COMMENTARY

A Picture of Passion:

The truth about ballet — its joy and sorrow, pain and exultation — remains difficult to capture on film

January 1, 2004 by Toni Bentley

Robert Altman's new movie, "The Company" — a "tribute" to the ballet world — reveals a curious moment in the history of ballet. Twenty years after the death of George Balanchine, the father of classical ballet in the 20th century, we are, as the film attests, in the midst of a democratic furlough from an aristocratic art form.

Ballet, first codified in the court of Louis XIV more than 300 years ago and later refined in 19th century Russia under the czars, is an art based, for good reason, on hierarchy (it encourages the competition necessary for excellence to prevail); benevolent rule (one man's vision, as with Balanchine's, has always produced the best companies, dancers and dances); and a mental, spiritual and physical discipline that is unforgiving, relentless and unapologetic.

Yet in Altman's movie, all the dancers remain vague and, ironically, unformed. The only real character is the leader of the fictionalized Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, company director Alberto Antonelli. Played by Malcolm McDowell, Mr. A is a flamboyant, coarse and self-important man: the anti-Balanchine.

The film has some poignant moments: a retired dancer working out alone, her back as flat and tapered as it no doubt was in earlier days, her legs certainly weaker and stiffer; a dancer in rehearsal snapping her Achilles' tendon, destroying her career and 15 years of work in a millisecond. But ultimately the story goes nowhere, crowns no one and aims only to celebrate the quotidian lives of men and women in a dance troupe.

These people worry about their contracts, their injuries, their age, their love lives, their paychecks. Wow, sounds like the rest of us. And that's the problem. Ballet has been removed from its pedestal and reduced to "real life," so audiences everywhere can "connect," "identify" and perhaps even feel better about their own dashed dreams.

But the bloody-toed martyrdom of ballet — so often, and easily, romanticized — does not in fact represent the "reality" of a dancer's life, just the gray underpaid difficulty of it.

Here the details undermine the whole. Although superficially accurate, this amalgamation

of sometimes-gory backstage ephemera actually camouflages the profound question at the center of any professional dancer's life: how best to serve Terpsichore, the goddess of the dance.

Of course dancers, like other humans, must endure their everyday lives. What distinguishes dancers, however, or any artist, is not repetitious details but the result, the performance, along with a headstrong drive to rise above banalities and astound with something beautiful. But this is not an easy concept to dramatize on celluloid, which by definition excises the essential third dimension of live performance.

Altman's demotion of a fragile and transient art form from the patrician to the plebeian is not the first Hollywood venture to present this unfortunate transition. Nicholas Hytner's 2000 "Center Stage," while rather more of a guilty pleasure, proposed the stunning concept that disco dancing is far more "fun" than ballet dancing.

The heroine of "Center Stage," a young dancer in ballet school, is a girl-next-door type with a lovely face but an imperfect ballet body — her feet and turnout, we are repeatedly told, leave something to be desired in the eyes of the cruel men and women who rule ballet. The discipline required by ballet is declared "uptight."

But after hot sex with a celebrity dancer, a late night at a disco and plenty of alcohol, this girl overcomes the constraints placed on her and becomes the film's heroine. She is now no longer a strange girl with a demanding artistic obsession. She, along with ballet, is off that "uptight" pedestal. What a relief! Or is it? With no one and nothing on a pedestal, wouldn't life be dull — like the lives of the dancers in "The Company"?

Hytner's movie, like Altman's, can mesmerize with its imagery, but in the end it too avoids the central dilemma for every dancer: to dance or to live? Of all ballet films, in fact (including 1977's "The Turning Point," featuring Mikhail Baryshnikov), only the 1948 "The Red Shoes" dares to speak the unspeakable about a dancer's real life, inner life, onstage life.

This magnificent, colorful and surreal film by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (available on VHS and DVD) stars the divine young Moira Shearer as its tragic heroine. Miss Victoria Page is the quintessential ballerina-star-diva; when we first encounter her, she is in a box in the audience at Covent Garden, wearing nothing less than a glittering tiara. But, and here is the genius of the Powell portrayal, the specificity of her story — a prima ballerina's story — presents the love, passion and eternal conflict that make up the essence of any truly dedicated dancer.

The imperious company director in the film, Boris Lermontov, played by the suave Anton Walbrook, tells Vicky the story of the "Red Shoes" ballet (based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale) that he will create for her. It is the story of "a girl devoured by an ambition to wear red shoes." She wears them to a party and dances, but when she is tired and wants to go home, the shoes are not tired, "they are never tired, they dance her through night and day, time rushes by, love rushes by, life rushes by, but the red

shoes dance on and on…."

Vicky, entranced, asks how it will end. "Oh," Lermontov says matter-of-factly, "the end? She dies." There is no escape for one chosen by Terpsichore.

Lermontov tests the young ballerina's dedication, asking her to define "ballet." She responds without hesitation: "For me, it is a religion."

"Why do you want to dance?" he continues.

"Why do you want to live?" she counters.

"I must," he responds.

"That's my answer too." And their pact is sealed. But Vicky falls in love and marries a young composer. Lermontov is outraged, heartbroken. There is no "having it all" in the uncompromising world of this visionary man of the theater.

Torn by having to choose between loving and dancing, Vicky determines to put on the red shoes and dance one last time, but when confronted by her beloved husband, she is unable to decide and flings herself into the path of an oncoming train.

Laid out on a stretcher by the tracks, she utters her last words: "Take off the red shoes." Miss Victoria Page, fittingly, dies in her tutu.

In "The Company," there is one sequence that suggests redemption. An excerpt from the 1990 dance "White Widow," it features the lovely, simple choreography of Moses Pendleton and Cynthia Quinn of the modern dance ensemble Momix and the otherworldly voice of Julee Cruise singing "The World Spins," with music by Angelo Badalamenti and lyrics by filmmaker David Lynch. In this eclectic work, New Age meets ballet: the Blue Velvet Shoes.

A single female dancer dressed in a long, full white skirt dances not with a male partner but with a rope-like swing suspended from above the proscenium. She remains faceless, with loose hair, but as her skirt catches the breeze from her swinging and twirling, and her beautiful feet in their tight, ribboned pointe shoes glide and turn and spin in close-up, something extraordinary happens.

Altman has managed, perhaps in spite of his overall democratic intention, to capture four meditative minutes of reverie, yearning and lonely beauty. The dancer's satin-sheathed feet, barely skimming the ground, magically create their own kind of pedestal, where art is about love and love is about loss and dance reconciles the two. The red shoes, oblivious to time, do dance on and on.

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