

# Thoughts on High Culture: Opening Night at the Ballet

*by* Con Chapman

This week, as every Boston school boy knows, marks the beginning of a new season at the Boston Ballet, *and* the conclusion of the 50th anniversary of its founding! New dancers have joined the *corps de ballet*, there are new works by new choreographers to be performed. Of course I want to go! I told my wife. I stuff myself into business clothes and commute downtown five days a week—what better way to spend an evening than by stuffing myself into business clothes, driving downtown and staying late-r than usual?



*“Where do you want me to put this thing?”*

It is with a sense of anticipation that I scan the program. I note that Clarissa Khozas and Lasha Ponoma, both principal dancers resigned for this year, have had syllables added to their names in the off-season in order to sound more Russian. Clarissa's patronymic is now Khozashvilikova, while Lasha has opted for Ponomarenkoguraneivichlysenkomartinanavratalova—and who could blame her!

“She looks . . . stronger than last year,” my wife says.

“I think she's added muscle tone dragging around the big patronymic.”

*Hey big spender!*

We tip our sherpa for his expert assistance during the two-day climb from the box office, and settle back into our seats. I gaze out upon the beauty of Boston's refurbished Opera House and think back to twenty-five years ago when it was on the verge of collapse, both financially and structurally. That night I saw Al Pacino in David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, and begin to recite—involuntarily, I might add—the stirring opening soliloquy from the play: “Fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' RUTHIE!”



*Sherpa: "You should have enough jujubes to last through the Don Giovanni pas de deux."*

A few heads turn, and my wife shushes me. Sor-ry—ballet isn't the only art form I care about!

I close my program and make a little church-and-steeple with my finger tips. It is in these last few moment before the curtain rises that my mind inevitably turns to deep thoughts on the state of the higher culture in America. Think of it: ballet was once a disreputable, even a scandalous art.



*Dancers by Edgar Degas demonstrating the Cecchetti method. Or is it the Zucchini method?*

Nowadays, you can't make a fart noise by blowing into an empty Black Crows box at the ballet without drawing the scorn and

obloquy of all right-thinking men and women. I know—I found out when I tried.



The announcer comes over the p.a. system and recites the usual prohibition against cameras and recorders, and asks that the audience turn off cell phones and other electronic devices. The man next to me—caught in the middle of some urgent business missive—delays compliance while he searches for *le mot juste* to finalize his text message to some unseen correspondent.



"Excuse me," I say.  
He looks at me, a bit embarrassed. "Sorry, I'm just finishing up."  
"No, no problem," I say. "That's a sophisticated looking phone you have."  
"Thanks," he says. "It's this week's version of the iPhone, until Apple decides to come out with a Veterans Day model."

“You really need to stay current with changes in personal technology,” I say. “I was going to ask you—do you have an application for crappy white rock music of the 60’s?”

“Sure do—what’s your question?”

“Who sang ‘Down in the Boondocks’? Billy Joe Royal or Billy J Kramer?”

My new friend flails at his keyboard with his thumbs, then allows himself a smile of self-satisfaction bordering on smugness at the speed with which his little doo-hickey produces the answer. “It was Billy Joe Royal,” he says. “Billy J Kramer covered The Beatles ‘Do You Want to Know a Secret.’”

“That’s a great song,” I say, and we begin to sing it together, call-and-response style.

“Listen . . .”

“Too-da-loo . . .”

“. . . do you want to know a secret?”

“Too-da-loo . . .”

“Let me whisper in your ear.”

A woman behind me taps me on the shoulder with her lorgnette—out of tempo, by the way—and my new friend and I break it off as the curtain comes up.

The dances are breathtaking! I know because that’s what everybody says at intermission after my wife wakes me up. There is *Le Corsaire*, in which a male and female dancer dress up like pirates

and dance like somebody named Chabukani Vedtang thinks pirates danced. There is the *Tarantella*, based on the spirited Italian folk dance, complete with tambourine. As I sip my plastic cup of red wine, my mind is launched upon a reverie. "Wasn't it the Universal Robot Band that sang 'Dance and Shake Your Tambourine'?" I ask our little group of *balletomanes*—or is it *pedophiles*?

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," sniffs one young man, assuming incorrectly that I'm a total low-brow philistine. While I've promised my wife before that I wouldn't get my back up when people look down their noses at me due to my ignorance of ballet, I'm not going to take this lying down.



*Sailor and Brave New World albums by The Steve Miller Band*

"I sensed that you might not," I say, repaying the young man in kind. "You surely *do* know, however, as between *Sailor* and *Brave New World*, which Steve Miller Band album contains the line 'Somebody give me a CHEESEBURGER!'"

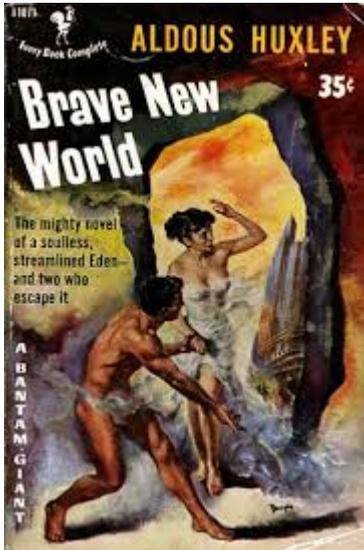
The fellow has a scarf around his neck—why do they all wear those things?—and it is almost as if he is choking on it.

"I . . . I'm only 28," he says weakly. "I'm not that up on psychedelic country blues from the sixties."

“And seventies and eighties and nineties,” I add, making clear that The Joker, The Smoker, The Midnight Toker has stood the test of time, that final yardstick by which we measure artistic greatness.

“Well, let me ‘pull your coat-tail,” I say, with an undercurrent of malice in my voice that I’ve tried not too hard to suppress.

“‘Somebody give me a CHEESEBURGER!’ is on the *Sailor* album. *Brave New World* is famous for another reason.”



“What’s that?” the fellow’s date asks, apparently seeing through the thin veneer of her boyfriend’s *ersatz* coat of culture, and fastening upon me as the wise elder aesthetic statesman in the crowd.

“Aldous Huxley named a novel after it.”

*Available in Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection “Dance Fever—Catch It!”*

