

# Litchfield Aviary Opened State - to the Public August 17, 1941

BY SARAH STEVENSON

NEAR PAWLEY'S ISLAND in the charming neighborhood of Waccamaw Neck Miss Susan Norris has opened to the public her collection of tropical birds. This collection is one of the largest in the east and is a treat for the amateur as well as the person who has made a definite study of birds.

Leaving the highway at Pawley's Island and traveling along a country road dotted with picturesque negro homes past thriving truck farms, you journey to Litchfield plantation down a road so dense with undergrowth you are sure that the tropics you have heard of cannot be far away.

Four years ago Miss Norris began a collection of tropical birds, starting with six pair. Today she has sixty-eight varieties representing eighteen countries. A pair of rare sky-blue tanagers from Peru; sweeping tailed wydahs whose habitat is Africa; South America is represented with the vivid blue sugar birds and the lilac tanagers.

The lilac tanagers have just hatched a family announcing the blessed event with much chatter, when you get near their cage. China has the dainty Pekin nightingale. Australia the black cheeked waxbills, which are believed to be the

only ones in the United States. The aviary contains an unusual collection of waxbills and a most interesting and full collection of finches.

The birds during the warm months are housed in large cages. When the weather turns chilly they are carried into a heated house. Visiting the birds you do not have the feeling of birds in captivity, but rather the luck of these birds in finding a happy home with perfect care and attention, in such beautiful surroundings. Each cage gives a minute description of the birds who live there. The attendant is eager to answer questions.

If you are lucky enough to meet Miss Norris you may be invited into a cage or a bird may be called out for your inspection.

This is the first year the aviary has been opened to the public.

Litchfield Aviary cannot be digested on a bounce for birds like a garden must be lived with to be fully appreciated. A visit with the birds is something you will never forget.

# THE BALLET IN CHARLESTON

The City by the Sea, particularly in the latter part of the 18th Century, played a notable role in the development of the ballet in the United States

By JOHN R. DOYLE JR.

Illustrated by Arthur L. Street

Intimately related to the French Revolution and the uprising which had terrified the population of Santo Domingo, the growth of the ballet in Charleston, during the late 18th Century offers a wide range of events, a range which includes business considerations, professional activities and human passions. As a history of Charleston's role in the development of the ballet in America, the story is significant; as a narrative concerning the personal activities of the performers, it is very exciting.

Upon the advent of the Revolution, few French actors, dancers, or musicians felt themselves safe, because of the European practice which frequently related the artist to royalty and the nobility. Thus America suddenly received far more artistic talent and genius than it could ever have attracted even as the great land of opportunity. Many artists came directly, others by way of various countries.

Early in 1794 a small group of French dancers and actors arrived in Charleston from Santo Domingo. This company was led by a man of superb training, Jean Baptiste Francisquy. He was not only a dancer but a choreographer who knew the ballet repertoire of his age and

European training. Only a year before this troupe came, the handsome Charleston Theater, built upon Savage's Green, now Broad at New, had been completed and was one of the finest theatres in America. Soon after the French group settled here, they secured this theater for a performance, which seems to have been a complete success.

In an unpublished manuscript the late Eola Willis, author of "The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century," says that "The French actors knew their Classics, and that Aeschylus composed his own dances to accompany his tragedies; that

the dance began the Classic drama, and that it would always be in some way associated with stage productions; and to be a successful ballet-dancer was no mean accomplishment." Not only did these French performers relate the ballet and drama but they understood its intimate association with music, pantomime,

costume, and setting. One is tempted to add "public relations" — the skill with which an artist presents himself to his audience, for making oneself appreciated was life itself to these musical actor-dancers. Never did they avoid study and practice, and according to all available evidence their performances were lavishly staged,

constantly varied and enlarged, and skillfully presented.

The Santo Domingans joined with new arrivals and on April 10, 1794, opened the French Theater, with Rousseau's "Pygmalion" and the grand ballet pantomime "The Three Philosophers." During its life the French Theater was often called the City Theater or Church Street Theater. Located on the west side of Church Street between St. Michael's Alley and Tradd Street, the building was known as Sollee's Hall, for Jean Joseph Leger Sollee.

One of the first developments growing from the work of the French company was that it created a business problem for West and Bignali, proprietors of the Charleston Theater. The people of the city respected them, but the French finally won

the economic struggle, and mergers were effected.

Quite literally the stage was now set for the entrance not merely of the star but stars of the performance. At the beginning of April, 1794, Monsieur and Madame Alexandri Placide arrived. Of the small French group now in Charleston, Placide was to contribute most and

have the greatest influence.

Alexandre Placide's ability to select and arrange material, human as well as otherwise, gave him his power. Already a celebrated dancer in Paris, he had reached America in 1791, landing at Charleston but soon proceeding north. With him as ballerina in his company was a young dancer whom he presented as "Madame" Placide. This girl seems to have been his first "selection" for promotion to success. The "Madame" was apparently by courtesy; she was indeed Suzanne Vaillande, a French girl of talent and beauty. It is possible that she had fled from France under his protection. Later Suzanne was to have a very important part in

Charleston events.

Meanwhile Placide had made another "selection," 11-year-old Master Louis Duport, "son" (probably nephew, or at least had left France under the protection) of Pierre Landrin Duport, one of the most distinguished French dancers and teachers to settle in America. The "Duport" in his name was an addition to Landrin, seemingly for protection after the Revolution started, since he had been intimately connected with the royal family. How Placide induced the boy to leave his family is a mystery, unless upon the really simple assumption that little Louis was fascinated, even hypnotized, by the

The author wishes to express his sincere appreciation to Miss Emily Sanders and the Charleston Free Library for access to the papers of the late Eola Willis and especially for the use of an unpublished manuscript which she had hoped to call a book "The Mother of American Drama and The Peerless Placides." The author also is indebted to "The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century," by the same author. Finally, he acknowledges extensive use of "The Duport Mystery," by Lillian Moore.

brilliance of Placide's performances. A still greater and more significant mystery, the subject of a recent study by Lillian Moore, is the question of whether there is a relationship between Master Louis Duport and Louis Antoine Duport, probably the greatest dancer of his generation in France. Though an answer to this question may never be found, Master Louis Duport was one of the finest youthful dancers America has

known. At the height of his success, he danced for an extended period in Charleston, before his strange and unsolved disappearance after a performance in Savannah, Aug. 19, 1796.

Placide's third and most important "selection," that of his bride, was made in Charleston. The "selection" may well have been the discovery that he was actually not only in love with his profession but also with a person. Without more evidence than is available at the moment, there is no way of saying what actually was in the minds of those, now almost two centuries away from present interpretation. Yet the simple facts of the events make an exciting story.

The French company, which had made its debut in April of 1794, was augmented in June by the arrival of M. and Mme. Louis Douvillier. Though nothing is known of the wife except that she was an accomplished opera singer, Douvillier himself had received his training at the Theatre des Varietes Amusantes, Paris. After the 1795 season, Madame Douvillier's name

failed to appear in the playbills. It is reasonable to assume that this was another loss through the various illnesses of the period, against which they had little defense. Regardless of what happened to Madame Douvillier, life in Charleston was about to compound one of those situations which make human actions good fiction with little help from an author.

In the absence of Francisquy, Suzanne Vaillande, still known as "Mme. Placide," on May 9, 1796, cast herself opposite Louis Douvillier in a performance of "Echo and Narcissus" which she had choreographed. Nature completed the complications, for

very soon Alexandre Placide challenged Louis Douvillier. Both were expert swordsmen; and one account has it that when at noon the next day the two men converged upon the appointed place, they were accompanied by a multitude who wished to attend the performance, which promised to be even more exciting than the ones for which their patronage was solicited at the box office. Certainly the audience was not disappointed. No extant record of the event agrees with any other account, but all describe dramatic and violent action. One narrator has it that Douvillier was killed, but that, before he passed away, he observed in Placide's hand a handkerchief belonging to Suzanne. Snatching this, he pressed it to his wound and died in an ecstasy of joy.

Though Douvillier may have received a wound, he must have been skillfully attended, probably by Suzanne, for Eola Willis says that he and Suzanne were married June 30, 1796, in Charleston. In Norfolk, Va., the

"Herald" for September 26, 1796, advertised the French ballet pantomime "The Generous Soldier and the Two Thieves," with Douvillier taking the part of the Soldier and Madame Douvillier, late "Madame Placide," as Collet. Louis and Suzanne Douvillier lived long and successfully, he dying in New Orleans June 20, 1821, and she Aug. 30, 1826.

After learning how well all turned out for the actors on one side of the duel, a reader almost fears to ask what horrible punishment awaited the other, who certainly must have suffered to balance the happiness of these two. To tell the other side of the story, it becomes necessary to relate something else which had happened in Charleston.

The winter season of 1795-6



THE DRAMA OF THE BALLET was not always confined to the stage, the author recalls. The famous duel between Alexandre Placide and Louis Douvillier, in which Douvillier was seriously — some say mortally — wounded, is a case in point. The cause of the duel: Ballerina Suzanne Vaillande.

was an especially brilliant one. Mr. Sollee's Company, at the Church Street Theater, now had some of the finest actors and actresses in America. Among these was Mrs. Mary Ann Pownall, who had made her debut at Drury Lane in Garrick's Company. In a number of parts she had played opposite John Philip Kemble. Her two daughters, Mary and Charlotte Wrighten, by a former marriage in England, made their debuts upon the Charleston stage. Charlotte was particularly gifted.

Whether Alexandre Placide's serious interest in the talented girl preceded or followed the duel has not been established, but the fact is that on Aug. 1, 1796 (two days after the marriage of Suzanne to Douvillier), he, more than double her age, married Charlotte Sophia Wrighten. This, his last discovery, was his greatest. He had dedicated his life to performing and to training performers. Now his artistic passion united with the greatest passion of his private life. The result was splendid. With all of his skill and energy and experience, he moved Charlotte center and front. Born to this life and first trained by her gifted mother Charlotte achieved a notable career as an actress and dancer. In a summary of the last full season of the 18th century, Eola Willis says that "Mrs. Placide had appeared before the footlights the greatest number of times — 61 — taking many of the leading roles and acknowledged as the 'premiere danseuse.'" In addition to her professional life, Charlotte Placide became the mother of one of America's most important theatrical families, led by her two sons, Henry and Thomas.

Clearly ballet and drama in the 18th Century American theater cannot be considered separately. Not only did the same performers act and dance but dancing also was a part of the evening's entertainment in a way which would surprise, though probably delight, a modern audience. From 1734 dancing was taught in Charleston, and the 1790's saw a brilliant display of this art. Of the period one author has said that the "Ballet in the French Theater in Charleston as directed by Alexandre Placide was exquisitely poetical." Not only was the quality excellent but the quantity and variety were vast. The appearance in advertisements of the terms Pas Seul,

Pas de Deux, Pas de Trois, Pas de Quatre indicates the use to which they put their dancers. One might see a Hornpipe on Monday, but on Tuesday it might be an Allemande, a Scotch Reel, Harlequin, or Pastoral. One day the announcements speak of a Grande Ballet but the next day advertise a Rope-Dance. One program might call for a Minuet and another a Gavotte. For "The Tempest," a Charleston company promised that there would be "A Dance of Demons bearing flaming torches." On at least one occasion, visiting

Cherokee chiefs and warriors entertained the audience at the end with an Indian War Dance, in return for seeing a play and pantomime. At times the theater offered even more excitement than an Indian War Dance could produce. On March 19, 1794, two French seamen, feeling they had been insulted at the theater, returned to their ship and soon not two but some thirty French sailors rushed in with drawn swords and "excited general terror and confusion." The audience fled in all directions.

Yet the audience returned — again and again, in the 18th Century, and the 19th Century. They still return. At its last performance, the Charleston Civic Ballet company danced before a two-night audience of 1400. The modern company is also aiming for the excellence exhibited by its distinguished forerunners. A review of the Charleston Civic Ballet's first performance of the 1961-62 season commented upon the com-

pany's "true professional attitude" and attributed the good work to the training and inspiration of the director, Stanley Zompakos.

Those who know the arts understand that a professional attitude and more especially professional accomplishment are not accidental. The training and experience of Stanley Zompakos are an echo of the forces which created his 18th century predecessors. Starting as a youthful scholarship student in the School of American Ballet, New York, he studied with such teachers as George Balanchine, Pierre Vladimiroff, Anatole Oboukkoff, and Madame Kyrá Blanc. In Paris he worked under Madame Olga Preobrajenska and Madame Nora. Not only has he received European training, but also experience, for during 1949-51 he was in Sweden as choreographer and ballet master at the Malmo Theater. In America he has danced with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the New York City Ballet. Some of the famous individual performances of which he has been a part are "Song of Norway" and "Annie Get Your Gun."

Along with its historic architecture and achievements in the other arts, Charleston can be deeply proud of the ballet in its past. Yet much of the 18th Century is being lived over in the present fine ballet company. With a great past and 20th Century direction and performances devoted to excellence, Charleston is again becoming an integral and significant force in the American ballet.

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