

Dance

Baryshnikov's Continuing Experiment

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What Mikhail Baryshnikov and his White Oak Dance Project proved in their performance last night at Lisner Auditorium is that, after nearly four decades and incalculable societal and artistic changes, the great modern dance experiment born in the basement of a New York church continues.

Back in the '60s, when a group of nonconforming choreographers assembled at Judson Church, they were testing how far they could go in shocking their audiences. How about if they danced nude? In silence? Looked and moved like ordinary pedestrians instead of trained technicians? Choreographer David Gordon recalls operating under the credo, "What shouldn't I do? I think I'll do that."

Gordon's words form part of the introductory video montage to White Oak's "PAST

Forward" program, presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society. The program revives some of the Judson works and includes newer ones created by such Judson members as Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs. The "ordinary" movement and frequent lack of musical accompaniment that characterize many of the works no longer shocks; these have become part of mainstream modern dance. But there are still plenty of surprises: How mesmerizing a slow parade of regular folks across the stage can be. How endlessly fresh the same string of steps can look when performed backward, forward, solo, in a group, set to music.

How Baryshnikov can still inspire awe by simply shifting his weight.

You see plenty of him on this program, in a rewardingly intimate context. He is often alone onstage, moving simply, slowly—still life with Misha. See him run onstage holding a chair in Gordon's "Chair Intro 2000," as Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" blares; he executes a perfect handstand on its seat as lithely as a gymnast. Study him in Steve Paxton's "Flat," where he walks around and around and around. What makes him so intriguing? Undoubtedly, his seriousness, his timing, his ability to build a subtle drama. He's the Organization Man pacing in his apartment, stripping off his clothes and enjoying a few moments of solitary rebellion, alone in his aloneness.



Deborah Hay and Mikhail Baryshnikov in "Single Duet," part of tonight's program.

BY STEPHANIE BERGER

But Baryshnikov's contribution is not the whole of this program. Several of the works center on members of the local community, as in Paxton's "Satisfyin Lover," in which these non-dancers stride across the stage one by one or in small groups, some stopping for several minutes, then continuing on their path. In Simone Forti's "Huddle," the community members cluster in a tight knot, as one scrambles over their shoulders to perch on the top of the mound.

There is not much of a kinetic rush in this program, but there is much that is satisfying nonetheless. Raquel Aedo and Emmanuele Phu-

on slip like silk over and through a pair of folding chairs in Gordon's "Chair/two times" (the companion to Baryshnikov's chair romp). The collective pluck of the seven-member ensemble is apparent in the group works: Yvonne Rainer's prismatic "Trio A Pressured #3," Deborah Hay's "Whizz" and Childs's "Concerto."

The leisurely pace of this program won't be to everyone's taste—last night's audience was restless at times, and some didn't stay after the intermission. The Judson works didn't please all comers when they were new, either. But Baryshnikov's stature forces us to look at and try to understand Judson a second time around.

Much of Judson's aesthetic has by now been folded into the mainstream. The mixing of dance techniques with everyday movement, the use of household props, film, minimalist music, silence and speech—these have become staples of modern dance, but they first came together at Judson Church. Indeed, the term "multidisciplinary"—which distinguished Judson from the standard approach—now

defines much of contemporary dance.

Much of Judson's legacy has been passed on, that is, except for its shred-the-status-quo thrust. This is where Baryshnikov comes in.

Having in the '70s recently defected from the ultra-structured Soviet society, how fascinated he must have been to witness the spontaneity and creativity of the Judsonites and post-Judsonites he encountered then. Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project embodies several of the Judson Church principles, such as an eschewing of any particular dance technique, a welcoming of new and untested voices, and a lack of hierarchy. Baryshnikov doesn't get any special billing among the dancers; in the group works, he mixes seamlessly into the ensemble.

Though he wasn't a part of the original collective and comes from a different part of the world, Baryshnikov more than anyone carries on the Judson ideal of reinventing dance.

A second program will be performed tonight, with many works repeated from last night and some additions.