

The Audition

A One-Act Ballet for a Cast of Six (and Possibly a Pianist)

Between Covid lockdowns during 2021, I had the pleasure of meeting Australian choreographer Alice Topp, when she visited Castlemaine to speak about her career (thus far) at a local dance studio. Alice was an excellent speaker; she possesses an endearingly warm and ready sense of humour. And in the course of recounting her colourful experiences and travels as a dancer, she mentioned an audition she'd once attended—in Germany, I think.

Telling the anecdote with wide-eyed wonderment, Alice described the almost instantaneous elimination of another dancer. Scarcely had the poor candidate stood at barre and flexed a finger before receiving the direction to leave. What had the scrutineer disliked so peremptorily? What talent was never chanced to shine? Was it a random, purely gratuitous elimination, prompted by the pressure of a hundred odd dancers to be got through?

Alice, so far as I know, has not yet created a ballet that gives rein to the purely dramatic aspects of her art form. But nevertheless, a couple of days later, I was sitting in my study, reflecting on her anecdotes, vaguely contemplating if anything she'd mentioned suggested itself for a new work. Some scenarios have been an agony in my head for years. This short piece—let's call it a sketch—sorted itself out, beginning to end, in under an hour's musing in my armchair.

I call this a 'sketch' because the concept is a simple one, and adaptable. While I offer one particular version below that presumes a score for solo piano, *The Audition* is essentially a work for six dancers, of any combination of genders, who move through a series of choreographed 'rounds' based on the breakdown of individual movements performed in the course of one final, ultimately mundane task. This version is reflective of my own preferences *vis-à-vis* gender-based power dynamics. The climax is deadpan; the opportunities for comic vicissitudes numerous along the way.

Those of you with a healthy knowledge of the international ballet repertoire will perhaps deduce that the version below takes some inspiration from Jerome Robbins' humorous masterpiece, *The Concert*, primarily in terms of the Pianist's integration into the action. Depending on what opportunities are available for scoring, it is perfectly feasible, however, that the Pianist may not feature at all.

The Audition, however, also pays homage to two other ballets: *The Lesson* by Flemming Flindt and the much less well-known *Le Concours (The Competition)* by Maurice Bejart. I had the good fortune to be introduced to *Le Concours* when it was danced by the Australian Ballet and screened on television in 1995. I got to know it very well: I recorded the broadcast onto a VHS tape, grainy and static-sparkled as our reception was in coastal Warrnambool. Those of you who have known only uninterrupted high-definition television, honestly, you have no idea...

Le Concours struck me, at the time, as an 'out there' confection—busting up conventions as a dance satire of the hard-boiled detective genre, and leaning towards the avant garde with its tongue-in-cheek lampoons of the world of international ballet competitions. I'd love to see *Le Concours* revived; its post-modern irreverence would, I suspect, go over better with mainstream audiences today than it did in the 1990s. Maina Gielgud, then the Australian Ballet's artistic director, has never, to my mind, been accorded the recognition she deserves for the intelligent, stimulating repertoire she introduced to the company. Her choices certainly hooked me into this art form.

The Audition: Synopsis

The curtain rises to reveal a sparsely furnished stage, suggestive of a dance or theatre studio. A long bench at the rear and perhaps one or two individual chairs provide seating. There is a piano to one side. The space is uninviting and the atmosphere portentous.

Five 'candidates', each a distinct individual, enter from upstage right, ushered into the space by the 'Supervisor'. The Supervisor, a woman, is commanding and authoritative. She is restrained in her manner, a figure who brooks no argument. The candidates look perplexedly at their surrounds. They do not know each other, nor why they have been assembled in this space.

The Supervisor hands each candidate a large card with a number on it, directing them into a rough line facing the audience as she does so. The candidates begin to grasp that they have been gathered for some kind of test. They look at each other apprehensively.

A pianist enters abruptly, pacing swiftly past the candidates without acknowledging them. The Pianist looks back, nods to the Supervisor and takes the seat at the piano.

The Supervisor commands the candidates' attention and, facing the audience, steps forward. Hesitantly, the candidates do likewise. Then, in further demonstration, she walks simply, but purposively in front of them. She gives the signal to the Pianist; music begins. The candidates, more puzzled than ever, begin to walk about, holding their number cards. Each has their own idiosyncratic gait. They wonder if they are walking 'correctly'. The supervisor moves amongst them, observing, but offering no directives.

Suddenly the Supervisor snatches the card of one candidate and orders her to leave.* It is a mystery to all but the Supervisor why this candidate has 'failed'. Exeunt the first candidate. The four remaining candidates, having begun to relax a little, feel their apprehension renewed.

The Supervisor fixes their attention on herself again. She bends and raises her knees with great control, indicating the candidates to do likewise. The music picks up pace. The candidates begin to move rapidly about the stage, raising their knees in an exaggerated manner, and executing movements that emphasise deep knee bends.

One candidate, a man, quickly begins to tire. The candidates are not required to demonstrate for very long, yet by the time the Supervisor calls a halt, the man is exhausted from his exertions. Panting, he is relieved when the Supervisor eliminates him, glad to be excused from this strange situation. He exeunts almost too happily.

Round three begins. The Supervisor steps into an elegant arabesque in a demonstration of 'poise and balance'. The candidates duly dedicate themselves to showing 'poise and balance' by various means. Unexpectedly, the Supervisor now continues demonstrating, and begins to appear lost in reminiscence as she does so, gradually neglecting to give attention to the candidates' efforts. The candidates notice this, and leave off their own endeavours to watch their task-master. When the Supervisor performs one excessively flamboyant manoeuvre, a female candidate sniggers. The Supervisor snaps out of her reverie and turns sharply towards her. The three candidates freeze. The Supervisor gazes malevolently at the culprit as she moves towards another candidate, reaches out one arm, and eliminates the luckless individual with the heavy fall of her hand.

The elimination complete, the Supervisor stalks back towards the culprit, places a hand on the woman's head, and 'swivels' her on the spot. This is the signal for what is required in the final round: demonstrations of 'turning' by the candidates: spins, turns around fixed points, and the like.

This time, the two remaining candidates begin actively to compete. The woman who sniggered is determined now hold her own, while the remaining male candidate keeps constant pace with her. The Supervisor eggs them on to ever more difficult variations. She grows agitated as no clear winner emerges.

Suddenly the Pianist strikes a loud, jarring note, and stands up. The Pianist leaves the piano and enters the action. The Pianist produces a coin and the four characters move in close together. Hands gesture, one candidate is heads, the other tails, and the Pianist tosses the coin. Someone shouts [verbally] "Heads!" The candidate who sniggered loses the toss. She exeunts, upset and gesturing her indignation, escorted out by the Pianist.

The Supervisor and final candidate, now the victor, eye each other.

The scene darkens. The Pianist re-enters, and returns to the piano. The final candidate, the most affable individual throughout, grapples with the Supervisor in a short, intense duet. The Supervisor exudes excited anticipation. The candidate anxiously awaits his fate.

The duet ends. The Pianist stands up from the piano. The candidate watches nervously as the pair begin to bring apparatus onto the stage.

A plinth is brought on [visualised downstage right, close to the wings]. A cardboard box is placed on top. A stepladder is brought on, and a cord and socket descend from above.

The Supervisor directs the final candidate into position behind the plinth, and opens the box in front of him. He looks at her surprised, yet serious.

The Pianist returns to the piano.

The Supervisor takes up a position near the ladder, below the suspended cord, her back to the audience, ready to watch the candidate's final 'performance'.

The Pianist begins to play.

The candidate delves into the box and takes out a light globe. He walks purposively to the base of the stepladder. He ascends the ladder, raising his knees at each step. He poses to grasp the socket and balances while he screws in the light globe with a clear twisting of his hand.

The candidate looks out to auditorium from the top of the ladder, highly pleased. The music ceases. And the Supervisor twists to look back towards the audience, melting into an expression of ecstasy.

Blackout.

* You may note that the number cards hereafter disappear from the described action. They may be useful at the outset to establish the ballet's design and later discarded. They are mentioned here merely as a suggestion.