

re-action against such puritanism. Gradually the need for a different approach is becoming recognized. As Josef Goldbrunner puts it:<sup>4</sup>

‘Formerly spiritualisation was the goal, now it is the moulding of the whole human life.’

If any aspect is rejected the holiness which is wholeness cannot exist. But it is still difficult for us to see this, so deep is the Neo-Platonic tradition in our own heritage. And yet the whole matter has been strangely overlooked, and when most people picture the Renaissance today they see it rather as an example of hedonism than anything else. They ignore the tendencies which flourished among the great minds of Catholic Europe. They do not see the profound significance of Boehme’s position; a loyal Lutheran (though much affected, according to Dr Stout, by the Catholic mystics of the Low Countries), who yet reached an extreme position which would not have been out of place in a Marcionite. They do not understand what were the roots of the Puritan movement in which the Renaissance ended. Perhaps the publication of these two most vital works will help towards a better estimation of our traditional European civilization.

4 Josef Goldbrunner: *Holiness is Wholeness*. (Burns and Oates, 1955.)

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## OBITER

VARIATIONS ON A THEME. ‘Two households, both alike in dignity’ begins the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, setting the framework for the two hours’ traffic of the stage that is to tell the story of those star-crossed lovers; but those who have had the good fortune to see both the Bolshoi dancing their version of the tragedy and, more recently, *West Side Story* may well feel that the words apply almost equally aptly to those two extraordinary performances. It is hard to say which proved the more surprising, though for widely different reasons.

We have been extremely slow to appreciate the full implications of the implacable Soviet insistence on realism in art, and when the Bolshoi sailed slowly and majestically into their first night at Covent Garden, most of us simply could not believe our eyes: that about two-thirds of the evening was going to consist of this realistic, old-fashioned over-emphatic mime did not at first occur to us. The sets were banal, the costumes unimaginative and the colours uncertain so that all the blaze we had expected was signally lacking. What was far more disconcerting, however, was the pace and wholeheartedness of the action. In the banquet scene, everybody was doing something all the

time, and with absolutely every limb and expression at his command; should someone quaff a goblet of wine, it was almost audibly with a flurry of period remarks like 'marry', 'forsooth' or 'quotha', and a smacking of lips that would have been considered overdone in the touring Shakespearean companies of my youth who had, in fact, given me *Romeo and Juliet* for the first time. It was so serious, so deliberate, so reverent and, to me at least, so often boring. Once they began to dance—and how long it seemed before they did—the pure undidactic aesthetic magic of ballet flamed up at once. Sergei Koren as Mercutio was electric, his wit and his technique and his power making Romeo seem dull in comparison—which truth to tell sometimes happens in the theatre, as those who saw the Gielgud/Olivier alternation in the characters will remember—and we sat back with a sigh of relief at seeing at last what we had come for. Every now and then, as for instance in the wonderful episode of the street fight, when the violence erupted first from one side of the stage then from the other until finally the whole area was alight with wickedly glinting blades and angry young men, the ensemble fused into that cohesion of movement, colour and emotion that is the secret of ballet; but this happened all too rarely, and it was more the memory of gentlemen in dressing-gowns pacing about the stage that one carried away. Except for Ulanova, of course: the performance, the transformation, rather, of this no longer young woman in an unremarkable costume into the very flower of youth and innocence was one of the most breath-taking sights possible. As she moved dreamily forward with Romeo in Brother Lawrence's cell, her miraculous feet stepping forward and down, forward and down and then—suddenly—forward and up on to the points like a swallow skimming water one was moved to tears by the inevitability of her genius. This was something never to be forgotten, a moment of absolute delight such as one might never have in a lifetime. We forgot the reverend signors, the jolly clowns, the heavy drama, and went home in a dream.

There is nothing like this in *West Side Story*: how could there be? But as a whole, heretical or not, it seems to me to be a far more urgent presentation of the passion and violence of the young Shakespeare's youthful exuberance. By the transference of the story into terms of gang-warfare in the New York streets Jerome Robbins has, of course, inevitably lowered the level of the story, while at the same time heightening the temperature, as it were. The nobility has gone, but the fierceness is enhanced. The Bernstein music is adult, febrile and precisely symptomatic of our age of anxiety; it is also occasionally a little vulgar, but I am not sure that this matters in the context. The sets, mere skeleton suggestions of house or girder or balcony, bring more

swiftly to life the hot and dusty streets than all the solid verisimilitude of the Bolshoi furniture could produce in three hours; the colours of the costumes rage and scream at each other like the cross-rhythms of the music, so that Maria's white dress, her soft and fluid skirts which are as unobtrusive as Ulanova's unbecoming shift, seem to underline the fragility of her youth and gay vulnerability. The words of *West Side Story* are witty and contemporary, and it is full of all the cocksureness of youth, which is the very spirit of the play; but it is in the dancing, the formalized, savage movements of the gangs when they meet, in the flamenco-provocation of the Sharks in the dancehall, the terrifying cut and thrust of the 'rumble' when Tony kills Bernardo in the desolate *terrain vague* under the great arch of the highway flyover; in the frightened, almost diffident, patterns which the Jets weave after they have left the two boys dead on the concrete that one sees most clearly the difference between realism and suggestion. Suggestion wins hands down; stylized violence, stylized grief, stylized passion convey more vividly, in the ensemble of décor, sound and music, all the exultation and compassion that Shakespeare poured into his breathless lyrical threnody on young love betrayed than the cumbrous machinery of the Bolshoi was able to do. But when all is said and done, is not perhaps the most remarkable thing Shakespeare's own story, so patient of exploitation in varying genres, and yet so matchless in itself, when one turns to read it again, as one compulsively must each time one sees a variation on its theme; fashions may come and go, but this eternal summer, at least, shall not fade.

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