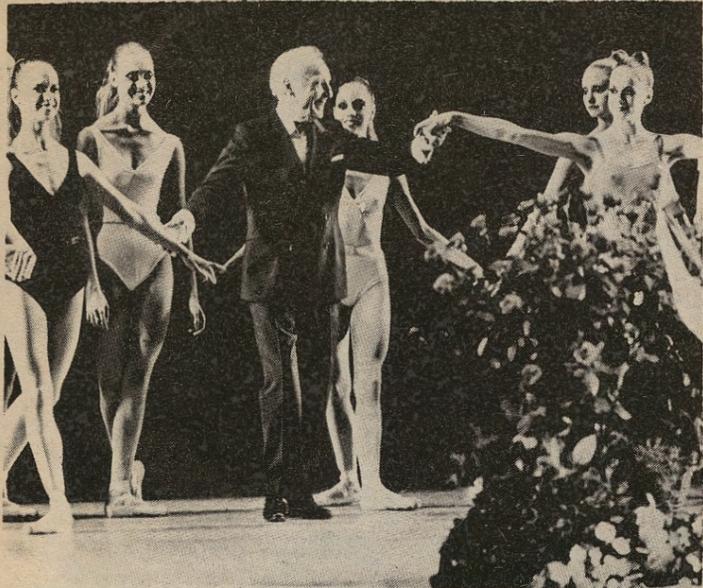


"Choreography is the key"

Lillie F. Rosen



George Balanchine with the New York City Ballet.

When The New York City Ballet opens its thirtieth anniversary season November 14th at State Theatre, Lincoln Center, it will offer a new and special fillip. To the roster of 95-some-odd members of the company will be added the name of the dynamic and undeniably exciting Mikhail Baryshnikov, a second time "defector" (first the Kirov

and now American Ballet Theatre). Already we have the ingredients for possible controversy, for Mr. B (as George Balanchine is referred to even by his intimates) has stated repeatedly and emphatically that choreography is the key, not superstars, and Baryshnikov comes from a tradition of superstars, both in Russia and

David Gordon's Talking Dance

Barbara Naomi Cohen

"I support changes in context, the freedom to re-examine, to alter, to abandon materials, or to re-use them for a good laugh at myself and my world. Keeping the options open extends the life span of a work and my interest in it." David Gordon, September 1978.

David Gordon kept his options open in recent performances at the American Theatre Lab space. With his Pick Up company of talented dancers, he unfurled three works - *Chairs*, *What Happened* and *Mixed Solo* - each an example of Gordon's experiments with the mix of text and choreography.

The first piece, *Chair*, has been performed in various forms since December, 1974. Gordon's monologue is organized on a grid structure - lines chalked onto the floor of Gordon's loft, with dance steps determined by the chance pedestrian movements of a New Yorker's selection of unavoidable intruders - children, janitors and vagrants.

In one translation of *Chairs*, the piece opens with a piano rendition of J.P. Sousa's "Stars and Stripes," a march in which the composer seems to predict Gordon's ability to create a consistent flow of variations. After a taped analysis of the work's structure, Gordon and Valda Setterfield go through the movement sequence, which grows from the opening phrase, continually recovering itself like the perpetual spiral of a barber pole. The chair and the floor augment their knee movements as flexed supports, fulcrums and projections of their bodies.

In *What Happened* (the newest paraphrasing of material from Wordsworth and the Motor) a dialogue between each of the seven female performers and the audience is based on a series of texts - each performed by each dancer, but seldom heard in chorus. The first set of texts consists of three differing eyewitness reports of a single (or three separate) accidents. Most words are acted out within their meanings, but soon, one realizes that certain words are performed as visual puns. "To" is seen as two fingers; "which" is a sketched out hooked nose and loud cackle. That these re-interpreted words are grammatical conjunctives seems a comment on Gordon's connective choreographic style.

Gordon weaves a fractured text into a unified commentary for the final piece on the program. *Mixed Solo* opens with a knowing apology for his dual starring role as creator and performer, a "less than admirable manipulation of the audience by an ego-centric personality." This manipulation is carried out in his dance solo with its diagonal movements and extraordinary weight tricks.

The commentary seems to be taken directly from a volume of the worst of dance criticism. All through the audience were embarrassed faces that read, "O God, I've said that." Among the interjections bounced off Gordon to the viewers were: "like a symbol of all beginnings, he begins as if he hasn't begun ... It's that powerful persona of his ... don't you think he's carrying the appearance of indecision too far?" and "perhaps the dance boom has got to him."

Gordon seems to end his manipulation with the final comment, but then he shows the real mixed solo - as performed by four other dancers, without his connecting personality. Their dance movements are as arresting as those in *Chair*, and could easily stand alone.

The best metaphor for David Gordon's work may be one of the demonstration models of laminated plywood that could be found in any elementary school class-room-layers of opposing grains glued together, but cut into steps so that the end (or beginning) of each sheet may be seen separately. He uses stratification as a construction technique, molding individual layers of movement and text into a whole, leaving traces of each unique ingredient. One can get involved in Gordon's puns and forget the movement constructions. But his system interweaves text and choreography and it is the whole fabric which is most rewarding.

(BARBARA NAOMI COHEN is editor of the Dance Scholars' Newsletter.)

with ABT.

Mr. B is a graduate of the Maryinsky School, the product of a 300-year-old training tradition. What marks him as a visionary, a choreographic Titan, is the way in which he has utilized this bedrock training to extend ballet's vocabulary and create a hitherto unknown neo-classicism. In the more than fifty years that he has been choreographing, his prodigious output of over 150 ballets has encompassed a new timing, a new tempo and a wholly new style. And through his School of American Ballet have been siphoned off the kind of dancers he needs, who are uniquely suited to bring his incredible creations to fulfillment.

It has been said time and again by Mr. B that he has no use for temperamental superstars, that performers are the instruments only and that choreography can never become subservient to "stars." Indeed, the company has always listed its roster alphabetically. But even Mr. B cannot prevail nor prevent the public from recognizing and differentiating between good, solid, adequate dancers and great ones (few though they may be). And no alphabetical listing can deny the greats in his company, such as Peter Martins, Jacques D'Amboise, Suzanne Farrell and Merrill Ashley, or the budding soloists that crop up like the Duell brothers, Bart Cook, Sheryl Ware, Stephanie Saland, etc. As water naturally seeks its own level, so does unusual talent come to the fore.

Nonetheless, dance history will unquestionably be in the making at NYCB. Baryshnikov, who would be welcome in any ballet company anywhere in the world, chose to "defect" once again from ABT and work at City Ballet, with Mr. B. It has been said, during Baryshnikov's four-year tenure at ABT that he was a bit of a playboy, not loath to be found at popular discos and parties with an attractive female on his arm. Yet, at heart, Baryshnikov is first and foremost a dancer, an artist, probably the finest male technician in the world today. Certainly he abandoned a lifetime security, a \$3,000 per performance guarantee and superstardom to come to NYCB and "be an in-

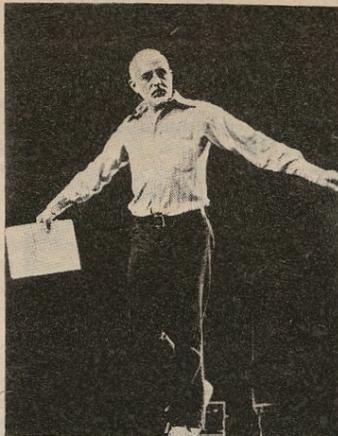


strument of the choreographer" (Mr. B). And while he will continue to guest with different companies around the globe - as and if the City Ballet schedule permits, he will be earning a salary of about \$800.00 a week with his home company.

There will be little if any time for anything but hard work, so many new roles in the repertoire to be learned, new music - Stravinsky, Webern, Ives - and a whole new style to be absorbed into his muscles and memory.

Baryshnikov has stated categorically that at thirty years of age, he is at his physical peak and if he was going to make the break and avail himself of the opportunity of working with Mr. B, the time was NOW. And so, while the NYCB is not prone to tremendous advance publicity and does not list casts weeks ahead, some good news has nevertheless filtered through.

Not only has Misha already been taught by Edward Villella the "Rubies" section of *Jewels* and the "El Capitan" role in *Stars and Stripes* as well as Balanchine's version of *Coppelia*, but for him, Mr. B is reviving



Jerome Robbins

Orpheus and Prodigal Son. From the computer of memory, I retrieve scenes from *Orpheus* with the late Herbert Bliss, Nicholas Magallanes, Maria Tallchief and Tanaquil Leclercq, from *Prodigal Son*, Francisco Moncion, Diane Adams, Yvonne Mounsey and Robert Barnett. All



the above contributed to and shaped NYSC's illustrious past. Both roles will be juicy challenges to Misha. So too will be *The Four Temperaments*, *Agon*, *Kammermusik No. 2*; also *Donizetti Variations*, *Raymonda Variations*, *Divertimento No. 15*, as well as Jerome Robbins' *Dances at a Gathering*, *Goldberg Variations* and *Afternoon of a Faun*. There is almost nothing in the company repertoire for which Baryshnikov is not well suited. One can feel sure that his presence will greatly influence the company, just as the company will have a strong impact on him. And knowing Mr. B, do not for a moment feel that Mr B will allow even a Baryshnikov to dominate the dance.

It should be one of the finest seasons of the company, one fit to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary as well as the genius of George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, and of Lincoln Kirstein who had the foresight so many years ago to bring Balanchine to America.

(LILLIE F. ROSEN is dance critic for Manhattan East, and Dance News and contributing editor of Dance Scope.)



Delia Peters

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