

# Baryshnikov, White Oak group hail simplicity of ordinary movement

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SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

In "Homemade," a solo dance by Trisha Brown, Mikhail Baryshnikov carries a projector on his back, radiating scenes of himself dancing across the theater. The kinetic images wash across the audience and draw them into the movement on stage. Inclusion is a theme for the Russian ballet star, who's spearheading a program honoring Judson Dance Theater's postmodern choreo-

graphers, a group who made their mark in New York City in the 1960s.

When Baryshnikov and his White Oak Dance Project bring "Past Forward" to the Dance Center of Columbia College Wednesday through Sunday, audiences will have a rare opportunity to see the groundbreaking original work of seven Judson founders, choreographers who were often inspired by the transcendent simplicity of ordinary movement. Still active in their fields, these artists will also present new pieces, and

Baryshnikov will perform a series of solos and duets. In the latter, he'll be making a conscious effort to blend in with the ensemble-oriented White Oak group, which he founded with choreographer Mark Morris 10 years ago.

Blending into the crowd won't be easy for the iconic dancer. Baryshnikov's defection to America from the former Soviet Union in 1974 gained him instant celebrity status, and as a principal dancer with New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theater

for which he served as artistic director from 1980 to 1989, he gave classical ballet a sexy edge that appealed to the masses.

Yet even as artistic director of ABT, he was fascinated with modern dance, bringing in avant-garde choreographers like Twyla Tharp, Karole Armitage and David Gordon, one of the founders of Judson Dance Theater. He asked Gordon, who contributed four works to "Past For-

SEE DANCE, PAGE 5 Tuesday, November 14, 2000 Section 5 Tempo 5

## Dance

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ward," to serve as director of White Oak's current paean to postmodern dance.

"I admire the Judson artists' boldness and daring," said Baryshnikov during a telephone interview from Pittsburgh, one of White Oak's stops on its nine-city tour. "It has always been White Oak's mission to challenge ourselves and our audiences. You know, we call it 'the Judson movement' but, although they share a common love of natural motion, these choreographers all have extremely different approaches to making dances.

"They were very much hungry for discoveries. They took risks and stretched the boundaries of what was possible. It's amazing to see them all under one roof again."

And how exactly did the Judson Dance Theater take its first steps?

Back in the early 1960s, a group of dancers, composers and visual artists converged in New York City's Judson Memorial Church — and various other spaces and art galleries — to present their work.

Dance historian Wendy Perron traces the Judson group's birth to Robert Dunn's composition workshops at the Merce Cunningham studio. Dunn, who was an accompa-

nist for Cunningham's dance classes and a student of composer John Cage, was influenced by Eastern philosophy, European experimental music and Cage's spontaneity. From his classes emerged the Judson choreographers whose work served as a catalyst for White Oak's "Past Forward": Gordon, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti and Deborah Hay.

"The climate in New York at that time," explained Forti, "was one in which artists from different mediums were very much in communication with each other. It just felt natural for these artists to share ideas across the lines of poetry, music and dance.

"We weren't pigeonholed. We all became part of the movement of modernism."

Forti, who will perform only during the Chicago engagement, has drawn inspiration from visual art and daily life. On the White Oak



Mikhail Baryshnikov performs in "Past Forward" as part of the White Oak Dance Project at the Dance Center of Columbia College.

bill, her "Huddle" — centered on people engaged in mundane tasks — was first performed in 1961 in a Manhattan loft.

"'Huddle' was my answer to an environmental art piece by Saburo Murasaki of the Gutai group [Japa-

nese painters and sculptors]," said Forti. "Murasaki had done a piece in which he walked through many layers of paper attached to wooden frames. I was moved by the simplicity of this very singular action."

While these postmodern choreog-

raphers have been criticized for favoring unadorned movement over more heroic, recognizable forms of dance, Forti insisted that the focus on basic movement or even stillness "encourages viewers to take the time to pay attention to what really matters now."

Not everyone thought the Judson group's work was worthy of attention. Gordon recalled a pivotal time when the programming coordinators at New York's 92nd Street Y, a well-known artistic venue, rejected all future Judson artists' performances.

"Our work was not within a linear narrative," said Gordon. "It was out of the mainstream of what was then modern dance. But the [rejection by] 92nd Street Y was a breakthrough for us. It was like the Paris art community's rejection of Duchamp's toilet. It became notorious."

Gordon and his fellow choreographers decided to put on their own concerts at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, and basked in their notoriety.

Bonnie Brooks, chair of Columbia College's Dance Department, noted that, by challenging the accepted wisdom about time, space and image in dance, promoted the idea that "art is born from and belongs to us all. There is no 'right' response; there is only our own."

She also pointed out that the

Dance Center's new South Loop facility marks the smallest venue for White Oak's "Past Forward" performances.

"It's a similar environment to the original Judson Memorial Church concerts," she said.

By recognizing the these groundbreaking choreographers and bringing their these now-respected dances to an environment that recalls their origins, Baryshnikov aims to establish a link to the past.

"I hope audiences can look back on this century to the genesis of the avant-garde," said Baryshnikov. "I think the Judson artists' material will open so many eyes because these are such highly theatrical ideas."