

The Arts

Nureyev blasts nationalism

Rudolf Nureyev was in Toronto earlier this year for the opening of the National Ballet's spring season. He danced the title of *Don Juan* in the North American premiere of the one-act ballet by the young American choreographer, John Neumier. The ballet was received with a six-minute ovation. Out of the Neumier-Nureyev combination emerged some extraordinary moments, like the scene of Juan's damnation when the flames of hell turn the ballroom a rosy red: at this moment Nureyev touched up his hair and went over to the flames to warm his hands.

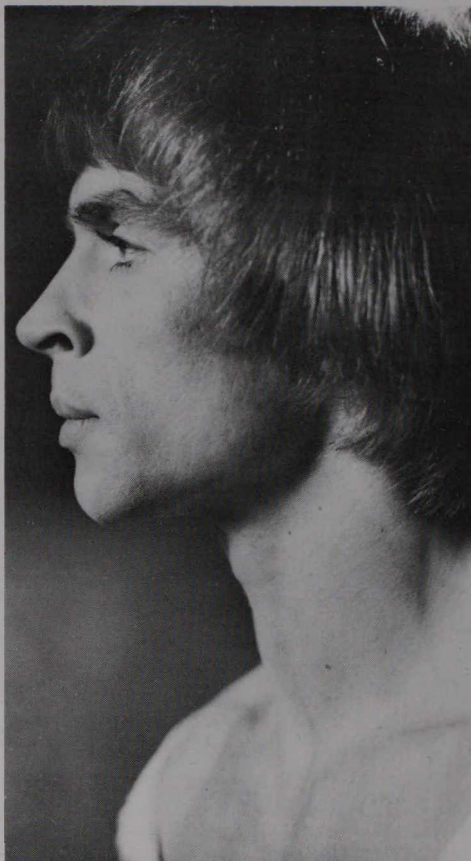
A few days before the ballet opened Nureyev delivered himself of a tirade against nationalism in the arts, and particularly the ballet, in Canada. He was talking in an interview with John Fraser, dance critic of *The Globe and Mail*. Here is a slightly shortened version of the interview.

Rudolf Nureyev rejected nationalism in the performing arts the day he jumped into the arms of that astonished gendarme at Paris' Orly airport and asked for asylum. It was the last political jete of his career — all the others have been served up for art. He keeps houses in several places and dances nearly everywhere, but there is no country that he would call home.

There are several companies Nureyev is fond of and enjoys working with, and the National Ballet is certainly one of them. Because of the success of last season's North American tour and the anticipated success of the one just ahead, it has been assumed that a special relationship exists between the Russian-born superstar and this country. It's an illusion. At the moment, he's here because the action's here, because Sol Hurok, the all-powerful New York impresario, arranged it that way, and because the National needs him, especially right now when it is woefully short of powerful male principals.

As a business deal, it seems to be working fairly well. On a personal level, however, some sore points have arisen. For one thing, Nureyev is trying to come to terms with Canadian nationalism, or "this big chip you have on your shoulders," as he put it in an interview.

"It's not easy for a foreign artist to come to this country right now. I'm not the only one, I've heard it from others. You protest at our coming and you close your eyes to all other considerations, including artistic considerations. You don't make foreign artists feel very comfortable. Do I hurt Canada when I dance here? Do I hurt this company?"



Rudolf Nureyev.

You don't have to look very far for the roots of discontent here. Nureyev was upset by the widespread criticism of his production of *The Sleeping Beauty* for the costs it incurred. He does not fancy an image of himself that has been floating around, which depicts him as an insensitive outsider who jetted in, issued orders and brought the National to the brink of bankruptcy. The way he sees it, he made a beautiful ballet for Canada.

"This nationalism costs money, you know. So many of *The Sleeping Beauty* sets could have been built in England and brought out here more cheaply than what was done. I know, I know, they tell me you have to use Canadian labor, so all right, it costs more money and everyone screams about overtime costs. Well, I tell you, when La Scala did my *Sleeping Beauty* it was three times cheaper. And you know what? It was even more sumptuous."

Nationalism perhaps was never a very logical business. The logic of cheaper sets, built by professionals outside the country, is straight and simple to him, and the desire for national self-sufficiency even in this small area seems silly.

Add to this the fact that the company is

feeling its oats at the moment and rather likes the idea of producing its own stars instead of importing them — to the point where it is playing coy with Nureyev over plans for next year — and some idea of the differences that are emerging can be grasped.

Right now, he feels the company is merely using him, without much appreciation and he's quite right. There's no doubt that he is the linchpin in the deal with Hurok. Without his presence the National would not have had either the past or upcoming tour and would not be performing in New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

The National is also reaping the benefits of the Nureyev phenomenon. Since that great political leap in Paris 13 years ago, his particular brand of athletic and dramatic dancing has brought new life to Western ballet and a major improvement to the image of male dancing. Even his erratic personality and celebrated pranks have engendered a lively interest in the art among a large number of people who have come to love ballet primarily because of him. And because of all this, his presence with any company has always meant sure-fire success at the box-office.

On the other hand, it is equally true that Nureyev has used Canada and the National Ballet. The company is, as one critic put it, "a handsome backdrop to his talent" and the National tends to feel a little unappreciated once it gets beyond the border.

Nureyev has a quick temper which frightens many people, but it is one of his attractive traits that he does not hold grudges (at least not much longer than a year). His complaints are divulged, one suspects, so that he can get them off his chest, be done with them and get back to dancing. But before he leaves off flailing away, there's one other gripe — Norman Campbell's television version of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

"Someone was cheating me in that film and I don't like that to be. The way every single dancer moved in the ballet was plotted out before anything else was done. All the cuts in the production were agreed upon so that it could fit into the 90 minutes. But what happened? Strange camera angles were used that no one discussed with me and which I wasn't aware of during the filming. All the variations for the fairies in the Prologue were cut out without my permission.

"The ballet was castrated, the company was castrated. Instead of the fairy variations, you know what we see? We see

Photo Dominic, Camera Press.