The Ballet Meister

Margaret Mattison*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

"WHAT A BALL," called Luigi in his best New Jersey slang. He put another tablespoon of Mexican sauce on his hamburger and repeated the phrase for anyone who might be listening. "What an absolute ball." He was describing the party after the opening of the ballet.
"What a ball," called Luigi in his best New Jersey slang. He put another tablespoon of Mexican sauce on his hamburger and repeated the phrase for anyone who might be listening. "What an absolute ball." He was describing the party after the opening of the ballet. As composer of the ballet, he had a right to celebrate. It was the best ballet that Scott Theater of the Arts had ever produced.

"But where is Mr. Johnnie Beggs? No party is complete until the choreographer comes," he said as he looked over the crowd around the fire.

"I haven't seen John since before the curtain calls," said little Don Fibenger. "I can't figure out why he wasn't there to get his applause."

"Last time I saw him, he was wandering around back stage." Bill Allison was at his usual station—beside the coffee pot.

The long and narrow Nancy reached for another slice of onion. "You know, troupe, I just can't figure that out. Remember when John danced the part of the Hairy Beast of the Enchanted Cave? He was supposed to carry Greta into the forest." She popped the onion into her mouth and said the rest through the onion ring. "He leaped right by her as if she were just another tree." Nancy demonstrated with a young aspen. She pranced around the tree like a young giraffe. "Greta had to dance around in front of him so he could lunge again."

"I can't figure out why he forgot the leap. After all he composed the dance. He seemed to be looking through Greta instead of at her." Don's mouth twitched as he spoke. His mouth always twitched when he thought he had said something nasty.

"Listen, kids, we all make mistakes. Imagine the strain
he was under tonight.” That was Ann. Always on the team that needed another player. You could tell by her eyes that she was on your side.

Frank sat in the wicker rocker with a pickle in one hand and a piece of devil’s food cake in the other. “Anyway, John is one great guy. How many professionals do you know who would give up their summer to come out here and teach a bunch of amateurs?”

“Shh!” Ann looked toward the gate in the back yard. “I think I hear John now.”

We listened. We heard a few curses, a cry of “Bring a man a light so he can see where he’s going,” and then John stepped into the lantern light.

“For heaven’s sake, John.” Luigi called from the cake table, “What took you so long? The party’s almost over.”

“I’ve been scrubbing that damn grease paint off my face. I look like a white man again.”

John was wrong. He didn’t look like a white man. In fact, the orange paint was almost as thick as it had been in front of the stage lights. He stood in front of the lantern a minute, soaking up the party spirit. John Beggs, ballet meister. Narrow hips, large thighs, muscular arms that had been trained a lifetime to lift from the shoulder. His face was almost handsome, in spite of the orange paint. Perhaps a few too many worry lines for thirty-eight, but still handsome. He lived behind thick horned-rimmed glasses. Even in class when he showed us turns, he snapped them off, whirled around, and slipped them on again as if it were all part of the technique.

John walked toward the banquet table. Somehow he missed the first step onto the porch and there lay our ballet meister sprawled out in the currant bushes.

Nancy thought it was a good joke. “For a ballet instructor you sure don’t go in for this graceful stuff. You stumble around more than any two people I know. Myself included.” Nancy turned to her audience. “Remember the time we were walking home from town and John walked smack into the sign in front of . . .”

“Are you hurt, John?” Ann asked as she ran over to him.

“I’ll be all right if I can just find my glasses,” he said as
he felt around on the ground under the nearest bush.

"You have them on."

He stared at Ann as if he had never seen a face before.

"I'll get your hamburger," and she backed away from his stare. She brought the plate and ushered John to a seat near the fire. She certainly was taking him under her wing. That seemed funny. He must have been at least fifteen years older than she.

Then the party really started to roll. Tall tales of Greenwich Village. Past shows. Inside information on big names in the theater. And John always had the tallest tale and the biggest laugh. He started telling stories of his past accomplishments. That surprised me. It didn't sound like John. When he started another, Ann began a story about one of her students in New York.

"Damn it, Ann. Quit interrupting. This is my night." He stood up to get the absolute attention. "I'm going to shine tonight. Shine while I can still enjoy the glitter."

He stood before us in fifth position. We all knew what was coming. His take-off on Swan Lake. Grand battements that looked like a stretching crane. Releves that looked like a kid at a candy counter. This was his favorite stunt. It had been my favorite, too. But tonight it seemed too much like the Dance in the Currant Bushes.

"Someone stole my cocoa," Frank called as he crawled around the lawn looking for his paper cup.

"Here it is, Frank, right next to your plate." Don pushed the cup under Frank's nose.

"You must be going blind, too," John said in a loud voice. He laughed hard. I felt as if I were the only person who heard him.

"You must be going blind, too."

"He leaped right by her as if she were another tree."

"Bring a man a light so he can see where he's going."

John was going blind. John Beggs was going blind. Bring a man a light so he can see where he's going. Where he's going.

Tell me, John, where does a blind ballet dancer go? — Margaret Mattison, H. Ec. Jr.