

Character and Classicism in Ashton's Dances

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Ashton is rightly honoured above all as British ballet's most 'classical' choreographer. Space forbids analysing the many possible definitions of that term, but it seems to me there are two reasons for this public perception. One is the nature of his work as a whole, springing from Ashton's life-long belief that all ballets which 'are not based on the classical ballet and do not create new dancing patterns and steps within its idiom are, as it were, only tributaries of the main stream' (Ashton, 1951, p.92). In other words, anything outside the classical tradition was for him peripheral. The other reason for the general view of him as primarily a classicist is that his creations include, notably, a series of works in plotless pure-dance form. These amount to something like one third of his ballets; no other choreographer except his close contemporary Balanchine has matched them in quality or exceeded them in quantity.

Note, however (turning to another meaning of 'classical'), that very few of Ashton's ballets require only dancers of a pure classicism, the strictest perfection of technique, line and style. When the Royal Ballet in 1970, on Ashton's retirement, was reducing its numbers, he made a revealing remark to me: 'They're getting rid of all the character dancers; they won't be able to do my ballets'. I aim to show that in his plotless as well as his narrative works Ashton was always interested in the full potential of ballet, welcoming the grotesque as well as the lyrical, the comic as well as the romantic. He wanted expressiveness as much as display; character and classicism in his work are not opposites, but part of a wide spectrum.

I want to take one of his plotless dance works as my starting point: *Les Rendezvous*. Created in 1933, it can be seen as an important step in Ashton's process of evolving his pure-dance form. That task occupied him throughout his career, from *Capriol Suite* in 1930, his earliest surviving ballet, right through to his last major work, *Rhapsody*, a full fifty years later.

Les Rendezvous is succinctly described in Koegler's *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Ballet* (1977) as a suite of light-hearted dances for young people in a park. Balanchine's *Complete Stories of the Great Ballets* says that 'young couples promenade and dance to give appropriate expression to youthful sentiments that take hold of their ebullient spirits. There is no plot' (1954, p. 309). Actually, the impression of couples is largely an illusion, apart from the two leading dancers, whose roles virtually follow the pattern of an extended pas de deux (entry, adagio, solos and coda) which is accompanied, distracted and interrupted by an ensemble. Although the ensemble dancers pair off at times, the women and men enter separately, and the men (but, surprisingly, not the women) have a pas de six to themselves. There is also a quick, perky dance for another solo woman and two men (Balanchine calls its music 'saucy and bouncing'), and a quartet for a pretty, Petipa-like group of 'little girls'. Although the score (ballet music from Auber's opera *L'Enfant prodigue*) consists of separate numbers, the ballet's sequence is carefully and formally structured.

This work is not necessarily perceived by the spectator as a plotless ballet in the same way as is Balanchine's *Serenade*, created the following year. It has humour, which prevents some from taking it seriously. The dancers — or some of them at any rate — are given titles in the cast list: the leading couple are called Lovers; the corps de ballet are Walkers Out. They have little touches of mime to perform: shaking or kissing hands, bumping into each other or sidestepping to avoid this. The leading man is blindfolded in a game. Pairs of men each lift up a woman and swing her amorously between them. But there is no story here, no development of character, and rather less emotion than in *Serenade*. The comedy, the incidents, are just a device to make the ballet more acceptable to an audience that was unused to ballets without a narrative basis. As Ashton wrote later, at this period he was eager 'to please my audience.... entertain, amuse and charm them' (1951, p. 89).

His chief intention declared at the time, was to provide 'a vehicle for the exquisite dancing of Idzikowsky and Markova' (Ashton, 1933) - and, he could have added, to show the young Vic-Wells Ballet as a whole at a higher technical level than had previously been expected of them. His remark seems to me to indicate that he knew very well what he was doing: helping to invent and establish a new kind of ballet where dance was supreme without needing literary or dramatic excuse. In fact he later described this as the first ballet in which he took his lead directly from the music, the method of working which he came to prefer.

Les Sylphides is usually taken as the first ballet of the plotless genre, evolved by Fokine almost accidentally from a more conventional earlier version, and it had to wait a long time for successors. Perhaps Diaghilev, by presenting *Cimariosiana* (and even the *Polovtsian Dances*) out of their original operatic contexts, helped establish the precedent for a ballet that was simply dancing without narrative. By the early 1930s, Massine, Balanchine and Ashton were all devising their own ways of tackling this.

In Ashton's case, having to start his choreographic career making small works for mostly inexperienced casts, he soon produced some pieces which, to judge from frustratingly vague accounts and snatches of film, we might well regard (if we could see them today) as sketches towards the non-narrative genre. It is difficult to believe, for instance, that anyone watched *Leda and the Swan* or *Mars and Venus* for their faint plots, and he also staged suites of dances to Purcell and Mozart. Certainly by the time of *Capriol Suite* he was trying out many of the choreographic ideas that made the basis of much later work: setting two men in rivalry for one partner, or enhancing the effect of the male dancing by making the men work as a group. And since music and costumes both derived from Arbeau's sixteenth century dance manual *Orchésographie*, and Ashton's dances evoked the same period, *Capriol Suite* has a unity that deserves classification as a ballet without story rather than a divertissement. (*Façade*, the following year, was in many respects a better ballet, but a less unified one, since each of its numbers presents a fresh set of characters who have nothing to do with each other.)

With two exceptional virtuosi to head his cast, Ashton in *Les Rendezvous* displayed the classic technique in all its brilliance. But, as Ninette de Valois pointed out (1937, pp. 115-19), ballet dancers can be divided, according to their physique and disposition, into categories which have proved serviceable for two hundred years since Noverre's time. On one side was the danseur noble or ballerina, elegant in appearance, reserved in manner; on the other, the character dancers, rougher, more vigorous and robust, encompassing dramatic and comic roles. But those who fell between these types, she suggested, the 'demi-caractère' dancers, had the best of both worlds, often ranging into the territory on either side, and Ashton was always happy exploring their centre ground.

In this he was influenced by the two choreographers whom he took as his models, Bronislava Nijinska and Léonide Massine, both of them primarily demi-caractère choreographers. The Nijinska influence on *Rendezvous* is well known, pervading the whole manner of the ballet with the amusing sophistication of *Les Biches* (certainly not the monumental power of *Les Noces*). But I want to suggest one specific resemblance that I do not remember reading or hearing mentioned before. Looking at the ballerina's main solo in *Rendezvous*, with its dizzy turns, its circlings and its deft reversals of direction, its insouciant carriage of the arms, its slight but gracious acknowledgement of homage from male admirers, its general shape seems to me to resemble an abstract and more classical - although still rather jazzy - distillation of the hostess's solo in *Biches* (the Rag Mazurka), although stripped of its predatory characterisation and heightened in the technical demands it made on Markova's virtuosity.

However, if Nijinska is the strong underlying influence, we should not forget that Ashton in *Rendezvous* actually makes a direct quotation from one of Massine's ballets, *La Boutique fantasque*. The way the six male Walkers Out, as a group, lift the ballerina to the height of their shoulders and carry her off at the end of the duet (*Adage des Amoureux*) comes straight from the end of the Dolls' night-time revolt in *Boutique*, when the Cossack soldiers lift and carry the

female can-can dancer. Except that Ashton trumps his model: he makes the partner, instead of following quietly behind, sink adoringly to one knee — a more romantic touch.

It is easy to imagine Ashton himself performing that gesture - although not the rest of Idzikowsky's part. In fact, creating *Rendezvous* before he joined the Vic-Wells Ballet, he made no role for himself in it, although later he danced in the pas de trois. Ashton's roles in early years included the man in *Les Sylphides*, Siegfried in *Swan Lake* Act II, and the Prince in Andrée Howard's *Cinderella*. He knew how to give romantic leads the right atmosphere and style, and how to support his partner to show her at her best; he was enormously proud of having partnered Karsavina, Lopokova, Markova and Fonteyn. Some of the parts he created for himself in early ballets were romantic too, partly because he wanted to see himself that way, and partly for lack of anyone else to do them. But temperamentally and physically Ashton was better suited to character or demi-caractère parts (and that was no great disadvantage: a similar bent did not prevent Massine from being the most celebrated male dancer of the day). Ashton excelled in quick, small steps: as the Ballet Master in his own *Foyer de danse* he was repeatedly skimming round the stage in brilliant solos. His most characteristic roles, the ones in which he is vividly remembered, were droll, witty, often cynical, from the Dago in *Façade* and A Personage in *Les Masques* through to the Stepsister in his own *Cinderella*. Incidentally, he played that role much more 'straight' than is usually seen nowadays, more like a slightly caricatured portrait of a real woman (with a make-up modelled on Edith Sitwell) than a pantomime dame. Remember, too, Ashton's film solos as Kleinzack in *The Tales of Hoffmann* and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle in *Tales of Beatrix Potter*. And the roles which de Valois created for him were comic ones, the Sergeant in her earthy anti-fascist comedy *Barabau*, and Valentin the waiter turned can-can dancer (a figure from Toulouse-Lautrec) in *Le Bar aux Folies-bergère*.

Given his experience and circumstances, it is no surprise that Ashton developed his treatment of pure-dance works on lines very different from Massine and Balanchine. Massine made his two first 'symphonic' ballets in the same year as *Rendezvous*, but the high heroic style of *Les Présages* and *Choreartium* is far removed from Ashton's light, elegant confection. Interestingly when Ashton (in *Apparitions*) and Massine (in *Symphonie fantastique*) both treated the same subject in 1936, Ashton - working to music by Liszt selected by Constant Lambert - undertook a more literal narrative than the dream fantasy which Massine devised to Berlioz's symphony. A direct influence on Ashton from Massine's symphonic style can probably be seen only in *The Wanderer*, his 1941 creation to Schubert.

The closer parallel is between Ashton and Balanchine. By coincidence the latter was making a ballet to Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* (under the title *Errante*) just about when Ashton made *Les Rendezvous*, and he was thenceforward to specialise more than any other choreographer in non-narrative ballets. Although he often took symphonic music as his base, he called the outcome 'classic ballet' - never 'symphonic ballet'. It is a useful reminder that the great achievement for which Balanchine is often credited, but in which Ashton shared, was finding a way to preserve and adapt the classical ballet tradition so that it would thrive for modern audiences without needing the props of story or drama. Balanchine went further down that route. Ashton, for instance, never followed him into the use of what is usually but erroneously called practice dress - that is, the uniform of tights and T-shirts for men, simple tunics for women, which Balanchine invented to make the choreography more easily legible (besides saving money on costumes). Even dances which Ashton made as *pièces d'occasion* had some element of design: *Monotones* is the starkest, and for that he himself added caps and belts to the dancers' all-over tights.

Also, Ashton never proceeded to the fully and exclusively musical starting point of some Balanchine ballets (*Concerto Barocco*, *Symphony in C*, and so on). This was because of his continuing concern for expressiveness and character in dance. Consider how his pure-dance works developed over the years (the landmarks tended to come in groups with intervals between them). *Les Patineurs* in 1937 follows the *Rendezvous* precedent of a slight situational pretext on which to hang the dances - and I am tempted to claim *A Wedding Bouquet*, later that

year, for the same category; if this ballet has a narrative, it is a very surrealist one (perhaps post-modern before its time!). Then in 1938 *Horoscope* had a theme rather than a story.

The early wartime ballets mark a stride towards complete self-sufficiency of music and dance without theme or pretext. I have already mentioned that *The Wanderer* had elements reminiscent of Massine in its structuring, but *Dante Sonata* perhaps assimilated more fully the principles of the 'symphonic ballet' while clothing them in a bold style partly invented for the occasion. Ashton followed the surges of Liszt's music in presenting the confrontation of the Children of Light (a pained, tortured lyricism) and Darkness (twisted and malevolent) to evoke powerful emotions.

The breathing-space of Ashton's war service, followed by the return of peace and the liberation of moving to a larger stage at Covent Garden, produced the celebrated series of pure-dance works leading from the glory of *Symphonic Variations* in 1946 to the more romantic *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, the nostalgic grandeur of *Scènes de ballet* and another symbolically or 'abstractly' treated theme, *Don Juan* during 1947-48. Also, the big waltzes for the corps de ballet of Stars in *Cinderella* draw upon the way he developed the ensemble choreography in *Scènes de ballet*, so that they become in effect miniature plotless ballets. (Ashton was so far ahead of any other British choreographer in his handling of the corps de ballet that this subject deserves a paper to itself.) One of the further group of plotless works he returned to in the middle of the 1950s, *La Valse*, is unusual in being almost entirely for the large corps de ballet, and *Homage to the Queen* too used a large cast for whom he invented a cascade of brilliant display dances. *Birthday Offering*, also from that period, fulfilled a similar function for the unprecedented group of no fewer than seven ballerinas he could by then draw upon. And those three works, like the group in the 1940s, reveal his choreographic range: *Valses nobles* and *La Valse* are in romantic mode; *Symphonic Variations*, *Scènes* and *Birthday Offering* more purely classical — but even the display solos of *Birthday Offering* were suffused with the individual style and personality of the women for whom they were created. Very different from these, and from each other, were *Don Juan* and *Homage to the Queen*: the former aiming to distil the essence of the Don Juan legend into dances almost as abstract as *Scènes*, the latter a bravura showpiece for the whole company. What they (and the short-lived *Variations on a Theme of Purcell* in 1955) had in common was encompassing classical, demi-caractère and character work.

This particular mixture is rare in non-narrative ballets (although Balanchine did also use it, for instance in *Pour Temperaments*, *Western Symphony*, *Bugaku*). It should not be surprising that Ashton adopted it, however, since the mixture is customary in the big narrative ballets of Petipa which he took as a model for his own long ballets, including *La Fille mal gardée* which James Monahan justly praised as 'the best long ballet of this century... There is no other...to rival this one for neatness of overall construction...wealth of characterisation and super-abundance of felicitous dance.... What is most remarkable is that it is very funny. For any ballet to be funny is rare; for a long one to be funny is quite extraordinary' (Monahan & Roboz, 1980, p. 44). To which I would add that here, as in *Cinderella* and *The Dream*, Ashton did not arbitrarily divide the serious and comic characters, but allowed the romantic leads to provide some of the fun too, and some of the comics to have their own moment touched by a sense of wonder.

And, since *Fille* and *Dream* are among the works which were in the repertory equally of the Royal Ballet's two companies when Ashton was directing them in the 1960s, let me quote what he said to me apropos of criticism that the touring company was treated less well than the London-based one. Insisting that for him they were equal but different ('like two sisters' was the comparison he used), he defined the difference as being a greater emphasis on classical and technical perfection at Covent Garden, while the touring company excelled at a demi-caractère quality and in theatrical impact. This shows that he was conscious of these linked aspects of ballet, and he told me that he was happy for his works to be performed with the emphasis either way.

As early as 1951, Ashton wrote that he had grown to work 'purely and selfishly for myself' (1951, p. 89), but few would find that easy to believe, looking at the works he made then and even much later. By the time he made the first section of *Monotones* in 1965, however, his new small-scale treatment of the pure-dance form explored a mode of choreography that was austere, calm, remote and personal, a response to Satie's music that deployed three exceptionally elegant dancers in an idiosyncratic plastique. Luckily, his mastery was such that what pleased Ashton also delighted the public. And the works that followed over the next couple of years seemed designed entirely to please; yet each introduced some novelty into the plotless form. *Sinfonietta* combined swift, virtuosic dancing in demi-caractère style with a central adagio as experimental as *Monotones*, the ballerina being supported by a group of partners and never touching the ground. The dances of *Jazz Calendar* (which incidentally included a burlesque of *Monotones* in the Tuesday's Child section) were arguably as disparate as those of *Façade*, but made to hang more together partly by the consistency and boldness of Derek Jarman's design. This work perhaps, and certainly Ashton's next, *Enigma Variations*, represent an unusual form, a non-narrative ballet composed entirely in terms of character or demi-caractère dance. The pretence of a plot in *Enigma* can fool nobody; Ashton is presenting portraits to parallel those in the score - portraits which were originally given definition and contrast by an amazingly strong cast of experienced dancers, and which can lose their sharpness when comparable performers are not available.

There was another unusual short work, again in lyrical mood, the *Five Brahms Waltzes* for Lynn Seymour, before Ashton made his last substantial ballet, *Rhapsody*, in 1980, a work that bears many resemblances to *Les Rendezvous* in mood and manner, as also in its emphasis on virtuosity, again with the male role created for a foreign guest star, this time Baryshnikov. With Lesley Collier as the ballerina, too, Ashton seemed to me to be trying to use her speed and sharpness to create solos worthy of his first inspiration, Anna Pavlova.

And he ended *Rhapsody* with just the same puckish, quizzical gesture for its leading man as he had given the 'little girls' at the end of *Rendezvous*. Since he had made it a recurring motif in other works too (Puck in *The Dream*, for instance, the Blue Skater in *Les Patineurs*, and a melancholy variant in his own role as the Spectator in *Nocturne*), it seems perhaps as if Ashton chose quietly to draw attention to the continuity of his work over half a century. He himself defined that work in his 1951 essay:

"Consciously all through my career I have been working to make the ballet independent of literary and pictorial motives, and to make it draw from the rich fount of classical ballet. If the ballet is to survive, it must survive through its dancing qualities, just as drama must survive through the richness of the spoken word. In a Shakespearean play it is the richness of the language and the poetry that are paramount; the story is unimportant. And it is the same with all the greatest music, and dancing and ballets. In a ballet it is the dance that *must* be paramount." (Ashton, 1951. p. 92)

Indirectly, Ashton also reveals here what it was about his ballets that made him a great choreographer: the *richness* of the dancing, its variety, its purity and its earthiness, its lyrical and expressive qualities, its poetry and its comedy, its humanity and its humour - and the fact that they coexist in harmony. For Ashton, there was no clash between classicism and character; they were part of one great whole.

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