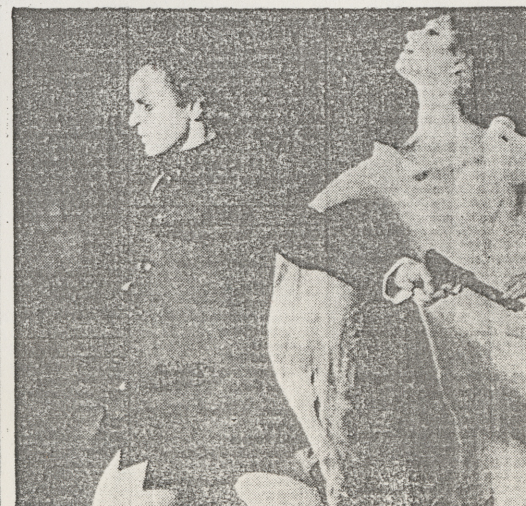
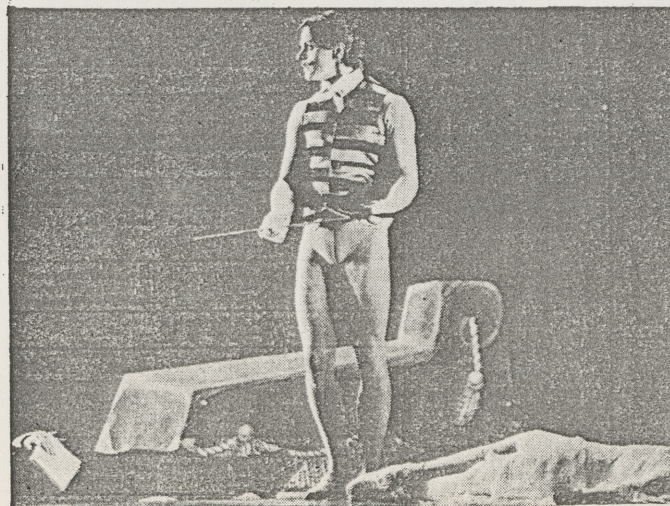
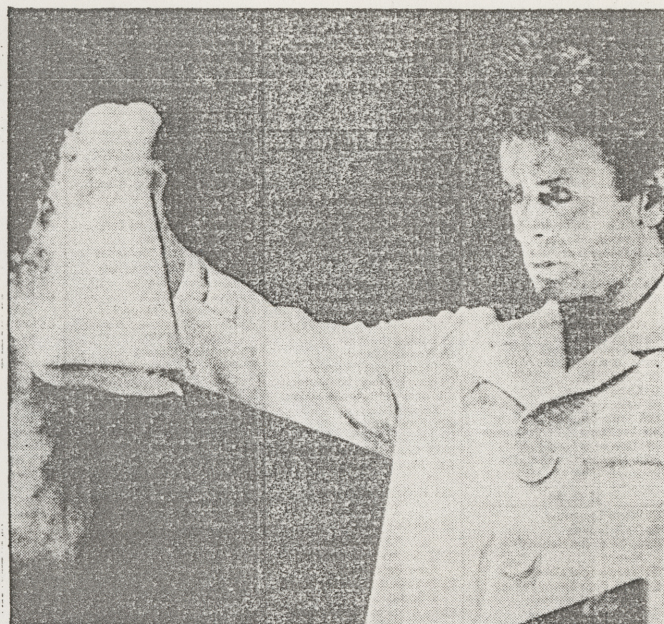


San Francisco Chronicle

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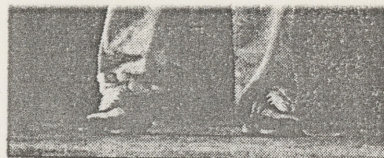


## Baryshnikov's Quick Changes

Mikhail Baryshnikov races through five roles in the premiere of David Gordon's 'melodrama' ballet, 'Murder.' Clockwise from above, his roles are (1) a stogehand, (2) a Victorian maiden, (3) a mad scientist, (4) a pistol-toting lover and (5) the butler

Photos by Jerry Telfer

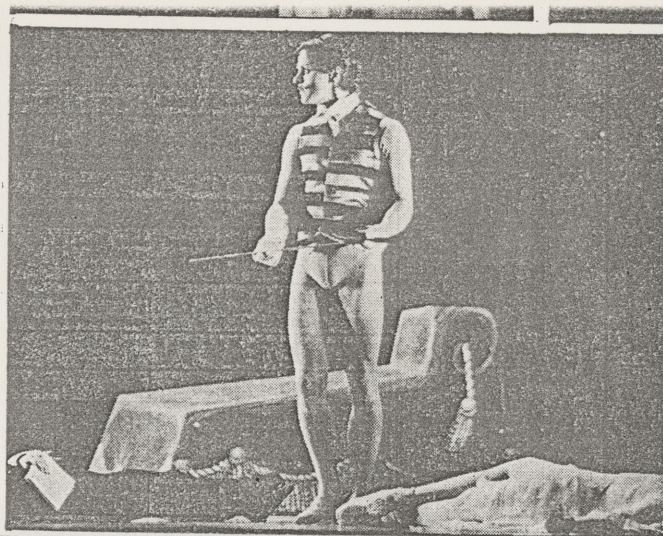




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Photos by Jerry Telfer



# ABT Gets Away With 'Murder'

BY MARILYN TUCKER

The subject was "Murder" at the American Ballet Theater's program Thursday at the Opera House, David Gordon's audacious "melodrama," done in a flash of movement and with the light-handed irony of Peter Sellers' "Pink Panther" movies.

"Murder" has little to do with traditional classical ballet, except for its lightning-quick vocabulary, but it will undoubtedly have a long and hilarious life in the ABT repertory.

"Murder" also gives Mikhail Baryshnikov a role he obviously relishes more than anything he's done since Tharp's "Sinatra Songs." Correction: Not one role but five, ranging from a mad scientist to a Victorian maiden who is more drag queen than wide-eyed damsel, and including a stagehand, lover and butler — all done with keen comic flair.

"Murder" follows last season's "Field, Chair and Mountain," Gordon's first ABT commission, and another non-traditional work by the choreographer who has been at the forefront of post-modern, avant garde dance since the mid '60s and whose Pickup Company is coming to San Francisco in late April.

One would be hard pressed to explain what really happens in "Murder," except that it seems to begin and end with the same scene, the finding of the dead Woman in White. Who is this woman, who killed her and for that matter who is

responsible for all the bodies that keep turning up and are carried away in a dirge of movement by a macabre crew of pallbearers?

The 20-odd participants, playing more roles than you could count, are similarly attired in the delectable funeral black and gray that cat-drawing Edward Gorey earlier introduced in the stage play "Dracula."

Going through a hair-raising pantomime, they are introduced in a taped monologue by Valda Setterfield, a Merce Cunningham alumna, Pickup member, Gordon's wife and a specialist at this kind of thing. Everyone is a Smith of some variation. The Woman in White is Miss Smith. Baryshnikov is for a time Smitty the Butler (falsely accused). There are Lord Smith, Smith-Smith, not-quite-dead Smith, Isadora Smith (complete with a neck scarf that strangles her as she comes through the door) and Dr. Schmidt, the German psychiatrist. The more the words were repeated in Setterfield's flat, unstressed delivery, the funnier it was.

When she finished with the question of "Who is this woman?" the flashback began, committed to the strains of the first movement of Berlioz' *Symphonie Funebre et Triomphale*. Originally written for large wind band to celebrate the

July revolution of 1830, the music is explicitly patriotic and unremittingly square, a brilliant choice. Paul Connelly conducted a good performance in Berlioz' later orchestration, which includes strings.

The action is accomplished in a comic-strip series of vignettes in which one could go batty trying to follow the fortunes of quick-change artist Baryshnikov. I loved his Victorian maiden, a delicate Camille-type character who, refusing to die, kept pushing back the lid of the coffin. Her duet with Clark Tippet kept to the rules of dance and was thus even more funny.

Allen Lee Hughes' lighting framed the work, enhancing the action of a piece that Gordon refers to in a neither-fish-nor-fowl manner as a "melodrama."

"Murder" was balanced on the one side by "Swan Lake Act II," on the other by "Theme and Variations."

After 20 years in the role, Cynthia Gregory puts her toe on the Swan Queen with the strength of steel and poetry of line and balance. When you see Gregory's Swan Queen, you begin to have an idea of what ultimate authority means.

What was astonishing about "Theme and Variations" was how soloist Amanda McKerrow emerged

from the cracks of reliable performer to the eminent status of artist. She had all the requisites of speed and musicality, but she was also emotionally moving in a way I wouldn't have thought possible two weeks ago.

McKerrow's partner, Patrick Bissell, caught the energy, dancing with a strength of personality and virtuosic flair that had eluded him in the previous night's "Symphonie Concertante."