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SWISS BALLERINA IN CHINA

The Swiss ballerina, **MANOLA ASENSIO** (interviewed in the August 1978 issue of "Swiss Observer"), recently returned from a visit to China with The London Festival Ballet, of which she is one of the principal dancers. One of our readers who spoke to her shortly after her return, sends us the following summary of their conversation:

Q.: *The London Festival Ballet is the first major Western ballet company to dance in China for about 20 years. As one of the principal dancers of the company, you also made the trip. When were you there and where did the company perform?*

M.A. We left London on 7th May and travelled first of all to Belgrade where we joined part of the company that had already flown there the day before. After a long wait, the full company of 145 dancers and musicians pursued the journey to Peking where we were met by an official delegation, all lined up on the tarmac at the airport like soldiers in their blue, green or grey Mao uniforms. Their welcome was most cordial and warm. I should like to mention that wherever we went, the Chinese people whom we met were helpful and friendly. Throughout the tour, during our visits, at official parties, each of us was always accompanied by two persons, one speaking Chinese, the other acting as interpreter. The company gave fifteen performances in all, eight in Peking and seven in Shanghai. We returned to London on 22nd May.

Q.: *What productions did the Company present and what roles did you dance?*

M.A. The Company presented two programmes; one full length ballet, "Giselle", and a triple bill of 20th Century dances, Czerny's Etudes, a Bournonville ballet, choreographed by Harald Lander, consisting of a series of exercises progressing from simple steps to the virtuoso classical steps; Elgar's "The Sanguin Fan", a ballet reminiscent of the Victorian era, choreographed by Ronald Hynd, and "Greenings", a modern ballet about



the changing seasons, based on music by the Norwegian composer Arne Nordheim and choreographed by the American Glen Tethy. I danced Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis in "Giselle", and leading roles in "The Sanguin Fan" and "Greenings".

Q.: *You have danced these roles on many occasions in London and the regions, as well as in New York and Washington last year during Festival Ballet's successful American tour. The past year has been very eventful for you. But maybe, the visit to China left some particular impressions upon you.*

M.A. Yes, it is true that I have experienced a very eventful year. I was impressed by the

friendliness and helpfulness of the Chinese. If you stop in the street to take a picture or to look at a shop window, you are immediately surrounded by a crowd of chattering people, all of them seeking to assist you and to give you advice.

The streets are thronged with cyclists and cars making an indescribable din. Because the pavements are too narrow and crowded, people walk on the street. They are generally clad in dark grey suits, children on the other hand dressed in bright colours and looking like dolls. Passers-by gazed at the women dancers wearing long, red hair, or at dancers with bright blue eyes, because this is unknown in China.

Spectators at the perfor-

mances were astonishing. They gave us tremendous ovations, but reacted in a strange way, probably because they are unfamiliar with classical ballet and were surprised at classical productions. They would applaud if they appreciated a technical step, but refrain from applauding at the end of a passage. In "Giselle", for example, the Queen of the Wilis glides across the stage, so I have to dance very short but fast steps on point, called "pas de bourrée", to give the impression that I am gliding. I cross the stage, disappear into the wings and return for variations, which include high jumps called "coupés-jetés". Here in London or in other Western capitals, the audience applauds at the end of the variations. The audience in China, however, applauded me before, during and after the variations. To mention another strange example, in "Greenings", there is the sound of a siren at one stage, and the audience was amused and unexpectedly started laughing.

Chinese television filmed the second performance of "Giselle" in Peking. Our company were impressed by the competent and superb work of the crew who had had no rehearsal and who had not seen the production before.

Q.: *Although you had a very busy schedule of rehearsals and performances, were you able to meet Chinese dancers? In what sort of productions do they dance; does Chinese ballet have any connection with Western ballet? Peking Opera is about to pay a visit to this country. Has it anything to do with ballet as we know it?*

M.A. There are two distinct types of dancing in China. One is the traditional represented by Peking Opera. This company is coming to London in July and is bringing a spectacular version of the legendary tradition dating back to the 8th Century. It presents a kaleidoscope of dancing, acrobatics, mime and singing. Productions are based on martial law; they are what I would call folklore choreography. The Chinese style has moments of deep silence, relaxation, great control. When I watched Peking Opera performing, I was deeply moved by all that I saw. The other style is influenced by the Russian tradition, the Russians having taught the

Chinese classical dancing until about twenty years ago. Since then, there have been no new influences. That is why Chinese dancers were keen to study our productions, to visit classes and to learn from us. The Chinese also showed much interest in the company's technical equipment. We took a steam ironing machine to iron the costumes, and they were so enthralled that they wanted to borrow it. They took it to pieces to see how it works . . . But to come back to ballet: the Chinese are producing full length ballets like "Swan Lake" which they are polishing up and would be able to perform abroad in some years time. Beryl Grey, Festival Ballet's artistic director, danced with a Chinese partner when she visited China in 1964.

Q.: *Did you learn anything about Chinese society today?*

M.A. There was little time to look into the Chinese way of living. It struck me that women work hard and often live separated from their families. Women cannot marry before they are 24, men before they are 27. They are encouraged to have as few children as possible, allowances becoming smaller the more children they have. The Chinese are a very hygienic people. They are allowed no pets in order to stamp out diseases. There is not enough food to spare for animals which would starve and then spread diseases. Nothing goes to waste, all materials are used sparingly.

Q.: *You stayed in Peking and Shanghai. Is there any difference between them?*

M.A. It is like London and Manchester. I would say that Shanghai is more characteristic of China than Peking.

Q.: *You have been with Festival Ballet to Paris, New York, Washington and China in the past eighteen months. What are your plans for the immediate future and where else would you like to perform?*

M.A. I shall shortly be appearing in Festival Ballet's season at the London Coliseum with Rudolf Nureyev. I expect to dance Rosalyn in the Russian dancer's "Romeo and Juliet", as well as Princess Aurora in "Sleeping Beauty" with Nureyev, and "Shéhérazade" with him too. After that, Festival Ballet has a short season in the regions and a

Royal Festival Hall season in London where I shall appear in the name part of Ronald Hynd's "Rosalinda", based on Johann Strauss' "Die Fledermaus".

Having visited Paris, America — where incidentally I spent six years with the New York City Ballet and Harkness Ballet — and China, I have one great wish, that is to dance in Russia, the home of classical ballet. Whether that will ever come true remains to be seen. But, of course, I hope to have some opportunities of appearing in my native country too.

Q.: *I am sure all the readers of The Swiss Observer would like to wish you luck and success. They will certainly be interested to know that the Suisse-romande television is currently preparing a film on you.*

BOOK REVIEW

A few words about "William Shakespeare's Plays", by Ulrich Bräker

Most people who have been on the receiving end of a formal education in Great Britain have "studied" at least one of Shakespeare's plays at some time or other. But "study" is indeed usually the operative word and far less people would lay claim to have enjoyed the experience. The language is too complex even for British schoolboys to readily understand and the humour especially seems anachronistic and scarcely funny to anyone who has been reared on a strict diet of "The Two Ronnies".

Thus, all too sadly, it is often the case that, having been treated as a text-book at school, Shakespeare is discarded in adult life as part of "school culture". This is certainly not what Shakespeare would have wanted as a man who "crept unwillingly to school" himself. Rather than becoming part of an academic study, he would have no doubt far preferred the less sophisticated criticism of Ulrich Bräker, "the poor ignorant citizen of the world who had the good fortune to read him".

It is also a good fortune that those of us who find German difficult can now read Bräker's thoughts on Shakespeare in its first English translation by Derek Bowman, a lecturer in German at Edinburgh University who has also translated Bräker's autobiography, "The Poor Man of Toggenburg".