Nov-2017

Book Review: Wardance

Jenifer Sarver
Bridgewater State University, jsarver@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol36/iss2/12

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

There is a famous war-era quote attributed to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. When it was suggested that he cut government funding for the arts to support the fight against the Nazis, his fabled response was: “So, then, what are we fighting for?” Though this quip cannot be verified, the determination of Britons to fight to live according to their values and their steadfast refusal to be reduced to mere existence—even during the psychological unease of the “Phony War” and later the genuine horror of the Blitz—is both well documented and widely remembered.

Classical ballet has been seen as a “civilizing” force as far back as its inception in the Florentine ballrooms under the watchful eye of Catherine de Medici. In the early 20th century, it became powerful propaganda in the Soviet Union, which used both ballet and folk dance to bring the illiterate peasant population under the hopeful mantle of socialist realism. Later, ballet and, to a lesser degree, modern dance became tools of Cold War international exchange. In all cases, plots and programs were carefully designed to serve the “party line” of whomever was presenting the work. What makes ballet’s rise in wartime England particularly interesting, then, was its apolitical nature; instead of ultra-patriotic ballets that took political stances in the Soviet Union later in the century, it was the classical works that were presented to the public in England.

Karen Eliot’s exquisite research *Albion’s Dance: British Ballet during the Second World War* provides a portrait of an important aspect of this time. Odd though it may seem, classical ballet actually flourished in Britain during the Second World War, and when peace arrived in Europe, English ballet found itself in a secure and respected place amidst post-war austerity. Eliot argues that despite the horror that reigned, the story of wartime ballet was more than a struggle of beauty vs fear. In retrospect, the war years provided a “discrete time period during which the British ballet formulated its identity as a classical art form after the eclecticism and choreographic experimentalism of the 1920s and 1930s, and describes a moment in time when ballet flirted with populism in spite of the pressures exerted by the dyed-in-the-wool balletomanes to guard its elitist status” (3).
who worked with equal dedication, but less public prominence. These include sensitive portraits of Cyril Beaumont, and his legendary bookshop and backroom on Charing Cross Road, and Arnold Haskell, the fierce defender of ballet as an elite art, and his gradual conversion to the idea that British ballet was worthy of the affection and respect accorded his beloved Russian ballet. Eliot also assesses the work of P.J.S. Richardson, editor of *Dancing Times* and author of some of the most important primary-source material that exists instead the costumes, sets and colorful plots that delighted British audiences used to traditional pantomimes? Mona Inglesby’s International Ballet exemplified the populist view. Despite her youth (she began the company in her early 20s with family money), and her scanty preparatory training, her company was hardly an amateur affair. Nikolai Sergeyev (1876-1951), the famous former Imperial Ballet master who had smuggled notations of the great Russian classics to Paris during the Revolution, staged Act II of *Swan Lake* for the international Ballet in 1941, and in 1942, a full-length *Giselle*. Inglesby’s company was dedicated to producing ballet as spectacle, with full costume and sets, and bringing it to all of Britain, not just the London elite. It contributed enormously to the affection for ballet that developed among the British middle classes.

These performances were not only a balm to war-beleaguered civilians, however. Ballet evenings were provided for both troops and war workers, and in London, a series of “lunchtime” ballets were produced at 1:00 pm in the cellar of a small theater. These became so popular that management soon added performances at 2:15 and, later, another at 3:15. Though the freelance dancers were unionized, there was little respite for these victims of artistic overwork; in 1941, women without young children were “called up” to contribute to war work. Performing professionally allowed these women to defer the call, which contributed to an eagerness to carry on with artistic work, however arduous. But things were far more difficult for men. Unless rejected for military service because of physical ailment (unusual among ballet dancers), there was no “decent” way of avoiding it. The emotional and practical difficulties took their toll, not only on individual men, but on ballet generally, which developed an overly feminine look out of necessity.

Eliot weaves in stories of individual difficulty and heartbreak with those of the fierce, resolute courage that was required to carry on with ordinary work and life in an extraordinary era. *Albion’s Dance* provides numerous accounts of previously unpublished stories, explained in the context of the time.

Jenifer Sarver is Assistant Professor of Ballet in the Department of Dance.