films:

alonso's giselle

by john mueller

For the first time a film of the complete *Giselle* is available for rental and purchase on 16mm. It features Alicia Alonso and her National Ballet of Cuba.

Overall this 1964 black and white film is a real beauty—well conceived, intelligently photographed, and often brilliantly danced. And it preserves an interpretation by this legendary dancer—then forty-two years old—of a role for which she is justly famous. Technically superb, her Act II Giselle is near-definitive: at once vaporous and desirable. In Act I her Giselle, less frisky and girlish than some and a bit restrained in the mad scene, is appropriately and convincingly vulnerable: trustingly and devotedly in love with Albrecht, touchingly awkward in her scene with Bathilde.

Alonso is given strong support by her young company, especially by the chorus of Wilis. Led by the young and forceful Myrtha of Mirta Pla, their drillwork, at once delicate and threatening, is extraordinarily coordinated and well-rehearsed. I especially like the way they dance Albrecht's final solo with him, urging him on to exhaustion. The company also shows signs of good coaching and careful rehearsal in the Act I crowd scenes.

Alonso's Albrecht is the Soviet-trained Azari Plisetsky, a capable and attentive, if not terribly exciting, dancer. The role of Hilarion is taken by the brooding and bearded Fernando Alonso, the company's co-director and Alicia's husband at the time.

The staging, by Alonso herself, is dramatically clear and attentive to detail. It contains two valuable scenes often missing from other productions: Giselle's mother's warnings about the Wilis, and an atmosphere-setting opening scene in Act II in which the distracted Hilarion and some boisterous cronies gather in the woods only to be frightened off as night falls and the Wilis begin to emerge. The peasant pas de deux is rendered as a group work—which tends to make the last half of the first act rather heavy in chorus material.

The ballet has been thoughtfully transferred to the screen by director Enrique Pineda Barnet. He has not strained to "cinematize" the work. As on stage, there is essentially a single set for each act and the cameras generally observe the action from out front where the audience would be. At the same time, the settings and the acting do not look particularly "stagey." The near-miraculous result is that the ballet looks natural while the viewer still receives a good impression of what it looks like on the stage.

Barnet often shows a preference for a single camera, placed somewhat high, that moves in long takes from side to side to best capture the dancing—a procedure preferable, I feel, to multiple-camera cutting which is often disorienting (though there is some of that on the film as well). And often he uses a camera placed high and to the side (as from a front box in the first ring in a theater) which allows both for a relatively close fullstage view and for observing downstage acting in depth. It's a position that ought to be explored more in live telecasts of staged ballet. He avoids zooms, but there are places where they might have helped.

Cinema effects are used rarely and then with great appropriateness: Giselle's mother's warnings about the Wilis are juxtaposed with views of the objects of her concern; and, in her first confrontations with the bewildered Albrecht in Act II, the ghostly Giselle appears and vanishes with an effectiveness on the film that can only be suggested in live performance.

There are a couple of bad edits in the second act (as well as a few too many leaf-filtered shots). A solo for Albrecht is punctured by a jolting glamorous close-up of Alonso and, more objectionable, a solo adagio for Alonso is broken up with two rather lengthy shots of the moon which not only distract but also could inspire the suspicion that the inserts are there to cover up an inadequate performance—a real directorial mistake. But generally the cameras are content to observe the dancing quietly and from a respectful distance with quick cutting mostly used only in mime and storytelling sequences where it is quite appropriate (the entrapment and death of Hilarion are handled brilliantly). Whether more could have been done to make Alonso look less like the oldest Wili is doubtful, but certainly something could have been done to make her mother look less like a teenager.

The weakest element in the film is in the musical performance. Conductor Manuel Duchesne Cuzán's interpretation tends to be rather heavy and overly dramatic—the setting may be Germanic, but the ballet is French after all. And many of his tempos, particularly in mime and chorus passages, tend to be rather slow (compared, for example, to John Lanchbery's wonderfully lively tempos in the beautiful live telecast of American Ballet Theatre's *Giselle* in May 1977).

Alonso herself sometimes pushes tempos to extremes. In each act she has a solo that contains a long adagio and finishes with a dazzling allegro passage. In each case she drags the adagio out so much that the music almost comes to the breaking point (which, however, gives her plenty of time for exquisite articulation of the choreography). She then rather abruptly delivers the allegro passage with frenetic brilliance. The effect might be jolting and circus-like in other dancers, but Alonso manages to pull it off convincingly.

Obtaining the film. The film, *Giselle* (1964, black and white), runs ninety-eight minutes: fifty minutes for Act I, including nearly five minutes of titles in Spanish, and forty-eight minutes for Act II. It is available on 16mm (or 35mm) from Tricontinental Film Center, 333 Sixth Ave., NYC 10014; (212) 989-3330; or P.O. Box 4430, Berkeley, CA 94704; (415) 584-3204. The classroom rental is $100. Rentals for public or admission-charging showings would be higher, but are negotiable. The film is also available for purchase.

The print I previewed had three defects: ten minutes of Act II (from a spot near the end of Myrtha's major solo until just before the initiation of Giselle) was badly out of sync; the music was cut off abruptly several seconds before the end; and the film was mounted so that the last three minutes of Act I came at the beginning of the second reel—thereby splintering Giselle's mad scene between reels. The distributor has assured me that these problems will be corrected on all rental prints.