A View of Kingston, Jamaica, from Strawberry Hill

Photograph: Courtesy of Emma Lewis, Writer, Blogger, Environmentalist (Petchary.wordpress.com)
Endorsement

By highlighting a series of memories of dancing and performing, at the Ward and Little Theatres, a few of Fay Simpson’s former dance students present arresting snapshots of their experiences. In reading the book, I remember the magical kind of dance movies made during the Second World War. Take Judy Garland’s and Gene Kelly’s movies in the 1940s, for example – their song and dance movies had enormous positive psychological effects for those experiencing war or its conditions. I remember, well, Gene Kelly with Leslie Caron in ‘An American in Paris’ (1951) – incidentally, one of my favourite movies - that their dancing transported everyone watching into a different world. The classics like ‘The Nutcracker’, many other ballets and similar kinds of dance, such as some Asian dances, I think achieve the same impact. All contain this special magical element which takes the audience to a special world.

“Dancing with Mrs. Fay Simpson” is not just a book for dance, music and opera lovers, it is also about teaching any of the performing arts and other subjects in the humanities. The authors explain the ways that Fay Simpson tailored the dances to emphasize the students’ strengths and not weaknesses. Similarly, that Fay Simpson encouraged musical talents, by giving opportunities to the Foster Davis Youth Orchestra to accompany the dancers, was another very interesting point. In other words, Fay seemed to give the ballet students as complete and comprehensive an experience, as possible. Such exposure to live musical performances, made her a great teacher, apart from the ballet techniques taught to the children and young adults.

The book’s language is consistently, rich, poetic and graphic. It allows the reader to visualize the movements throughout the prose – one of the scores of lovely examples being: ‘[the dancers] minced with high prancing steps, followed by quick staccato, and bourrée steps --- right across the stage.’ I smiled when I read that.

Denise’s memories of ‘Giselle’ and her lead role demonstrate that the world of magic and illusions could be created, if only for short periods of time. Reminiscing about the audience’s engagement and responses to Giselle, indicate that the ballet gave them particularly rich, illusory treats. The memories of the ‘Santa Claus Parades’ are delightful. I note that the book uses various kinds of humour throughout to great effect – such as when Mrs. Gloria Cumper thought that Cecille was not showing sufficient fear – contrary to what she was actually feeling!

More than ever, I see how dancing is an essential part of who the authors were then and now.

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