

SHOWCASE

OVERNIGHT REVIEWS

Mikhail Baryshnikov and members of his White Oak Dance Project perform a work from "Past Forward."



White Oak Dance Project in 'Past Forward'

Through Saturday
Dance Center of Columbia College,
1306 S. Michigan
Tickets: \$60; (312) 344-8300.

Recommended



There are moments in "Past Forward"—the program of minimalist works assembled by Mikhail Baryshnikov and his White Oak Dance Project being performed at the new Dance Center of Columbia College—when a simple procession of non-dancers assumes a surprising and breathtaking beauty.

Witness Steve Paxton's walking piece, "Satisfyin' Lover" (1967), or Deborah Hay's uncannily poignant "Exit" (1995), with its Ingmar Bergman-like silhouetted parade, or David Gordon's overture to "The Matter," in which Baryshnikov plays a window dresser who works to classical ballet music while a stream of passersby move slowly past, their images picked up on video and projected on a giant screen.

There are moments of pure electricity, too, as in Lucinda Childs'

soaring 1993 "Concerto," when the dynamism of a fascinating choreographer is combined with the striking features and precisionist technique of Baryshnikov and his company of six, and the unstoppable momentum of Henryk Gorecki's piece for harp-sichord and strings.

And every now and then there also are moments when you understand why some in the early audiences at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village—where all of the choreographers on this program worked in the 1960s and early '70s—might have shouted: The emperor has no clothes!

In fact, those moments are few and far between. In part this is because we've grown accustomed to theatrical minimalism, to the use of pedestrian movement, and to what might be called "the democratization of art," even if art probably shouldn't be completely democratic. But in part it's because everything Baryshnikov and his dancers touch turns to gold; they are fine-tuned instruments simply incapable of wholly pedestrian movement, even if all they are doing is cavorting with a gray metal folding chair.

In addition to all this, Baryshnikov and David Gordon—the witty

writer and director of this retrospective, as well as a pioneering participant in the Judson Dance Theatre movement—have shaped the program with tremendous style, and an impeccable sense of mixing and matching pieces (half of which are remountings of early pieces, half recent works by those same founding choreographers). The result is that we are not condemned to repeat history but to rediscover it in a highly polished form.

Of course there also is the sheer pleasure of watching Baryshnikov, whose still boyish body and gaunt, chiseled face create an intriguing tension. At times there is an impishness about him, as when he playfully mugs like a silent film actor in Trisha Brown's "Homemade" (1965), a memory-driven dance with film. At times he suggests a Beckett-like austerity, as in Paxton's "Flat," in which he becomes a human coat tree. In Gordon's "Chair Intro 2000," he is a flattened Fosse dancer.

Baryshnikov never gets lost in the crowd, but he does melt seamlessly into the ensemble. As a child in Russia, he thought everyone in America danced like Fred Astaire. He is now emulating the master himself.

Hedy Weiss, dance critic

'Slaughterhouse 5, Cattle 0'

Open run
Second City, 1616 N. Wells
Tickets, \$15; (312) 337-3992

Highly recommended



First you're at Ameritech as cyborgs attack a waitress fed up with her dead phone line. Then you're at the Denny's where she works. Then you're at "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire." Then you're at a high school, witnessing a round of brutal peer abuse—by faculty.

And that's just the first scene. Sure, I've spoiled a few punch lines in Second City's new mainstage revue. And I'll spoil a few more. Why not? This show can afford it. Gags spill forth by the hundreds in "Slaughterhouse 5, Cattle 0," a splendidly entertaining effort by comic specialists at the top of their games. It's rare that one of these shows gets a director and a cast so attuned to their skills yet still so eager to please. Enjoy it while you can.

"Slaughterhouse" is an exercise in imagination. Scenes seem to happen in a parallel universe where silly reigns supreme, a land where the Hulk flies first-class, where ballots are punched with blow darts, where a man dreams of spending \$1 million on a million lottery tickets so he can have a 1-in-19 chance of winning. It's as though the performers can't wait to show you the next wacky thing they thought up.

You see it in the wide grin worn by Craig Cackowski as a bus driver, another of the cheerful extroverts that have become his trademark. You hear it in Angela Shelton, brandishing the rich and varied dialects and personalities she seldom gets to flaunt on Channel 11's "Cheap

Show." You feel it in the booming rumble of Rich Talarico as Mark Brown, a candidate unafraid to rub your face in his wretched ideology.

Like "History Repaints Itself," the recent Second City e.t.c. show from which half this cast came, "Slaughterhouse" dissects racial issues with a chain saw. When a bride-to-be stereotypes her best friends, a black woman and a Jew, they don't grouse—they make a game of it, amusing each other by upping the ante. And the bigoted Brown's prejudices aren't just spoken, they're fully acted out, to give our knee-jerk acceptance of ethnic humor a reality check straight out of "Bamboozled."

Director Jeff Richmond, the man behind the e.t.c. show and several other recent Second City triumphs, has perfected a breakneck formula that keeps the mind constantly engaged. Scenes tumble right into each other, and forgotten characters pop back up just in time to turn a moment upside down. Seven doors back up the set, two of them elevated and used to good effect when an old-timer (Ed Furman) decides to hide out in a tree. The show being what it is, he can only be talked down by a sea captain with a monkey paw for a hand.

The doors fling open "Laugh-In" style during one of the most uproarious bits as great authors read works from their mundane early jobs. Menu entries by Hunter S. Thompson (Furman) and overdue bill notices by Maya Angelou (Shelton) are just plain funny. But the one who charms us most, and later returns to send off the show, is Cackowski's Dr. Seuss. His merry mood is not far from this show's, a delicious whimsy that is sure to leave Second City visitors very happy.

Darel Jevens



Craig Cackowski (from left), Tami Sagher and Rich Talarico let the gags fly in Second City's "Slaughterhouse 5, Cattle 0."