

away before the happy ending happened. The servants are comic and feudal, the children prattle round your feet, the old friends sit at your fireside, talking of past days, there is the endless succession of enormous meals, the cold punch and sherry negus, the feather beds and warming-pans, the Christmas parties with charades and blind man's buff; but nothing ever happens, except the yearly childbirth." The ending of *Nicholas Nickleby* conforms to this happy pattern, but the adapters then spring a twist that out-Dickenses Dickens. As idle happiness swirls about Nicholas, he sees downstage an enfeebled boy in rags, shivering: the ghost-image of poor dead Smike, whose grave is adorned with flowers left by a host of little Nicklebys and Cheerybles. Leaving the humming nest of his family, Nicholas walks to the foot of the stage and lifts the sickly lad into the spotlight as a chorus sings, "God rest ye merry, gentlemen . . ." The sheer brazen *daring* of this gesture cuts through all of one's sophisticated defenses—it drives home Orwell's great insight that Dickens was a writer who was *generously angry*. The novel left Smike safely buried; the play resurrects him to show that our duty to the Smikes of this world is never done. Don't never forget.

Even more than the bravura stagecraft, it's this unashamed airing of moral concern that makes *Nickleby* so bracing. *Nicholas Nickleby* clothes moral actions in a suavish style; it makes charity and benevolence seem dashing—sexy. In our time, evil has so often been charged with a mysterious allure while goodness has been treated like a sick cousin, drab and pathetic. A few years ago, an academic critic of Chaucer repeated the modish cant about evil characters (Milton's Satan, Iago) being more compelling than good characters (Milton's God, Desdemona), clenching his argument with the remark, "Take someone to the zoo and he wants to see the snakes." To which the critic Marvin Mudrick replied, "But it doesn't occur to him that nothing in life or literature is more interesting and exciting than goodness: that Troilus, Criseyde, and Pandarus are all both good and wonderfully interesting; so too Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot, Sophocles' Antigone, Pushkin's Tatyana, Trollope's Plantagenet Palliser, Lawrence's Tom Brangwen . . ." Mu-

drick's capper: "And when someone takes me to the zoo I want to see the swans."

Nicholas, Kate, Smike, the blustering Crummles—all are swans of goodness, serenely stretching their wings while ogres and misers skulk through the underbrush. From the underbrush stones fly, but the splashes are soon followed by watery murmurs, the soft rustle of feathers. *Nicholas Nickleby* is a gliding procession. □

## BALLET MOVING PICTURES BY HOLLY BRUBACH



**T**ABLEAU VIVANT, a stationary sort of dancing in which familiar people or celebrities enact famous works of art, was a popular society entertainment at the turn of this century. No one considered it ballet, though dancers sometimes took part: during the first New York season of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, in 1916, Vaslav Nijinsky posed as a gondolier by Carpaccio, on a program to benefit flood victims in Venice. The audience that evening could have seen no more than a fraction of Nijinsky's greatness—no breathtaking jumps or beats, only the plasticity that made him so versatile a dancer, able to transform himself miraculously into a puppet, a golden slave, a faun, or the specter of a rose. But that plasticity undoubtedly played a larger part in great dancing then than we can now imagine.

If the advent of photography helped to send painting in a more abstract direction, movies and TV may well have driven dancing in a more musical direction, in choreography that approximates the rhythmic complexity and speed of its score. Audiences reared on *Life* magazine and Hollywood movies no longer look to ballet for pictures. But if they did, they would find them in dances by Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham.

For Paul Taylor's New York season last spring, the gala opening-night attraction was the revival of his *From*

*Sea to Shining Sea*, a sequence of tired-out patriotic tableaux, with a cast headed by Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rudolf Nureyev, Gwen Verdon, Hermione Gingold, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green. It was sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees. We got Baryshnikov crossing the Delaware, Green landing at Plymouth Rock, and Verdon stitching up the Stars and Stripes.

But when, the following night, Taylor's dancers took over the roles parceled out to celebrities for the first performance, *From Sea to Shining Sea* became a different dance altogether. It's this version that audiences will be seeing as the Taylor company performs the work, without celebrities, on tour.

The gags, some of them side-splitting and all of them over before you know it, became its substance (whereas the substance the first night was the cast), and the marvel of it was that Taylor had managed to weave out of all these scenes a whole piece of dancing. What makes his "Living Pictures," as he calls them in the program, succeed on their own terms where more traditional *tableaux vivants* would surely fail is a point of view.

Something is amiss. The spikes on the Statue of Liberty's crown are bent, as if vandals have been here before us. When the figure of Liberty reappears in the name of God and country, it's with a man sprawled across her lap—as the *Pietà*. Mae West, Marlon Brando, and the Ku Klux Klan all pass through. The weary soldiers hoisting the flag at Iwo Jima are barely able to stand up themselves. Men in bathrobes and women in curler bonnets wander the stage, dejected; we watch them brush their teeth. In a scene straight out of *Route 66*, or *The Flintstones*, or both, Elie Chaib drives an imaginary convertible past a hitchhiker, screeches to a halt, backs up, picks her up, and drives off; the wheels are played by two curled-up dancers turning somersaults, backward when he shifts into reverse. The *Mayflower* runs aground on Plymouth Rock (the rock played by a dancer), and the Pilgrims, as they set foot on American soil, are greeted by an Indian of the Cigar Store tribe. "How," he says, and, according to the best classical ballet tradition, launches into a long, fast mime speech, which starts out something like "Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly . . ." and in no time progresses to a

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curvaceous woman and a four-letter verb, in Italian.

Choreographed in 1965, *From Sea to Shining Sea* has all the earmarks of its time—antiwar sentiment, slouching posture, moral fatigue. The dance survives because it's wittier than it is sullen, and it's hard to imagine any other choreographer working today who could carry off such an assignment. Or who would want to—this picture pamphlet looks static compared with the dancing that audiences have come to expect. Why go to see a ballet if its choreography isn't anything we couldn't do? (Not surprisingly, it was *Arden Court*, a new dance-packed piece that looks as if it were made at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  and performed at 78 rpm, that brought

turne. But Taylor's choreography, when he isn't borrowing scenes from history books or paying tribute to Nijinsky with an Egyptian-style frieze of his own, is every bit as vivid as when he is, and as visually original as the work of most painters.

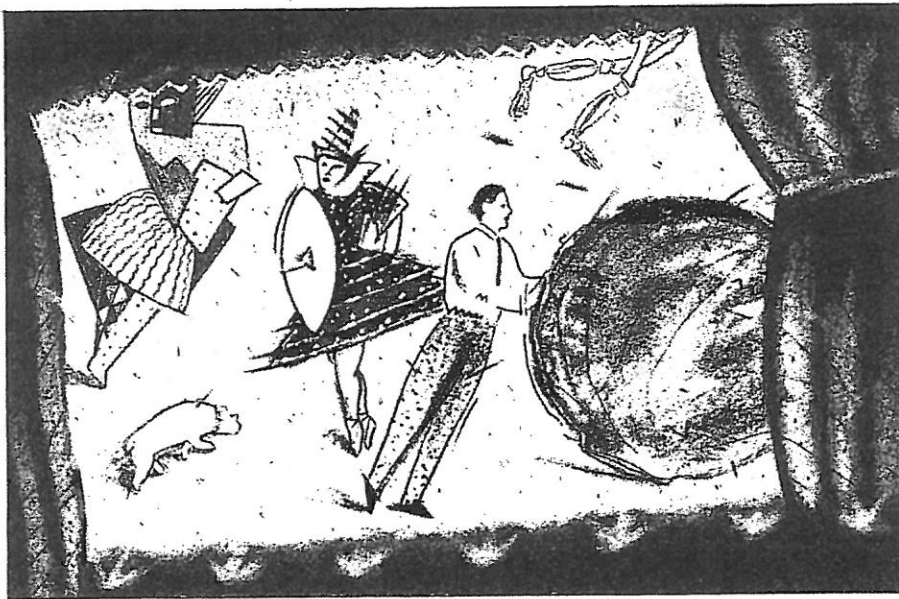
In Taylor's *Polaris*, the only set (by Alex Katz) is a huge eight-foot cube, an aluminum-tube frame at the center of the stage. The dance is performed twice through—the second time by a different cast, to different music, with different lighting, which makes the cube glow first silver against a dark blue field, then bright white, like the heat of a star, against blackness. The choreography never strays far, and the steps that take place inside the cube are magni-

and then miss their action as they went from room to room and window to window, and then they'd reappear. So that was the idea for *Private Domain*," in which we glimpse the dancing through three arches in a flat drop curtain at the front of the stage. And, again, "Alex called me one day and said, 'I've got an idea for a set—dogs all over the stage.' I said, 'Great. We'll do it.'"

In that dance, titled *Diggity*, we see eight people wending their way through an obstacle course of twenty-five cut-out dogs—standing, sitting, rolling over, playing dead. The dogs stay put; the people—jumping, skipping, hopping in *arabesque*—dwell in a stratosphere just above the dogs' heads. Midway through the piece, two men roll out a giant-size cabbage that falls flat to reveal Linda Kent behind it. She dances a solo that announces itself as seductive, with arms flung open, an arched upper back, syncopated hips—movements that read as wild abandon—but in the end is overwhelmed by its own wholesomeness. This bit has about it the earnest, straight-to-the-audience sales pitch more typical of the Miss America Pageant's talent competition than of a Paul Taylor dance; it's out of place not only in *Diggity* but in the entire repertory. But just as we begin to get bogged down in its incongruities, the solo ends, the giant disc is lifted behind the dancer, and we see, painted on the flip side, a sunflower. The only possible logic for this non-sequitur is purely visible.

It's not just occasional moments that strike us as odd in Taylor's work, it's whole dances. His instinct for the unexpected is infallible. None of the preconceptions we bring to other kinds of dancing—to classical ballet, for example—do us any good when we're watching his choreography: the equilibrium we find in symmetrical arrangement, the reassuring knowledge that the dancers will eventually return to certain time-honored formations (the soloist in the center, set off by the corps) are missing completely. So is our notion of who dancers are.

Not all ballet dancers look alike, of course, but their bodies are shaped by the classical technique along similar lines, as if according to the blueprint for some superior race. Onstage, they acquire a universal identity that enables one ballerina to represent all women. Unlike ballet dancers, who gen-



down the house and walked off with the season.)

Many resourceful choreographers turn, at one time or another, to painting and sculpture for inspiration. But when the original source finds its way into the finished dance, it's generally as a paraphrase rather than a direct quotation, a position rather than a pose. Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, from Egyptian reliefs, is one, and the most obvious, example. Frederick Ashton's *Foyer de Danse*, after Degas, is another. Homages to Thomas Eakins (*Eakins' View*, by Rodney Griffin) and Alexander Calder (*Under the Sun*, by Margo Sappington) are in the Pennsylvania Ballet's repertory. In a TV documentary, *Martha Clarke Light & Dark*, Clarke shows us the photograph of Baron de Meyer that inspired her *Noc-*

fied by it. *Polaris* begins with one dancer standing at the cube's center, facing us, and four others, one at each corner, facing her. They shift and climb over one another inside as if they were shut in a stateroom; they spiral-turn around the corner poles. An overhead light shines in, like a hot spot in an interrogation chamber. The dancing, by reiteration, takes on a magical, ritualistic quality: this is the sequence of events defined by this cube, this space.

This set, Taylor says, came first, before the choreography: the cube was the premise for making the dance. The cart carrying the set also came before the horse in two other cases. "I was over at Alex's studio and we were looking out the window, into the buildings across the street," Taylor recalls. "People were doing things—you'd see them



erally have long, well-stretched, diagonally formed thigh muscles, loose-jointed hips, feet with a strong high arch for good spring in a jump, and, in women, a secure position on point, Taylor's dancers have haunches. Their strength runs along the front, not the back, of the legs, and when they jump, they lift themselves by the power in their thighs. The women have bosoms, the men are beefy. Their flat-footed speed, which is pure locomotion, brings to mind the Road Runner. The bodies of these dancers haven't been stylized—or idealized, as ballet dancers have—by any uniform system of training; they seem instead to have been chosen for their singularity, in all shapes and sizes.

The governing principle in classical ballet is, traditionally, beauty. Every individual dancer aspires to certain standard positions. Turnout, in addition to facilitating a greater range of motion, shows us the most interesting lines of the legs. But this flattery, presenting the body at its best, is no concern of Taylor's. His dances, as a result, look determinedly honest, and innocent. We see fewer lines, more shapes. Classical ballet has a visual tradition all its own, and a dancer trained in it looks as if he had stepped out of a ballet. But Taylor's dancers look like people, and the images he makes with them have more in common with painting and sculpture than with other kinds of dance.

In *Tablet* (1960), *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rehearsal*) (1980), and *Profiles* (a thumbnail sketch for *Sacre*, in 1979), Taylor explores his fascination with flat, two-dimensional dancing. His *Sacre* pays tribute to Nijinsky, who choreographed the same Stravinsky score the first time around, with positions in the style of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*—knees bent, with the legs and feet in profile and the torso twisted front, palms out and fingers curled under at the knuckle. Two women at a dressing table mirror each other's movements; we watch the final, sacrificial solo in a rehearsal-studio mirror upstage. John Rawlings's costumes and set, all black, white, and gray, except for an occasional red prop—a bag, a dagger, a baby's bunting—give this *Sacre* the look of a cartoon filmstrip. The somewhat hazy plot is a detective yarn, set in Chinatown. The Egyptian reliefs that inspired these same positions in Nijinsky are twice removed

and buried beneath other references.

The picture Taylor presents in *Nightshade* is drawn in indelible ink. The idea, according to Taylor, came from etchings by Max Ernst. Like a nightmare in slow motion, the dance unfolds with an inevitability that's at the same time terrifying and fascinating; it's hard to imagine a more horrific ballet. The horror lies in its ambiguity, and just after its premiere in 1979, reviewers made a desperate—but unconvincing—attempt to account for its action, as if by doing so they could reason away the dread that takes hold of us in witnessing it. But whatever *Nightshade* is about, its subject isn't nearly as clear as its images.

There are six people in Victorian

as the image persists and the laughter subsides, we find ourselves reluctantly considering the suggestion of rape. But suggestion is as explicit as *Nightshade* ever gets, and the dancing moves on without ever resolving the issue or the image.

By lanternlight, we watch two men crouched over a woman lying on the floor; another woman, as if testing for death, lifts her wrist and it falls back to the floor, lifeless. The gesture is repeated—another thud. The sprite sits perched on the black man's shoulders and, for a moment, for no good reason, we take heart. He whirls like a dervish. Then, without warning, she drops from where she sits and, her ankles around his neck, hangs limp, swaying upside



dress—the women in long skirts and bonnets, the men in tailcoats—and two characters who are distinctly not human: one, a quick-moving sprite (Carolyn Adams), whose ankle bands and short “grass” skirt made of colored ribbons are vague reminders of a medieval jester's costume; the other, a hulking man (Elie Chaib), dressed all in black, with a black face and a black moplike wig—a witch doctor or a mysterious voodoo god. In the course of the ballet, he struggles with a fair-skinned, red-haired woman (Karla Wolfangle), dressed in a loose black negligee—and prevails. The apparition of this woman dragged by the feet, seemingly nude, with her nightgown hanging down around her shoulders and her head in a big wicker basket, invariably provokes uneasy laughter from an audience until,

down. In this awful final image, whatever it signifies, we immediately recognize the vindication for our fears.

The score for *Nightshade* is a selection of Scriabin piano pieces, appropriately fitful. In *From Sea to Shining Sea*, John Herbert McDowell's music, which is sparse and aimless, confirms the restlessness that moves the dancers from one tableau to the next. And for *Diggity*, Donald York's pleasant but inconsequential score hums along like scenery seen through a bus window. While Taylor's ear isn't as sophisticated as his eye, he never fails to grasp the sense of the music and often uses it to create brilliant effects: when the Crook's stooge pulls a rhinestone necklace out of the bag on a piano trill in *Sacre*, we hear the tinkle of the jewelry.

Taylor's dances go along with their music, but don't comment on it, as George Balanchine's do. And though Balanchine, for his part, has designed some arresting images—a man on a journey, guided from behind by a woman, blindfolded by her hand (in *Serenade*), a sleepwalker on point, carrying a candle—even those images serve to call our attention to the music.

IF MERCE CUNNINGHAM'S choreography isn't quite so painterly as Taylor's, the reason is that he has abdicated responsibility for arranging the entire stage. The notion of fixed perspective, however convenient, isn't very realistic, Cunningham finds. "Ballet choreography is built for the king, who sits in the middle," he says. "That's not wrong, it's just a different way of thinking." So, thinking to provide people on the sides of the theater with as much of the dance as the king sees, Cunningham choreographs movement to be seen from any angle. If the set happens to obscure some of the dancing, as Frank Stella's free-standing stripes of color do in *Scramble*, as Jasper Johns's constructions from Duchamp's "Large Glass" do in *Walkaround Time*, that's fine; after all, he explains, "the movement may be obscured for one person, but not for another." The decor, which in the past thirty years Cunningham has commissioned from Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Mark Lancaster, is separate from but equal to the dancing. But in performance it often conspires with the choreography to make Cunningham's dances as visual an experience as any painting.

In *Fractions* (1978), eight panels of color hanging overhead impose a "ceiling" on the dancing. They slide up and down, forming a small-scale proscenium to frame the duets, providing a backdrop for a solo. The eight dancers, each wearing a different color—none of the shades the same as the panels—come and go, and eventually each puts on a second leotard or pair of tights in still another color. The dance, which is by no means simple, is further complicated by this color strategy.

Cunningham's interest in visual art has recently turned to video and film: he now makes dances to be seen two-dimensionally, on a screen, and afterward adapts them to the theater. But *Channels/Inserts*, choreographed for

film but worked out in the studio on video monitors, and seen onstage for the first time last March, seems a digression of a more important sort. For some time now, Cunningham's choreography has looked as if it were conceived in the mind's eye, to be approximated as nearly as possible by real dancers. *Torse*, *Locale*, *Exchange*—all recent works, heavy with ensemble choreography—share in the textbook exposition of Cunningham's technique. Like classroom combinations, they are movement at its most abstract, theoretical—without subject or plot, but also without reference to the dancers. In *Channels/Inserts*, however, the dancing and the dancers are one and the same. The choreography camouflages any technical weaknesses and displays each dancer's particular gifts—Chris Komar's eccentric *port de bras*, hinged at the elbow; Karole Armitage's savage attack, giving way to relaxed surrender; Lise Friedman's gorgeous line in supported *adagio*. Six men enter one at a time and, in turn, perform short solo variations on the same spot. Each of these solos is as big as the full TV screen in the video version, and it seems as if Cunningham has been forced by the camera's more intimate range to pay closer attention to his dancers.

The music, of course, is as independent of the choreography as the decor. But somehow the music and the movement never merge in Cunningham's dances, as the movement and the decor invariably do. During his company's last season in New York, some members of the audience came wearing cassette tape players and earphones, and as I listened to the shrill whistles, squealing feedback, and BB-gunfire of David Tudor's score for *Exchange*, I wondered what the dancing would look like if set to a Mozart score instead. Cunningham, who makes his dances in silence, can hardly argue that this new BYO-music policy, instigated by the audience, violates his work. Imagine a theater full of people who have decided to override his choice of composer and tune into their own: each would leave with a different impression of the same dance. But, whatever the score, *Fractions* will always be *Fractions*, *Channels/Inserts* will look like no other dance in the repertory, *Scramble* will be what it has always been. The identity of every Cunningham work declares itself visually. The dancing demands only to be seen. □

## SHORT REVIEWS



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**THE TEMPTATION OF EILEEN HUGHES** by Brian Moore. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$11.95. Eileen is twenty years old, shy, dutiful, and kindhearted. Since she has never in her life been outside Northern Ireland, an invitation to visit London as guest of her employers, Mr. and Mrs. McAuley, seems a great piece of luck. The trip becomes a maze of perverse psychological manifestations through which Eileen, who, although socially inexperienced, is neither stupid nor unobservant, picks her way with common sense and some help from a random knight in tarnished armor. Mr. Moore has succeeded in the difficult task of making an uncomplicated girl an interesting heroine, but one is left with the suspicion that he has also told the easier of two possible tales.

**BYRON'S LETTERS AND JOURNALS Vol. 11** edited by Leslie A. Marchand. Harvard, \$15.00. "For Freedom's Battle" covers the last months of Byron's life, which he spent in Greece trying to bring some practical order to a chaotic war of independence. His final letters are naturally, in such circumstances, concerned with money, supplies, and military plans, but these sober preoccupations do not make them dull. A gaggle of "adventurers of all nations" had settled on Greece like buzzards on a corpse, and Byron, between calming duellists and controlling drunks, reported, "we are likely to form as goodly an allied army—as ever quarreled beneath the same banner." There were earthquakes that sent people diving through windows and negotiations with a crew of English armament mechanics who took one horrified look at the confusion and clamored to go home. Byron was plagued by braggarts, beggars, and liars ("there never was such an incapacity for veracity shown since Eve lived in Paradise," was how he put it), but he was also enjoying his part in an action that he believed was right. The volume ends not with Byron's death but with a return to his youth through letters to his close friend, Scrope Davies, a gambler and dandy whose papers came to