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The Milwaukee Ballet's Daphnis and Chloe

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DAPHNIS AND CHLOE

By Curtis L. Carter

Ravel's musical delicacy *Daphnis and Chloe*, with its essence of pastoral love, has attracted the interest of major and minor choreographers from its inception. The ballet was first produced in 1912 by Michael Fokine for performance by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris. Later productions include a Philadelphia Ballet production choreographed by Catherine Littlefield (1936); Frederick Ashton's Sadler's Wells (Royal Ballet) production (1951), and John Cranko's Stuttgart Ballet version (1962). The ballet has commanded the interest of the finest dancers of our century, including Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky who performed in the 1912 production and Margot Fonteyn and Michael Sommers who created the roles of Chloe and Daphnis for the Ashton choreography.

To these fine productions the Milwaukee Ballet had added its own, first performed in the season of 1977-78 and most recently presented at the Milwaukee Performing Arts Center on February 24-25, 1978. Choreographed by artistic director Jean Paul Comelin, the Milwaukee version is set in a forest and is divided into five scenes, as adapted

from the original libretto of Michael Fokine, 1906.

Scene one discloses the shepherd youths on a Mediterranean isle expressing homage to the god Pan and his nymphs. Three maiden deities with gold painted bodies stand sculpture-like on a diagonally pitched base. These three figures (dancers) are seen through the scrim. Their stark, art deco forms contrast with the softer pastoral motif of the work, producing an eerie visual tension.

The legendary Daphnis, hero of the shepherds and son of the god Hermes, is frustrated in his pursuit of the beloved Chloe, first by the intervening taunts of the shepherd boys, then by the seductress Lycaenion and by the invading pirates led by Bryaxis. Chloe is carried off by the pirates and is set up for a festive rape. Daphnis' prayers to Pan are answered, however, and the spirit of Pan terrifies Bryaxis as he is in the act of raping Chloe. The pirates disperse in disarray, and Daphnis and Chloe are reunited with the purity of their love intact.

Nolan T'Sani, formerly with the New York City Ballet and presently with the Sacramento Ballet, danced the role of Daphnis. T'Sani moves with great bodily fluidity, but his dancing lacks a distinctive character and appears lackluster. Leslie McBeth frequently caught the innocence of Chloe, but her movement is increasingly stiff and lacking in flexibility. Mark Diamond who danced Bryaxis succeeded in evoking a convincingly lecherous character, but he had little to do as far as movement was concerned.

Comelin's *Daphnis and Chloe* contains some visually attractive sections, such as the early shepherd dances, and the movements of the three goddesses who transform themselves from statuesque to live figures. But there are also coarse and self-indulgent excesses.

At the pirates' camp in scene four, Byraxis is attempting to subdue Chloe, who despairs at the thought of his advances. Byraxis is lifted into the air by his attendants and propelled toward the struggling Chloe like a giant phallus. Here coarse, almost vulgar excess takes over, and the dance movements grate against the delicate music that Ravel has provided.