look things over and shed a nostalgic tear. He found the footprints in the dust of Stage 8, he found the rabbit bones neatly stacked in a tin can outside the door, and he saw that the big camera had been tampered with.

A LITTLE judicious cutting here and there (the lovers by the sea had to be lap-dissolved into the dance act because the fiancé patted the girl's bottom), a little reorganizing of sequence, dialogue dubbed in, a spot of mood music to accompany the guitar—and every movie house in America that hadn't been converted to a parking garage reopened to capacity crowds. Even the French and Italians confessed that for sheer depth and realism salted with homespun whimsy it topped their best efforts. John McCarten in the *New Yorker* said Hollywood had come of age. The westbound Super Chief had to run in six sections.

Sam Botlick has made many movies since. Although he has come close, he hasn't yet been able to achieve the effect of his original classic, but it doesn't matter, really. His immortality is assured.

Marxist Musicale: The Calf-Length Tutu

PATRICIA BLAKE



THE Stanley Theatre in New York and other movie houses devoted to the showing of Soviet pictures have long been treating their meager audiences to one of the most enlightening spectacles of our time: the systematic destruction of Russian creative life by the state. A stunning example was recently provided by the movie "Concert of Stars," a multimillion-ruble mishmash of the latest in "proletarian" ballet, symphonic and choral music, folk dancing, patriotic songs, and opera.

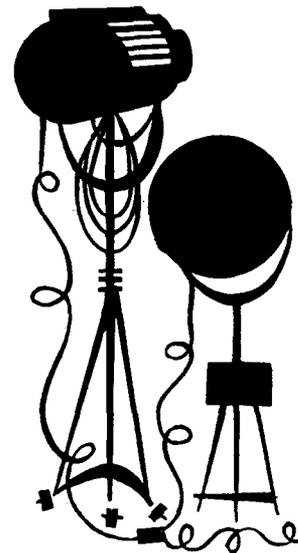
Clearly, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R., in its battle to make movies "a weapon of Communist education," has gone all out on the cultural front for the edification of the Russian masses and the envious admiration of the "oppressed peoples of the West," whose cultural opportunities are limited, the Committee says, by such perversions as modernism, experimentalism, and cosmopolitanism of the middle class. In any case, Russian moviegoers have had exactly the reaction one would have expected: In Russia since the war, more foreign movies than Soviet productions have had to be circulated in order to keep movie houses open and make up the box-office deficits.

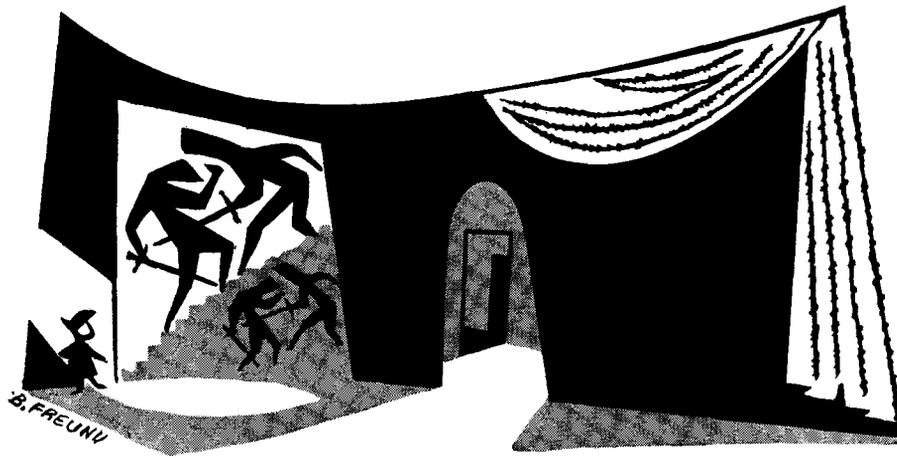
The fact is that this potpourri of culture—the scraps of ballet, the leftovers of folk art, the odds and ends of songs to Lenin and Stalin—which the Central Committee has served up in "Concert of Stars" has about as much appeal to a proletarian as the sixty-hour week. This

movie and others like it represent nothing less than the bad taste of the most notorious Philistine on earth—the state. Only at brief moments does "Concert of Stars" give a sense of authenticity, of a creativity drawn from the great artistic traditions of Russia. Those moments are both heartbreaking and heartening. A fine performance of nineteenth-century opera and the high quality of individual dancers, singers, and instrumentalists testify that the performing artist has managed to survive in the Soviet Union, while the creative artist is paralyzed by the taste, the whims, and the ideological needs of the bureaucrat.

Dancers and Singers

Take the case of the Soviet ballet, hailed as one of the greatest of the people's achievements. In a country where any kind of artistic experimentation and innovation is forbidden, Soviet ballet may be diagnosed as a clinical case of arrested develop-





ment. It is still the ballet of the Czars, or rather, since no art can remain static, it has deteriorated into a tasteless travesty of the past. All that can be said about Soviet ballet today is that the technical brilliance of the dancing is about the same as that of the New York City Ballet and the Sadler's Wells Company.

But the quality of ballet depends on the unity of several factors: the music, choreography, and the sets, as well as the dancing. The sets that are seen in "Concert of Stars" consist largely of papier-mâché mountains and fountains, and the choreographers who worked on Chopin's *La Valse* and Glazunov's *Raymonda* undoubtedly must have been hard of hearing.

The music serves only as background for singularly dull *pas de deux*, much as Muzak serves the dinner conversation of a married couple on their Saturday night out. The excerpt from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* (a bonus given on the same program with "Concert of Stars") is particularly saddening. The lovely ballet score of one of the greatest composers of our time—so often excoriated and purged by the Soviets in his lifetime, so often forced to expiate his "bourgeois" errors in composition by writing hymns to Stalin—is the setting for the most wretched goings-on in Verona.

The choreographer saw fit to transform the *corps de ballet* into what appear to be Veronese *Lumpenproletariat*, dragging its feet across the stage. Even the famous ballerina Ulanova seems more frustrated in her activities by the length of her skirt than by the absence of

Romeo. Indeed, the spirit of any audience might be dampened by Comrade Ulanova's calf-length tutus, worn in conformity with the prudish dictates of the Central Committee.

SOVIET OPERA performance is quite another story, at least as regards classical opera, where both the best and the worst features of the Russian tradition seem to have been maintained. "Concert of Stars" offers excerpts from two masterpieces of nineteenth-century opera, Glinka's *Ivan Susanin* and Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*. Both are what the Central Committee should despise, truly cosmopolitan works in the sense that they derive from the best of western musical traditions. And both are genuinely popular works; since their first performance neither has ever left the programs of Russian opera houses. Despite pressure from the Central Committee, which likes librettos about the Five-Year Plans and is crazy about folk tunes from Minsk, the Russian people still prefer the poetic imagination of a Pushkin, the universal lyricism of a Tchaikovsky, and the elegant majesty of a Glinka to all the folksy Marxist drivel that passes for modern opera in the Soviet Union.

The artists heard in "Concert of Stars" sing the great music of the past with passion; their voices are nothing less than superb. And if the vocal textures tend to be over-luscious, let it be said that the Central Committee has no monopoly on vulgarity, and that a particular kind of hearty bad taste in singing has always been a Russian forte. Despite this flaw, no one, proletarian or bour-

geois, could be unmoved by the peasant hero Ivan Susanin's beautiful aria to the dawn, sung in a bass as virile and massive as his great beard, or by Herman's heart-rending seduction of poor Lisa in *The Queen of Spades*.

Shostakovich Obeys

The rest of the picture is devoted to the presentation of the patriotic and folksy arts, so dear to the heart of the Central Committee: an Armenian sword dance to the tune of Khatchaturian's *Gayane*, a dozen tail-coated gentlemen strumming balalaikas in a concert hall decorated with six crystal chandeliers, folk dances and songs of the various Republics, a hymn to Lenin, and an array of lady soloists wearing "People's Artist" medals where an American producer would have put a plunging neckline.

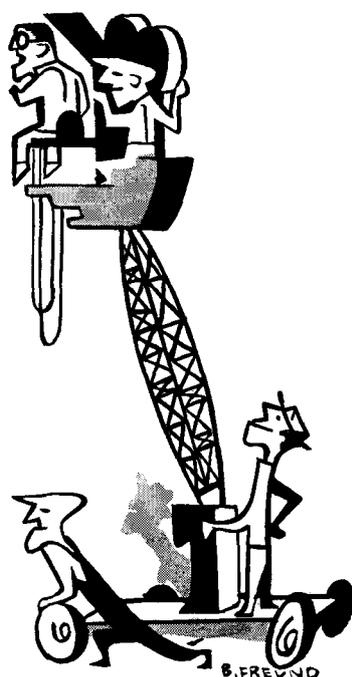
All this is very interesting, and the fuss the Central Committee makes about the beauties of Russian folk art is perhaps justified; the music is quaint, the dancing lively, and the young people who perform are marvelously handsome. Yet the knowledge that these qualities have not prevented that same Committee from persecuting and liquidating entire national groups in Russia, and the fact that the vicious purge of modern musicians in 1946 commanded composers to drink at the fountain of folk art—or else—add nothing to the pleasure of the evening. And indeed, one of the results of this command, Shostakovich's *Song of the Forests*, makes a suitable grand finale for the picture. It is hard to believe and tragic to contemplate that such a gifted musician could have composed a work so cheap and so primitive as this absurd oratorio about little Red Pioneers who chop wood in the forests to the greater glory of Stalin.

As for the quality of the photography in "Concert of Stars," this movie is just another example of the mediocrity resulting from the curtailment of interchange of ideas with foreign experts—i.e., "servility to foreign culture." Soviet film techniques today are clearly far behind those of Europe and America. What was once the most interesting cinema in the world—the flowering of the 1920's and 1930's which produced classics

like "Potemkin" and "October"—has now been reduced to the barren steppes of the Bureau of Agitation and Propaganda.

ALL THE Soviet films we see today are evidence that a totalitarian state can and must establish its tyranny over any activity where the word or image can conceivably be said to reach man's mind. They testify that the tyrant, by definition, both despises and fears the intellectual, the artist, the "egghead." "What I do not understand is dangerous to the State," the words of the Russian satirist Saltykov, might well be the motto of the cultural dictators of Russia and of all those self-appointed censors the world over who make of their ignorance a patriotic virtue.

As Hollywood might say, "Everybody should see this picture." Everybody, that is, who has a measure of respect for the artist and sufficient imagination in these days of hatred to conceive the indignity suffered by the individual Russian. For these moviegoers, the sound of a man's voice singing, the movements of a graceful dancer, and the hands of a young violinist will speak of the creative vitality of a people who somehow, in those secret places of the mind and heart where art is nourished, have resisted the onslaughts of the tyrant, the bureaucrat, and the Philistine.



Palm-Wine Drinkard

Searches for a Tapster

ERIC LARRABEE

IN WEST AFRICA there is only one African novelist, as far as I could discover on a recent trip there, who has begun to write of his own volition in a manner that might be called African. Politically and psychologically, Africans enjoy a larger degree of freedom in West Africa than elsewhere on the continent, but in the arts and letters their development is not without difficulties.

The British are, by and large, indifferent to the African culture except as a museum piece, and the French, while more sympathetic, alternate between encouraging Africans to write and paint and being discouraged by results that are insufficiently Gallic. The enterprising African is much more likely to go to work for the government, where he can put on glasses and necktie and safely harass the white man with the white man's own weapons of legalism, bombast, and chicane.

But in Nigeria there is at least one African who has by-passed this adolescent stage in the growth of Africa into modern society and gone on to something altogether different.

His name is Amos Tutuola. His first book, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, was published in England by Faber in May, 1952, and had already achieved a passable success in Africa by November. It will be published here by the Grove Press.

The Palm-Wine Drinkard was on sale in the largest department store in Lagos, and also at the British Council in Accra, Gold Coast, where the original drawing of the dust jacket had been framed and hung on the wall. At the University College of Nigeria at Ibadan, I encountered British intellectuals who thought little of the book, but they

had at least felt compelled to read it. Perhaps they were a little put out at the fact that the college bookstore had received letters from the author urging them to keep it in stock.

Many Trees, Many Friends

The Palm-Wine Drinkard is a work of fantasy, written in English but not an English of this world. The style is unschooled but oddly expressive.

(The publishers reproduce a page of the manuscript to show the minor nature of their editing.) The story elements are almost wholly African, and few European derivations are apparent—unless the author was exposed to *Pilgrim's Progress* in childhood and has since forgotten about it. Here is the opening paragraph:

"I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life. In those days we did not know other money, except COWRIES [seashells], so that everything was very cheap, and my father was the richest man in our town."

The palm-wine drinkard's father engages for him an expert tapster, a man to climb the palm trees and tap the wine, and gives him a tree farm nine miles square, with 560,000 palm trees. "So my friends were uncountable by that time and they were drinking palm-wine with me from morning till a late hour in the night."

One day the tapster, working at the top of one of the tallest trees, "fell down unexpectedly and died at the foot of the palm-tree as a result of injuries." The drinkard and his friends bury him there, but afterward "my friends did not come to my house again, they left me there