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LIVELIGHT

Age Finds Them Creatively Agile

IT HAS been cold around here for too long, and I don't mean the winter. For years, we've had to do without two of the most wonderful performers from the glory days nostalgically recalled as the dance boom. These men are too old to lug themselves around the stage, we're supposed to figure, or at least too tasteful to burden our cherished memories with anything less than their former selves.

As you've probably guessed by now, one is Mikhail Baryshnikov, a senior citizen of 46, who left the ballet world here five years ago with bruised knees and classical burnout — but has risen again at Lincoln Center this weekend as a great modern dancer and unconventional impresario.

The other name is not so obvious, but his return to the stage this weekend is, in its own way, a comparably momentous transformation.

David Gordon, 58, stopped performing with his own modern company years ago — but he's back onstage through Sunday at Dance Theater Workshop as an unforgettable actor and original playwright. Despite the big mustache and the hairy arms emerging from a house dress, Gordon is completely believable — impossible, funny and inescapably touching — as an old Russian-Jewish widow in "The Family Business." The project, also a family business, co-stars Gordon's wife, Valda Setterfield, and was co-written and co-directed and by their grown son, Ain Gordon, who also plays a father and his son.

If you're yearning for a couple of brilliant spins on the cliché about growing old gracefully, this is the weekend to try for a canceled ticket. The subject is not re-inventing oneself, exactly. Rather, the lesson — OK, the revelation — is about how major figures find worthy new challenges when the old possibilities stop happening.

Gordon always had been playing around with words in his dances for his Pick Up Company, formed in 1971. And Baryshnikov, from the day he left the Soviet Union in 1974, has been tasting the styles of dance he couldn't know at the Kirov. In fact, when he was struggling to find new directions as head of American Ballet Theater in the '80s, he had commissioned a piece from Gordon. It turned out to



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be an odd spoofy melodrama-with-dialogue, "Murder," which dressed Baryshnikov as a ballerina-corpse and thoroughly annoyed audiences who thought they had paid to see the classical superstar jump.

Baryshnikov can do whatever he pleases now. He has his own small, flexible ensemble of hand-picked modern experts, called White Oak Dance Project. He no longer has to beg for money to support a huge institution or deal with the shadow of his youth. The result, which has taken far too long to get to New York, is dance as he likes it today — lucid, literate, uncompromising, unadorned, brave. And, though he isn't doing the standard prince variations, he is offering more pure gorgeous Baryshnikov than we have seen here in many years.

This is no ego trip. It is worlds away from the sort of Nureyev & Friends packages that distorted the integrity of dance styles by making them all look like the same exhibition. Baryshnikov never was a look-at-me dancer who wanted everyone to know how hard he was winding up to do a trick. His desire to speak the languages of many different choreographers without an accent is very moving. He may always look like Baryshnikov — lucky for us — but the intentions are so generous. He wants to explore what *he* can do for the choreography, not what it can do for him.

The generosity extends to artists he admires. Thus, he not only learned Merce Cunningham's 1970 "Signals" for this engagement, but used his celebrity to turn his own opening night into a benefit for the Cunningham Company in honor of Cunningham's 75th birthday. (Talk about dance artists who never stop challenging.) In a recent interview in Harper's Bazaar, Baryshnikov recalled the shock he found when he first saw the Cunningham company. "It was like discovering modern painting," he said. "The way Cunningham dancers cover space, that kind of organized chaos — it was very much like neo-Expressionist painting."

Baryshnikov also commissioned Gordon to make a piece for White Oak, though it is not on the New York programs. Sad that both men will be a little too busy onstage to catch one another's act.

"Family Business," with all the wit and tenderness of Gordon's dancier work, has everything to do with ways to grow — not just get — old. It's about a generation of people who do what they are supposed to do. "While they live, they don't do what they want and then they retire and don't know what they want and then they start to die and know it's all over and get angry."

Baryshnikov and Gordon refuse to do that — and we are the richer for it. ■