Drama

Baliev on Broadway

THE BAT THEATRE OF MOSCOW (Théatre de la Chauve Souris). Forty-ninth Street Theatre.

DESPITE the extraordinary triumph of Nikita Baliev and his little troupe at the Forty-Ninth Street Theatre, it may be objected that his entertainment has little or nothing to do with drama. Even those who have been wildest in their applause may consider that the "Chauve Souris" is nothing more than "super-cabaret," or vaudeville sublimated. They may point out that it is only a Russian revue, which was born in a night-restaurant of Moscow, an offshoot of the famous Art Theatre directed by Stanislavsky. More inhibited enthusiasts may point out that the individual offerings, the "numbers" that have been most vociferously acclaimed, do not possess even the merit of true novelty. "The Porcelaine de Saxe," for instance, in which tiny figures of an old clock come to life and live over again the romance of other days, may recall an effective little one-act play offered years ago by Alfred Kreymberg in his little theatre. "The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers," likewise, embodies an idea that has been used and misused in American musical comedy, revue, and vaudeville. The same is true of the Italian "grand opera" burlesque. We have never been lacking in any type of novelty in our American theatre. Our managers have almost made a religion of it. Where, then, are we to discover the secret of Baliev's triumph? Why does his modest little entertainment furnish so exhilarating an evening at the theatre?

In the first place, possibly, it is because Nikita Baliev realizes that essentially and fundamentally the theatre is and should be a place of amusement. Every theatrical producer on Broadway may assert that this is likewise his fundamental belief. The difference is that the producer of the American revue, farce, or comedy makes the mis-

take of thinking that amusement is, in some mysterious fashion, something outside the realm of discrimination and criticism. Laughter, these industrious gentlemen feel, cannot be coördinated with intelligence. They have forgotten, if they ever knew, the formula of Molière: no comedy without truth, no truth without laughter. They assume that Americans cannot laugh and think at the same time. And in the creation of purely visual spectacles, where the aim is to impress with visual beauty, these gentlemen too often confuse expense with expression. They provide us with extravagantly expensive scenes and costumes, orgiastic riots—riots surely—of color. In the dance, they prefer energy to grace: as though the delight of the audience must consist in contrasting its own leisurely passivity with that frenzy of bodily energy expended on the stage, that ill-disguised effort that subconsciously but continuously emphasizes how *hard* these performers are working for our amusement. Conspicuous expense in scenery and costumes, hard work on the part of chorus and comedians—these are the ordinary commercial substitutes for amusement and art.

Baliev triumphs in more strategic fashion. There is a sober economy in everything he does, an economy never niggardly but made expressive by a native gayety and intelligence. There is never apparent in his entertainment any strain, any effort to force a point, to cram comedy down our throats. The audience is assumed to be intelligent until proven otherwise. To New York audiences nothing could be more flattering; and small wonder that they are paying opera prices for this treat in a Broadway theatre. The miracle is the more amazing, the magic the greater, in that Baliev has merely snatched up these unconsidered trifles of Russian life, and by the very modesty of his means transmuted them into gems of theatrical expression. The lesson here is not merely for the Broadway manager, but for the American dramatist as well. Let the latter realize the unmined treasure in amusement, mere amusement if you please, but amusement allied with truth. Because our Broadway theatres have shamelessly advertised themselves as "places of amusement," too many of our "little theatres" have haughtily refused to admit amusement into their offerings.

Baliev and his troupe are of value in another way. Much more than the translations or adaptations of the plays of Gorky or Tolstoy, of Chekov or Andreyev, interpreted usually in a heavy fog of gloom, much more illuminatingly than these versions which are periodically offered to us, the Bat Theatre gives us directly and with salient emphasis the very spirit of the Russian people: not the Russian soul filtered and exaggerated through the mind of dramatist or novelist, but caught *sur le vif* at play. It will no longer be possible to talk convincingly of the "mysterious Russian soul, steeped

in the gloom of the steppes," or in words to that effect. Baliev reveals the Muscovite as human, indomitably, courageously gay, and with a native and philosophical resignation. In this entertainment, Nikita Baliev proves himself a true envoy of those misunderstood and misrepresented Russians. He reveals them as a singularly expressive and innocent folk, untroubled apparently by social and political constraints—and possibly for this very reason the pitiful victims of slaves of a fixed idea.

The Chauve Souris illuminates with entirely unexpected flashes the life depicted in the novels and plays of the great Russians of the past. The songs of Glinka, sung in a scene suggesting the balcony of an old Russian house, against a curtain saturated with the atmosphere of the early nineteenth century—here is Pushkin in miniature; the gypsies singing at Yard's (Moscow, 1840) entertaining a lovesick young couple spellbound by the mystery of these weird melodies—they evoke that mad night in the tavern indulged in by Dmitri and Grushenka in "The Brothers Karamazov," no less than one of the opening scenes in Tolstoy's "The Living Corpse," played here by John Barrymore as "Redemption." In the *chastuchki*, the ditties of the working folk, sung against a marvelously suggestive though fragmentary background designed by Nicholas Remisov, one seemed to catch a glimpse of that deep crystal sky, that sense of distance and color that lights up, in some inexplicable fashion, the pages of Anton Chekov's tales. The "Chorus of the Zaitzov Brothers," executed frankly in the spirit of burlesque, suggested nevertheless the ragamuffin world of Maxim Gorky. In the creation of these moods, no little praise must be awarded to Messrs. Remisov and Soudeikin, who seem to possess a magic power of expressing much with the utmost economy of line and color. They exhibit an entirely admirable vigor and directness, a simplicity that is never lacking in expressiveness.

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