

edited by WINTHROP PALMER

DANCE

and ANATOLE CHUJOY

NEWS

ALFRED A. KNOFF

ANNUAL

NEW YORK

1953

13.

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The San Francisco Ballet

THIS is the first history of the San Francisco Ballet ever written. Before this, no complete chronicle existed, though parts of it have appeared in various periodicals; most of it has been in the memories of those concerned in the company's story. The written record has been a haphazard file of programs stored in the San Francisco Ballet School or at the home of the President of the Ballet Guild. The invitation to write this history has been the incentive to finish a task that otherwise might not have been undertaken for years.

San Francisco's grand-baroque War Memorial Opera House was completed in 1932. Adolph Bolm had been working in Hollywood, notably on his sensational *Ballet Mécanique*. It was natural that he should be invited to become the first ballet master. In San

Francisco Opera parlance, "ballet master" means choreographer. Bolm's success with *Le Coq d'Or*, staged in November 1933, caused the Ballet School to be founded. At various times, Stefano Mascagno, Nina Verchinina, and Julieta Mendez taught in the school. Bolm choreographed ballets beyond those of incidental opera ballet. Among the Bolm ballets was an ambitious *Bach Cycle*; he had, too, the impulse to use modern music. A Tansman ballet was the result of this desire. But no permanent repertoire existed when Bolm left in 1936.

Serge Oukrainsky succeeded Bolm as choreographer. Under him, Willam Christensen was brought from Portland to become *premier danseur* (or, in Opera parlance again, to become "soloist"). Willam Christensen suggested that his pupil, Janet Reed, be brought as a soloist also. They danced only in *Traviata*.

Coq d'Or had been (whether at the time it was so recognized or not) the first impulse towards a company. Willam Christensen's arrival gave direction to that impulse. In January of 1938 he was named choreographer to succeed Oukrainsky.

The San Francisco Opera season lasts from September into November. In the terms of a *corps de ballet*, that means that dancers have employment only during those weeks. The rest of the time the dancers must seek pastures not necessarily greener, but at least green. The Opera, therefore, asked its choreographer to develop a first rate company that could tour California and up into Oregon.

Willam Christensen had had his own company in Portland, at a time when Lew and Harold Christensen were touring with Lincoln Kirstein's Ballet Caravan, for the Christensen brothers have always been dancers. The brothers are of Danish descent. Their father emigrated from Copenhagen to Utah and continued the family professions of teaching music and dancing. Willam, Harold, and Lew received training in both music and dancing from an

uncle; later the two younger brothers were taught by Willam; later still, they studied under Mascagno and Fokine.

In the middle and late 1920's the brothers toured in vaudeville. As they performed classic ballet at a period of American history when there were singularly few balletomanes attending vaudeville performances, the act's chief asset was the performance of *tours de force*. In the act's finale, one by one the brothers would join into a tight circle of vertiginous *chainé* turns. Lew Christensen would perform these so fast that he leaned into the circle's center. Although their *enchaînements* led them to the Palace, called vaudeville's Mecca, vaudeville was over by 1932. Willam Christensen went to Portland to found a school. Harold and Lew stayed in the East, studying with Fokine and later at the School of American Ballet. They, with Ruby Asquith and Gisella Caccialanza, were original members of the Ballet Caravan. They also danced (with Danilova) in *The Great Waltz*.

For his Portland Company, composed of pupils from his school, Willam Christensen restaged *Spectre de la Rose* and *Les Sylphides*. He also choreographed *Les Visions de Massenet*, *Bourrée Fantasque* (to Chabrier's music), *Roumanian Wedding Festival* (Enesco), *Spanish Romance* (Rimsky-Korsakov), and *Coeur de Glace* (Mozart).

When the invitation to San Francisco came, Willam Christensen had already part of a repertoire for the company that was eventually formed. His first work for the new company, however, was a new ballet, called *Old Vienna*, to music by Johann Strauss. Janet Reed danced the leading role. James Starbuck, already in the Opera Ballet under Bolm, danced the most important male role, that of the Waiter.

A tour of small towns was undertaken in 1938. That same year Willam Christensen did his *Romeo and Juliet* to Tchaikov-

sky's music. The chief roles were to be taken by Janet Reed and Willam Christensen, but a leg injury made it necessary for the choreographer to stay out of the first performance; James Starbuck danced it.

The dates are indefinite when, during this period, a young Western Union messenger boy from Daly City (a small town south of San Francisco) used to park his bicycle outside the ballet school, take a lesson, and depart on his appointed rounds. This talented bicyclist later danced in *Romeo* as Tybalt and Mercutio. His name is Harold Lang.

Coppélia marked an important determination of artistic policy and gave Willam Christensen his stature as a choreographer. The year was 1939. The choreographer's grasp of the nature of full-length ballet, his ability to fill a stage with spectacle, and his gift for balletic humor became crystallized in *Coppélia*. Janet Reed seemed to have been preparing all her life for this ballet. In temperament and resourcefulness, Swanilda is, of course, a redhead. Only Ruby Asquith was able to reach Janet Reed's high standard.

At the first performance, Willam Christensen danced Franz. On tour, the company was joined by Lew Christensen, who then danced Franz; later it was performed by Michel Panaieff. Earl Riggins, Willam Christensen, and Simon Semenoff have been Coppélius. Tamara Toumanova danced Swanilda later. Harold Lang was a peasant boy, and one of the automata, a drummer.

Thereafter the policy of full-length ballets from the traditional repertoire was established. It remains the company's norm to this day. Although only two other full-length ballets exist in the repertoire, others are planned.

In 1939 the company was still the Opera Ballet, maintained by the San Francisco Opera Association. Willam Christensen and Janet Reed were the choreographer-*premier danseur* and the *prima*

ballerina respectively. Jacqueline Martin, Ronald Chetwood, Norman Thomson, Earl Riggins, Harold Lang, Zoya Leporsky, and Mattlyn Gevurtz were strong, talented, reliable soloists.

The repertoire of the 1939 season consisted of *Coppélia*, re-stagings of *Les Sylphides* and *Spectre de la Rose*, *Romeo and Juliet*, a *Divertissement Ballet* to folk music and music by Green, Honegger, and Brahms, a *Ballet Impromptu* to music by Bach, *Old Vienna*, and dances from *The Bartered Bride*.

The impulse that *Coppélia* gave the company and that year's tour made an addition to the teaching staff necessary. On January 5, 1940 Harold Christensen and Ruby Asquith arrived to teach in the school. The intention was that they were to stay for the three months the company was to be on tour. They were married in August 1940, have a home and two daughters. As Harold Christensen is now Director of the School, it would seem that he and Ruby Asquith will stay permanently.

In September 1940 the company performed Willam Christensen's recreation of the full four acts of *Swan Lake*. Again there was success for both company and choreographer.

As in the earliest Russian productions, *Swan Lake* was danced by two ballerinas: Jacqueline Martin was Odette; Janet Reed was Odile. Lew Christensen was Prince Siegfried, and Ronald Chetwood was Von Rothbart. Zoya Leporsky and Harold Christensen stopped the show in the Act III czardas. The following year, the *pas de trois* in Act I was danced by Ruby Asquith, Harold Lang, and Eileen Whitson. Later Siegfrieds include Norman Thomson, Willam Christensen, Peter Nelson, Roland Vazquez, and Gordon Paxman. Later, too, Harold Christensen was a Von Rothbart of satisfying malevolence, and Harold Lang was Benno. Odette has been danced by Onna White, Jocelyn Vollmar, and the company's present ballerinas, Sally Bailey and Nancy Johnson. Ruby Asquith

danced Odile in a presentation of the single Act III.

A Lew Christensen ballet was performed by the company for the first time in 1940, when Willam Christensen added to the repertoire *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (to Mendelssohn's music), which had been choreographed three years before for the Portland company. Janet Reed was Titania, Norman Thomson was Oberon, and Ruby Asquith, very aptly, Puck.

The success of the full-length *Swan Lake* carried into 1941, when it was repeated. That year *Now the Brides* was choreographed, to original music by Fritz Berens. Thematically it was a sort of anti-Communist *Lysistrata*.

Although the symphony and the opera in San Francisco are supported by popular subscription, the ballet has never received such aid, except nominally. An effort was made in 1941 to found a Ballet Guild for the purpose of raising funds. The preliminary meeting was held on the fateful afternoon of December 7, 1941. Although plans continued, the campaign was later abandoned on the promise to revive these plans in large scale after the war.

Like every other company, the San Francisco Ballet began to lose its male dancers. To run a company became a major administrative problem. Another great loss was Janet Reed's leaving to become *ballerina* of Dance Players. But the company gained a *prima ballerina* in Ruby Asquith. Her performances with Ballet Caravan had only indicated her potentialities; now she matured as a performing artist of technique and charm. She became the last *prima ballerina* of the company. Gisella Caccialanza was guest *prima ballerina*, as was Tamara Toumanova later. Alicia Markova and Alexandra Danilova have also made guest appearances. After Miss Asquith, Jocelyn Vollmar and Onna White danced first roles.

Amor Español, to music from Massenet's *Le Cid*, followed in the chronology of Willam Christensen's creations for 1942. Ma-

clovia Ruiz danced a Spanish lady of castanetted wickedness. In *Winter Carnival*, Ruby Asquith was a skating star to Strauss music. When *Sonate Pathétique* was created for Miss Asquith in 1943, it marked the beginning of the collaborations between Willam Christensen and a notable designer, Antonio Sotomayor. The company's later resident designer, Russell Hartley, was a ballet student at that time.

The San Francisco Ballet School was acquired from the Opera by Harold and Willam Christensen in 1943. It was in this year that the company ceased to be the Opera Ballet, even though the name is still cited. The company that year began its independent existence, even though performances with the Opera still constitute an important and proud part of its activity. This, also, was the year in which Gisella Caccialanza arrived from New York to teach in the school. For the company, she appeared in *Les Sylphides*.

Willam Christensen cast Gisella Caccialanza in the role of the Sugar-Plum Fairy when he did a full-length *Nutcracker* in 1944. Her adagio in the third scene, particularly adapted to the brilliance of her Cecchetti-taught technique, remains in the memory as something unsurpassable and comments on Willam Christensen's ability to choreograph to an individual technique.

The company toured as far as Seattle with *Nutcracker*. Again, this full-evening's ballet was a success. Antonio Sotomayor and Russell Hartley did sets and costumes. Today, a Christmas performance of the full-length *Nutcracker* is a San Francisco tradition. It is the strongest single production in the whole repertoire of the company. Lew Christensen has since re-choreographed the second scene for another Snow Queen, Sally Bailey, who is young, but has great distinction. Nancy Johnson very logically has inherited the Sugar-Plum Fairy role.

Other ballets produced during the war years (when the com-

pany was more a determination in Willam Christensen's mind than a company in fact), were *Hansel and Gretel*, sung in the pit and with the dancers on the stage as the Christmas 1943 effort; *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, to a Lulli-Grétry score, in 1944; and *Roumanian Rhapsody*, to Enesco's music, done for Celina Cummings and Peter Nelson.

The release from the Army, in 1945, of a young Mexican dancer, José Manero, resulted in a collaboration on the choreography of *Blue Plaza*, to Aaron Copland's *Salón México*. Sotomayor's set for the ballet was enchanting. In 1945, too, *Pyramus and Thisbe* was commissioned from Fritz Berens and staged for the lyricism of a dancer whose star was rising, Jocelyn Vollmar.

The promise, made in 1941, to secure backing for a major company through a fund-raising campaign, seemed about to be kept. A Civic Ballet Association was founded. In 1947 and 1948, two seasons, billed as San Francisco Civic Ballet and Municipal Concerts 1947-1948, were held. Irving Deakin was General Manager. Willam Christensen's name appeared as Artistic Collaborator.

In preparation for the season, Willam Christensen and Jocelyn Vollmar flew to Mexico City to see the Markova-Dolin *Giselle* at the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Miss Vollmar learned the role of Myrtha; Mr. Christensen learned the entire ballet in order to teach it to the San Francisco *corps de ballet* who were to dance it. The resultant performance of *Giselle*, Miss Markova has said, was her best. Certainly that is some sort of landmark in a career of excellence.

Mephisto and *Parranda* were the *premières* of the November season. *Mephisto* was choreographed in Hollywood by Adolph Bolm while the company was in Los Angeles with the Opera. The music was Liszt's; the romantic sets and costumes were a strong artistic support supplied by Eugene Lourie.

Willam Christensen's *Parranda* was set to Morton Gould's *Latin-American Symphonette*. Mr. Gould conducted the first performance. The ballet was perfectly suited to the gamin aspect of Ruby Asquith. José Manero danced exuberantly in it and contributed steps. Antonio Sotomayor was a creative partner in the ballet: his humor and his set and costumes helped give Willam Christensen the hit of the season.

The February performances had Tamara Toumanova as guest prima ballerina. Paul Petroff and Michel Panaieff partnered her in *Swan Lake*, the *pas de deux* from *Nutcracker*, and *Coppélia*.

John Taras' *Persephone*, in which Jocelyn Vollmar danced the title role exquisitely, was the second season's *première*. The music was Schumann's Symphony No. 1 in B Flat Major. Again Eugene Lourie provided distinguished sets and costumes.

The other novelty was Simon Semenov's *Gift of the Magi*, previously performed by Ballet Theatre. Ruby Asquith shone in the role originally danced by Nora Kaye.

These Civic Ballet performances achieved an exhilarating atmosphere for the ballet. But no matter what their artistic and popular success portended, they were a financial failure; the Civic Ballet Association went into bankruptcy. Wherever the blame lay, the organization, conceived in the post-war euphoria, made only partial settlement to its creditors. That the artists themselves did not suffer financially was due to a memorably generous action of Mrs. James Bodrero at the time when the curtain came down on the last bow.

That could have been the end of the story. What happened was that the Christensens carried on; the company was reduced to the barest essentials. Jocelyn Vollmar and other members of the company had left. From then to 1951 Willam Christensen choreographed only three more ballets: they were *Dr. Pantalone*, to music

by Scarlatti, with inventive costumes by Geraldine Cresci; *Danza Brillante*, an abstract ballet to Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 in G Minor; and *Les Maîtresses de Lord Byron* to Liszt's Concerto No. 1 in E Flat Major.

After Lew Christensen's release from the Army, he and Gisella Caccialanza joined Ballet Society in New York. They returned to San Francisco in 1948. For the young technicians of the company Lew Christensen created *Vivaldi Concerto* as a challenge to them and to his own growing choreographic inventiveness. In a collaboration with the writer and with James Bodrero, he did *Prelude*, a ballet-drama with a Handel suite as the finale. For a short series done at a high school, he remounted his *Jinx*, *Charades*, and *Filling Station*. The last now went far beyond its first choreographic attainment. Gisella Caccialanza and Harold Christensen romped brilliantly through their original roles (in their original costumes, lent by Lincoln Kirstein).

It is at this point that the narrative becomes personal rather than quoted reminiscence. Invited by Lew Christensen, I joined the company in 1950. He was working on an idea for a Mozart ballet to be called *Le Gourmand*. An impulsive conversation with Leonard Weisgard in New York resulted in a collaboration that was to revitalize the whole company. *Les Maîtresses de Lord Byron* was first danced on March 17, 1951. Then the young technicians of *Vivaldi Concerto* were challenged by Lew Christensen's sparkling inventiveness. They were costumed with brilliance and wit by Leonard Weisgard, whose costumes had been perfected *con amore* by Phyllis Weisgard, Russell Hartley, and Eliese Arnold. Aaron Girard joined the company to dance with Gisella Caccialanza in the show-stopping *pas de deux* of "Pêche Flambée" and "Café Royal" from *Le Gourmand*. And there, in a high school auditorium on March 31, 1951 the company had its collective pride returned



Aaron Girard (*Le Café Royal*)
Gisella Caccialanza (*La Pêche Flambée*)



Willam Christensen (*Un Vieil Homard Grillé*)
Carolyn George (*Un Filet de Sole Sauté Meunière*)



Anton Basuino (*Le Gourmand*),
Bene Arnold, Judy Younger (*Les Marmitons*)



Nancy Johnson and Roland Vazquez
(*Le Faisan Amoureux au Riz Sauvage*)

Four episodes from Lew Christensen's *LE GOURMAND*, San Francisco Ballet

to it.

The summer of 1951 was spent performing with Greek Theatre Productions in light opera. A television series was begun in the fall, choreographed by Lew Christensen, who also became Opera choreographer. Willam Christenson, ever a pioneer, accepted an offer from the University of Utah and became history's first Professor of Ballet. *The Nutcracker* was performed again at Christmas time. I became Artistic Director of the Company.

A gift from Lincoln Kirstein in 1952 gave the short spring season its greatest distinction. Vida Brown rehearsed the company in *Serenade* and *Concerto Barocco*, and earned from the dancers an affectionate enthusiasm. Alexandra Danilova appeared as guest ballerina in a single performance of *Serenade* at the Opera House; she danced it with that generosity of spirit which only those who know Danilova can comprehend. The revelation of the season was another success. Coached by Aaron Girard and Lew Christensen, Sally Bailey danced Odette in Act II of *Swan Lake*. Nancy Johnson's summer performance revealed another real talent. In all these performances, Aaron Girard, as ballet master, found the means to discipline a young and inexperienced *corps de ballet* until it shone.

The Ballet Guild, headed by Mrs. James Bodrero, has taken firmer hold as sponsor of the performances. The two ballerinas, Sally Bailey and Nancy Johnson, are on a small all-year sustenance. Suzanne Devincenzi is soloist for the company. Nancy Demmler, Bene Arnold, Christine Bering, Roberta Meyer, Virginia Johnson, and Fiona Fuerstner constitute the company's young strength. Gordon Paxman is leading male soloist.

The company has appeared in a series of thirteen television films for *The Standard Hour*. It dances with the San Francisco Opera and for summer light opera. Willam Christensen has returned as choreographer for the Opera. At this writing, *Nutcracker*

is being refurbished and, for the first time in many years, will be taken out of town.

The company's Director, Lew Christensen, as culmination of many years' work in ballet, is also Administrative Director of the New York City Ballet.