

# DANCE

Walter Terry

## Regional Treasures

There she was, a five-year-old with sausage curls, beaded eyelashes, a scarlet mouth, and a short glitzy costume. She wore toe shoes, and as she staggered onto *pointe* she sang "My lips were made for kisses." This was a fairly typical number in a typical dance school recital of some 40-odd years ago when I began my career as a dance critic. The poor child looked as if she were being trained for bordello life rather than for ballet. But in those distant days there were few national ballet companies of any standing outside of New York City, and the robust National Association for Regional Ballet, with member companies and schools from coast to coast, was yet to be born. Dance junk has not disappeared entirely, but the regional ballet movement has spectacularly elevated standards of instruction and taste.

Recently, in fact, the well-publicized performances of more than a dozen national companies in two special series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Brooklyn College have shown New Yorkers that American ballet is greatly diversified. Some elitist balletomanes and critics have been shocked by the healthy, hearty, and often husky vigor of, say, Ballet West from Salt Lake City or the oldest of the country's professional ballet companies, the **San Francisco Ballet**, founded in 1933. Michael Smuin's *Song for Dead Warriors* for the San Francisco Ballet, for example, shocked some sensibilities. It was not a

pretty or even prettily sad picture of the plight of the urban American Indian. Using multimedia, fantastic props, and harsh dance-acting, it came out punching and stabbing. This was ballet, and powerful ballet, but it had nothing whatever to do with Balanchine, Ashton, or the neo-classicists.

The regional ballets that came to Brooklyn, though usually smaller than

and choreographers who have gone on to international success. Every balletomane knows the wonderfully versatile and winsome Rebecca Wright, soloist with the American Ballet Theatre and director of her own ballet ensemble, or the Duell brothers, Daniel and Joseph, valued members of the New York City Ballet; and Donna Wood, one of the major star attractions of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Dayton's "Miss Jo" also trained Stuart Sebastian who, at a precocious 14, created a full-length ballet for her company. Sebastian went on to become a principal dancer with Washington's now-disbanded National Ballet, partnered such ballerinas as Dame Margot Fonteyn and Violette Verdy, and ultimately quit dancing (at 23) for a career in choreography. As one of the most gifted of America's young (he's just turned 30) choreographers, he has created works for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, the Hartford Ballet, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Joffrey II, the Metropolitan Opera, and the Munich (Germany) Ballet Days, an international festival where he scored popular and critical triumphs.

Most recently he staged for Dayton a full-length *Sleeping Beauty*, to the Tchaikovsky score, with his own choreography. There were elaborate and yet lightly charming decor and costumes, rather like illustrations for a child's book of fairy tales, by Mimi Maxmen, and choreography, classical



Janus and Morgan of Joffrey II in Gray Veredon's *Unfolding*

the professional companies in personnel and more modest in production, are equally important to the American dance scene. The Atlanta Ballet, founded by Dorothy Alexander, spearheaded the movement in the South in 1956. "Miss Dorothy" remains its patron saint.

In the North, the veteran **Dayton Ballet**, headed by Josephine and Hermene Schwarz, has produced dancers

in step yet spiced with originality of pattern and danced acting (replacing the old traditional mime), of a high order. It broke all attendance records in the long history of the Dayton Ballet and it received standing ovations at all performances. A few old fuddy-duddies objected to "tampering" with the Marius Petipa choreography of 1895, completely oblivious of the fact that this ballet and other classics have been altered, restaged, and rechoreographed continuously over the decades. To mount a successful *Sleeping Beauty* for a group of only 15 very young dancers constitutes a minor triumph. To that I will add the fact that it is the only *Sleeping Beauty*—including those by Britain's Royal Ballet or Moscow's Bolshoi—without a yawn in it!

In addition to the big professional

"seconds" are training grounds for their "firsts," but they have immense importance in their own right.

Ingenuity and resourcefulness are essential to the success of a low-budget second company. Last summer, for example, the **Boston Ballet Ensemble** had a budget of \$750 for a program consisting of *Holberg Suite*, *Le Corsaire* (pas de deux), *Donizetti Variations*, and a brand-new ballet, *Sailin' Aweigh*, by the 14-member group's acting director Tony Catanzaro (a principal with the mother company). Catanzaro managed to costume his ballet, a tribute to 350 years of American sailors, for \$600.

For *Sailin' Aweigh*, his first choreography, Catanzaro found inspiration in sea chanties, in paintings of seamen in raging storms or returning to their

opportunity outside of Dayton through Joffrey II) points out that every year she draws about 12 dancers (and four back-ups) from various regional ballets for her **Joffrey II**. So beautifully does she train them as performers in excellent repertoires ranging from the classic through modern to jazz, that she loses them swiftly to the Joffrey Ballet itself. Last year, all 12 moved up into Robert Joffrey's first company. This year, Joffrey II is totally new in personnel, including a personable young dancer named Ron Reagan, promising in those ballets with a show-biz beat or with romantic airs.

With Maria Grandy, her associate, Bliss heaves a sad, but curiously proudful sigh each year when she loses most, if not all of her dancers to possible fame and fortune with the Joffrey Ballet

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*Sleeping Beauty* at the Dayton Ballet, a regional company that has produced dancers and choreographers of international renown.

national ballet companies and the many regional ballets, the American dance scene is enriched by "second" or junior companies. The American Ballet Theatre has its first-rate Ballet Repertory Company, directed by Richard Englund; there is an Ailey II; the Boston Ballet has its Boston Ballet Ensemble; and perhaps the most famous of these ballet babies is Joffrey II, directed by Sally Brayley Bliss. All of these

waiting womenfolk, in visits to the U.S.S. *Constitution* (*Old Ironsides*), in Gene Kelly dance sequences and, believe it or not, through the Pentagon, where he managed to reach the chief musicians of the U.S. Navy Band! The result was a blockbuster ballet.

Sally Brayley Bliss (who, incidentally, discovered choreographer Stuart Sebastian at a regional ballet festival and gave him his first choreographic

and other companies around the world. With a captivating smile for which she is famous in the ballet world, she says ruefully, "The only people who don't move up and on are myself and Maria!" But onward and upward moves the dance in America because of dedicated professionals like Bliss, "Miss Dorothy," "Miss Jo," and all of those who serve not ballet on Broadway only but, rather, Ballet USA. ■

Stanley Kauffmann

## Piaf in Bits and Pieces

One of the great romances in Western history is the theater's love affair with itself. Since Aristophanes, the theater has been addicted to plays about how important, wonderful, and glamorous it is; and as the centuries have twirled along to our day, that reflexive love has embraced entertainers as well as actors. The latest "affair" is **Piaf**, a play by Pam Gems about the French singer who was in fact a genius of pop. *Piaf* is also one more of another curious breed, the show that asks a performer to perform like a famous star: Bessie Smith, Fats Waller, and the Marx Brothers are others who have

lately had their impersonators on Broadway.

Pam Gems is English and has had one previous play produced here, off Broadway at the Manhattan Theater Club, *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, which I thought fairly static. It meant to show the struggle for liberation of four young London women today, and three of them stayed the same throughout. *Piaf* is certainly not static; and show-biz adulation though it is, it too seems designed to show a woman's struggles in a world dominated by men. Its first trouble is that, as an example of a woman's struggle against male domi-

nation, Edith Piaf is a poor choice. She had gifts that would have made her outstanding in an Amazon society, and she was so active sexually that it's hard to think of her as being exploited sexually by males. True, early in life she was reputed to be a prostitute, a male-oriented trade, but there's no indication that she was much less promiscuous when she wasn't for hire.

The play's muzziness continues. *Piaf* was first done in London—by now almost a routine comment for serious plays on Broadway—the star is English, and the dialogue, which is gamy, is in Cockney to suggest the street argot of

Paris. At first this seems even more apt for America because it makes the play sound foreign at the same time that it's comprehensible; but then Piaf sings most of her many songs in French, which leaves us with madly mixed conventions.

The script itself is a surfboard ride over a complex life: from the streets of a working-class quarter to cafes, then stardom and adulation and international tours and international friends, through husbands (several) and lovers (who's counting?), to a finish in drugs and disease at the age of 48 in 1963. (I read her biography some years ago and was especially struck by the fact that, even toward the end, racked and maimed, she drew young men both in

MARTHA SWOPE



From left: Zoë Wanamaker, Lewis Arlt, Jane Lapotaire, and Michael Ayr in Pam Gems's *Piaf*.