
Book Review

Marina Grut, *Royal Swedish Ballet: History from 1592 to 1962*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, 2007. ISBN 978-3-487-13494-9. xi + 706 pp, illustrated. 98 EUR.

At over 700 pages this is a weighty tome, and even then the magnificent story it unfolds can scarcely be contained in the pages available. Its nine chapters trace the history of theatrical dance in and around Stockholm since the late sixteenth century, and what is immediately striking is not only the degree of royal patronage which enabled it to develop as it did, but also the degree of French influence which both introduced new choreographic forms and inspired native Swedish ballets.

DHDS members are likely to be particularly interested in the first three or four chapters of the book, which cover the period from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Chapter 1 sets the scene by discussing the influence of Queen Christina prior to her abdication in 1654, and the place of ballet at her culturally brilliant court. This was the era dominated by the French dancing-master Antoine de Beaulieu, who worked with the translator Georg Stiernhielm on several of the court ballets produced for the Queen during the 1640s and early 1650s. Chapter 2 takes up the story after Queen Christina's abdication and the lower-key patronage of successive monarchs in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Nevertheless the 1680s saw the emergence of the first Swedish theatre company, for whom Nicodemus Tessin built the first Drottningholm theatre, and in 1723 the young French dancing-master Jean-Baptiste Landé was given permission to bring a French troupe of dancers to Stockholm. They dominated court life for several years until Landé was dismissed for his 'bad conduct and dissipation' (and subsequently went off to St Petersburg to found what became the Russian Imperial Ballet). By chapter 3 we are in the era of the theatre-loving King Gustav III (1772-1792) and the Gustavian ballets, created by the likes of Louis Gallodier (another French import who remained in post at Stockholm for thirty years and was principal dancer and choreographer of the Royal Swedish Ballet from 1773) and Charles-Louis Didelot, who, although rarely in his native land (to the exasperation of the theatre managers), was the first Swedish-born dancer to achieve international recognition for his dancing and choreography.

Subsequent chapters continue the story of the Royal Swedish Ballet through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, introducing us to an impressive array of emigré ballet masters and dancers – the Taglioni and Bournonville families in particular – and the influential Swedish dancing master Anders Selinder who somehow found time to fit in performances by his own folkdance company while he was working with the Royal Swedish Ballet in the mid-nineteenth century. And so on, to the arrival from Russia in 1913 of Michel Fokine, and up to the era of Mary Skeaping in the 1950s and early 1960s. The whole book is in effect a homage to her, both for her inspired direction of the Ballet Company and for her careful research and reconstruction of early ballets.

As a general history the book works well. Serious scholars however will be less than happy with the often uncritical amalgamation of fact and anecdotal evidence. The primary sources consulted are often so meagrely described and referenced that it would be difficult to follow them up for further information, a weakness brought into sharp focus by the Bibliography. There are also minor slips in the text: p.15 for instance refers the reader to Appendix 3 when Appendix 4 is clearly intended. While this is hardly a serious fault, it does not create a very good impression, and the book would have benefited greatly from more editorial revision before going to print.

On the plus side however, there are over three hundred illustrations, all interesting (although again exasperating in being set out in a quite different order to their numbering), all of excellent quality, and including much material rarely seen before. There is also a very useful series of Appendices, and in particular Appendix 2 (a one-hundred page list of ballets performed in Stockholm between 1638 and 1973, with details of choreographer, production or text, music, performers, number of performances, and so on) will probably become an invaluable work of reference in its own right. It is this, one suspects, that will inspire the in-depth research into specific eras of Swedish ballet history which this preliminary general survey invites, and as such Marina Grut's work is more than welcome.

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