

Bournonville: the great nonconformist

by Katharine Kanter

Bournonvilleana

Edited by M. Hallar and A. Scavenius
Rhodos Forlag, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1992
271 pages, hardbound

A more telling frontispiece could not have been chosen by the editors: a black and white photo of a truly grotesque statue of Pan, by the Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen, which somehow manages to combine the morbidly romantic with clammy neo-classicism. Poised ironically against the stone, the new generation's leading Bournonville ballerina, Henriette Muus.

Although the Danish choreographer August Bournonville (1805-79) claimed to be a fervid admirer of Thorvaldsen, as an artist he far surpasses him. Both used Greek or Renaissance models. In Thorvaldsen, it was empty formalism, coasting along in the wake of the fashionable French painters David and Ingres. Bournonville, on the contrary, working with the real, fragile human form, saw the classic from the *inside* out: He used these ancient models only because the arguments in their favor, whether anatomic, dramatic, or aesthetic, were overwhelming.

This rich album, published on the occasion of the Second Bournonville Festival which opened in March 1992, gathers essays by different authors on Denmark during Bournonville's life, on Bournonville himself, his teaching method, and his ballets. The essays on Danish history and theatrical history, lively and well-written, give one an idea of what a maverick the choreographer was, ringed round by an extremely conformist society mainly preoccupied with its creature comforts. Too brief but delightful is the essay on Bournonville's special way of mime, very different from the *Commedia dell'Arte*, by the great dancer Niels Bjoern Larsen and his daughter Dinna, now head of the Norwegian Ballet. Unfortunately, other essays dealing with Bournonville's ballet technique are not only somewhat cursory, but their authors avoid the big question: Why has this first-class technique been practically shoved off the edge of the planet, in favor of the second-class, Anglo-Russian technique?

To my mind, the most thought-provoking essay is that

by the pianist Elvi Henriksen, wife to Niels Bjoern Larsen. If, after several readings, I have understood her aright, the problem is that Bournonville's enchainements have a peculiar phrasing of their own, where the steps must be accentuated so as to give value to the "verbs," so to speak, while not over-stressing the "articles" and "conjunctive" words. Miss Henriksen writes that after 25 years of teaching by the Russian Vera Volkova (1950s to 1970s), the dancers at the Royal Theater no longer know where to place the Bournonville accents. So, working with her daughter Dinna Bjoern, she designed a system where the step-accented are first danced to percussion, till the students have got it "in the blood," and only then, to the real musical score. The percussive background is kept up against the music until the students no longer need to lean on that crutch.

It's pretty complicated. Why are the children not steeped in Bournonville from their earliest years? Wouldn't that be better?

The answer lies in the modern sickness called pluralism, which is nothing but warmed-up conformism: We are supposed to believe that there is no right and wrong, only opinion. Miss Henriksen quotes Hans Beck, Bournonville's successor, to the effect, that "Evidence that two styles cannot be cultivated at the same time by one company without causing damage, has been more than obvious to us old professionals." She *must* quote him. Nowadays, no one in Europe or the U.S. would say anything that controversial on their own authority.

Bournonvilleana's editors touch on this as follows: "Bournonville . . . was deeply involved in the art and politics of the age, and with his hot-headed temperament, did not miss any opportunity to have his say—verbally and in writing—on the principal issues of the time." Were any theater director to try that today, in 1992, even on strictly "artistic" issues, he would be on the headline within 24 hours. Such is our feudal reactionary age: no debate please, we're British!

Do I digress? Well, let me pick just one objectionable case, Marilyn Hunt's essay:

"If American ballet lovers have been in the forefront of appreciation for Bournonville, the reasons must relate in large part to dance priorities crystallized by Georges Balanchine, such as pure choreographic values, energy and joy; dance does not have to express strong overt emotion to be taken seriously. Affinities between the two choreographers' styles have often been noted: the emphasis on a dancey flow of steps, complex footwork, speed, and the importance of musicality and of variety in rhythm and impetus." (Miss Hunt is a critic for *Dance Magazine*).

Balanchine's trail of broken bodies

Rubbish! The Russian choreographer Georges Balanchine (d. 1983), founder of the New York City Ballet, loathed beauty. The ethos behind his "neo-classicism" was the same old romantic drivel that Bournonville fought tooth and nail.

It was based on the simple truth, that people will look at *anything*, so long as it's done by a good-looking guy and a cute doll; that's what sells films like "Basic Instinct." Just about everything Balanchine taught was imprecise, fuzzy, and technically wrong; this he would justify by the "need for speed." For example, he didn't like it if you put the heel down when you land from a jump; this means the *next* step is not properly taken, so wearing down the Achilles tendon, displacing the metatarsal bones, and sending a shock through the entire leg. It is one of the reasons for the high "kill rate" among his dancers. Balanchine would weep a few crocodile tears at every early retirement, and then move on to the next Kleenex tissue. He liked the effect.

As for Balanchine's "musicality and variety of rhythm"—well, his favorite composer was his friend Igor Stravinsky. The man, lacking the skill to write contrapuntal music after Brahms, scribbled percussive, atonal noise-tracks, the basic feature of which, like pop and rock, is accompanied melody and jungle rhythm. This was one area where he could excel—by wandering off to play by himself. Unfortunately, the dancers cannot wander off and play by themselves. They need a pocket computer to correlate Stravinsky's crazy counts with Balanchine's weird gestures.

So, one would have wished for more controversy in *Bournonvilleana*, at least a hint of the kind of polemic raised by the director of the Paris Opera school, Claude Bessy, in an interview all the more interesting because out of character with what she herself teaches. Bessy told the Paris weekly *L'Express* in May 1986: "There is great risk in going from one school to the other. The body is forced to adopt contradictory positions, antagonistic efforts. There are far more accidents than ever before. . . . In the U.S.A., things have gone so far that after 10 years on stage, dancers are broken. They're thrown onto the trash, and others brought in. Within a few short years, at the New York City Ballet, the whole company had changed. I said: 'Where's Mr. X? Where's Miss Y?' And they told me—'Well, his knee cracked up three times,' or 'She's had an operation on her knee, or hip, or back.' Stop! Save the dancers! is all I have to say."

Hard on the proverbial heel of the Bournonville Festival, the Royal Theater is now, I am sorry to say, in the midst of a Balanchine Festival. Given the kind of injuries Balanchine dancers sustain, I pray that *Bournonvilleana* will not be chaise-longue reading for some of the Royal Ballet's best dancers as they sit out the season with their leg in plaster.

This said, the book makes a magnificent Christmas gift. The illustrations alone, chosen with great care, are worth the price. They include rare photographs from the earliest Bournonville productions in the 19th century, portraits of the great Danish dancers, old cityscapes, costume and setting sketches, and some really nasty caricatures of Bournonville from old newspapers. A note of caution: Order the hardcover edition. The softcover is poorly done up and will fall apart with the hard use we fanatics are bound to give it.

Malthusians' new beyond the limits

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse, Envisioning a Sustainable Future

by Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers
Chelsea Green, Post Mills, Vt., 1992
320 pages, hardbound \$19.95

In 1972, the Club of Rome popularized a little book, *Limits to Growth*, that established a protective coating of computer-modeling techno-gobbledygook around the Club's basic malthusian goal: population reduction. Now, 20 years later, the authors of *The Limits to Growth* have updated their techno-gobbledygook in a book titled *Beyond the Limits*.

The 1972 book gave the world about 100 years before collapse. The 1992 book gives the world a much shorter lifespan before resources, living standards, industrial production, and agriculture burst into uncontrollable collapse.

It was easy to defeat *The Limits to Growth* economists in debates during the 1970s; they and their doomsday analysis were incompetent to the point of being comical. Today their economics are still laughable; but the growth of the green movement has created a gullibility gap into which the *Beyond the Limits* economists fit too comfortably in 1992.

The Club of Rome's pessimistic message about how greedily growing industrial society destroys the Earth remains the same in both books. What's new in the 1992 book is 1) the authors' expression of "love" and concern for the "poor" of the Earth; and 2) the solution they devise to counter greedy growth: "sustainable development."

Euphemisms for genocide

These new items are geared especially to influence the developing-sector countries to go along with the malthusians' agenda as laid out at the June Earth Summit in Brazil: in brief, to cut living standards! (affluence pollutes) and cut population (people pollute). During May, the authors, economists Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, and Jørgen Randers, held a series of press conferences to promote this message.

For the leaders of developing countries—and for any