

"Ballet in Moscow."

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I was one of the few people attached to the British Military Mission in Moscow, who could claim to have been a ballet "fan" before I went to Russia. In fact, it was with some surprise that my fellow "missionaries" greeted my remark that I was very keen on ballet, and the usual attitude was "wait until you have been to the Bolshoi". I must say this attitude was justified.

The Bolshoi Theatre - Bolshoi merely means "big" - stands in a commanding position in the centre of Moscow, a stone's throw from the Kremlin, and, although impressive outside, is simply amazing within. Tier upon tier of boxes rise from floor to roof, glittering with gold leaf and glass chandeliers, and opulently draped with red plush. It is, perhaps, the typical opera house, but lacking the somewhat faded appearance of most theatres of any age. In addition, the Bolshoi has a very definite character and appears to link the splendour of the Tzars with modern Russia in some slightly cynical way of its own.

The orchestra pit seems enormous and the proscenium opening is on an equally generous scale, the drop curtain being a modern design commemorating the various revolutions, with particular stress on that of 1917.

Unless you are safely in your seat by the time the lights are lowered for the commencement you must wait until the next act, so it pays to be on time. The orchestra having assembled and the lights lowered, a small rotund figure makes its way to the conductor's seat. There is complete silence, for Moscow audiences behave perfectly, and in any case have tremendous respect and affection for M. Faier, the Conductor.

We have attained our seat at the theatre and the overture is about to begin, but what are we going to see? Ballet, of course, but which Ballet?

Last season at the Bolshoi it might have been any one of the following:- "Swan Lake", "Giselle", "Don Quixote", "The Sleeping Beauty", "The Fountain of Bakchisarai", or "Raymonda". All of these are done as full length ballets of three or four acts, with the

exception of "Giselle", which has, of course, only two acts

The scenery is magnificent and great store is set by scenic effects. In "The Sleeping ~~Princess~~" for instance, the Prince and Princess go for a trip in a boat which lasts for some ten minutes, during which the effect of movement is given by all the scenery - not merely the backcloth - moving steadily across the stage. As no portion appears to repeat itself, there must be several hundred yards of it! So important is the scenery deemed to be, that in many cases the curtain rises on a stage completely empty of performers, in order to give the audience an opportunity of studying the scenic effect, which is usually applauded heartily.

The Bolshoi stage is enormous, and when the curtain rises on the first act of "Don Quixote", there must be over two hundred people on the stage. The costumes are colourful and lavish, and everybody acts. In fact, it is often quite difficult to focus one's attention on the main action, so interesting are the bits of "Business" going on in some odd corner.

The dancing is, of course, superb. Not only does one get the impression of faultless technique and execution, but the tremendous enthusiasm and spirit of the dancers is infectious. It is not so much a performance as an exaltation.

Apart from the dancing, the acting - "mime" is the correct word in ballet - is of a very high order, and there is little difficulty in following the story of any ballet in Moscow. Yet there is no overacting, and a minimum of conventional gestures.

Whatever the period or scene of the ballet there is always a mazurka and usually a Spanish dance. To see some forty or fifty dancers really letting themselves go in a rousing mazurka is enough to bring the most plegmatic Briton out of his seat. Even the toughest of "missionaries" was forced to admit that there is nothing "pansy" about the male side of ballet in Moscow!

The high spots? Opinions differed widely, but a reasonable selection would be:- (1) The fourth act of "Swan Lake", in which the curtain rises on a palely lit stage with a corps de ballet of some fifty "swans", posed in attitudes of heart-rending dejection, followed by the most delightful dancing, and ending with a stupendous melee, in which the wicked magician is killed.

(2) The Tartar dance in "Bakchisarai", which must be

quite the most energetic spectacle ever staged, almost frightening in its wild abandon.

(3) Ulanova, the incomparable ballerina from Leningrad, in any ballet. She floats through the most difficult enchainment as smoothly as a river flows along its course. If only she could come to this country she would undoubtedly win every sceptic over to ballet.

(4) And M. Faier himself! For without him and his orchestra neither ballet nor the Bolshoi would have meaning. Tchaikovsky, Adam, Rimsky-Korsakov, live gloriously under the magic passes of that little fat man's baton. Almost expressionless of feature, he expresses himself in glorious music at the Bolshoi.

In ballet we have an art which is truly international, with no language difficulties. The Russian language is difficult, so it is not surprising that foreigners in Moscow turn gladly to the ballet, as first choice of theatrical entertainment.

Some members of the British Military Mission would proudly boast of having seen one particular ballet twenty or even thirty times. Tickets were not always easy to obtain, and it was necessary to work a rota, particularly for "Swan Lake", which seemed to be the general favourite.

Another form of ballet-going which was very popular was the Ballet Concert. These were held at the Tchaikovsky Hall and consisted of some twenty items, ranging from dances by the junior pupils of the ballet school, to ambitious efforts by leading ballerinas who really "let their hair down". Here, too, the coming stars were given their first chance to dance solo in public.

In addition to the Bolshoi, ballet is danced at the Filial - a theatre affiliated to the Bolshoi, and at which the same dancers appear, but in different ballets - and the Stanislavsky. The Stanislavsky, like the Bolshoi runs a normal programme of opera on six nights of the week and ballet on one. The Stanislavsky ballets of last season being "Lola", a story of the Peninsular War, "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and "Scheherazade". The Filial ballets were "Crimson Sails" and "Vain Precautions", both very light, attractive and colourful.

New ballets and revivals, are a rarity in Moscow, possibly because there is never any difficulty in filling all the theatres with the present rather restricted repertoire. But there is always a rumour of something new, which keeps everyone in a pleasant state of

anticipation.

Now that Moscow is only a few hours from this country by air, could not somebody induce the U.S.S.R. to run "Ballet Weekend" trips? Somehow, I fear not. But there must be a lot of people who, like myself, wish wistfully at times that they were in No. 2 Box at the Bolshoi, listening to the "Awan Lake" overture, and wondering how they could wait until the second act for Ulanova to appear!