

26 EXPRESS November 10, 2000

## DANCE

### WHITE OAK DANCE PROJECT

At Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley,  
Wednesday, November 1.

Most immigrants come to the US seeking economic prosperity, trusting that here, inside the walls of the world's castle, there will be scraps for even the lowliest newcomer. And occasionally someone unmoors himself from his homeland and heads to America looking not so much for prosperity as for creative freedom. According to *New Yorker* dance critic Joan Accocella, Mikhail Baryshnikov was one of these. The former member of the Kirov Ballet was after artistic freedom from the get-go, she wrote. He pushed for dancers' expression and experimentation in the company but was ostracized, spied on, and punished for his independent yearnings by being handed lesser roles.

Baryshnikov is a man of stunning intellect and emotional melancholy who brings Euclidean beauty to his line and seductive, Bach-like pathos to his expression. There has always been a hungry magic to his artistry, a desire to puzzle out life's mystery that seems essential to the very physics that catapult him through space and still exists; even now, when age constrains him. Maybe it was his mother's suicide and his father's subsequent cruelty that made him challenge, then escape, the paternal authority of the former Soviet Union. Who knows? What is indisputable about him is that few dancers are as married to dance as he, or can disappear into sensuous rumination quite the way he can. He can dance anything and make it resemble deepest love. It's no wonder we adore him.

Around 1974, Baryshnikov defected and became an American star. In 1980 he became director of American Ballet Theater, where he pushed for the now de facto marriage of modern dance and ballet by working closely with crossover artists like Twyla Tharp. From there he invented his own idiosyncratic vehicle, the White Oak Project, and since then, his search for the essence of dance expression both past and present has deepened and moved further from the glitz of the opera house toward the freedom of the artist's loft, where rules are only habits that one brings to the studio to challenge.

For his 2000 run, Baryshnikov angled and prodded in order to present the works of the New York dance avant-garde of the mid- to late-'60s, which congregated at Greenwich Village's Judson Church and called itself the Judson Dance Theater. This is where nondancers moved, math equations defined dance, dancers scaled walls and danced on roofs, and danced in sneakers or nothing at all. Baryshnikov missed the Judson era,

as most people did, but with his insatiable hunger to absorb and understand modern dance influences, he is determined to recreate a slice of it. It's a choice that seems not only brave and generous but also politically pointed. Perhaps he's found that America is an entrepreneur's dreamland but a radical artist's bog. With his latest offering, *Past Forward, the Influence of the Post-Moderns*, he has hand-carried the radical artists' creations to the marketplace, his fame drawing in audiences that otherwise would stay home.

The program showcased works by Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Lucinda Childs, and Trisha Brown, and gave credit to the guiding spirit of composer Robert Dunn. Most of the dances were revivals; a few were new. With historical annotation by Baryshnikov provided through filmmaker Charles Atlas' crisp, downtown-style video, the night served up a dance intellectual's feast.

Dance, Baryshnikov told us on tape, was liberated from its entertainment values and virtuosic spectacle by these young upstarts who were a part of the larger youth movement that sought a radical reordering of society. According to Steve Paxton, who

is regarded as the father of contact improvisation, the things they were interested in "had to do with invisibility. The ordinary is in a sense invisible because it's ordinary," he said in voiceover. And it was the ordinary and the beauty hidden there that became Judson's fodder. It met us the moment we arrived. From 7:45 to 8 p.m. we were presented with a semidark stage on which dancers warmed up, part of Simone Forti's unvirtuosic "Scramble." Consciously or unconsciously, in the moment or retroactively, we were being asked to reflect on the nature of dance, performance, our status as observers, and the aesthetic domain. At the Judson Church, dance began its incursion into the realm of conceptual art, Minimalism, and a postmodern Dadaism.

"Scramble," for instance, was inspired by Forti learning to drive in Los Angeles and wishing that the traffic would understand her need to enter a lane, stop, let her in, then resume its progress. Fat chance. So "Scramble" is her effort to "flow with the flow." Gordon and Rainer created brilliant dances that went in and out of phase as dancers manipulated chairs, or chairs and pillows. Rainer's dances were sexy and sly; Gordon's were witty and inventive.

Hay's and Forti's work was the most didactic, whether it was Forti's "Huddle" (1961), in which dancers and nondancers from the community toyed with the football form, or Hay's "Exit" (1995), in which the tear-jerking Samuel Barber "String Quartet" played as gorgeously silhouetted movers stepped slowly from stage right, arms in fifth position front, or outstretched, like a band of mourners.

It was Paxton, though, whose ideas were like lasers seeking movement solutions of Beckettian beauty. His mesmerizing "Satisfyin Lover" (1967) had community members carefully cross the stage with resonant timing that bore the monumental force of the ordinary, as though a crowd of George Segal's haunting sculptures had been set in motion. And Baryshnikov in "Flat"—circling the stage to the sound of a clock ticking, stopping suddenly midmove, then resuming, slowly undressing and hanging his shirt, jacket, and pants on hooks taped to his body, then redressing—seemed to fuse multiple art forms into a chiseled, lyric whole.

A fiesty intellectuality dominated the night until Lucinda Child's sumptuously organized "Concerto" (1993) wrapped up the program. This was a dance of loose, formal beauty that

## PERFORMING ARTS

### High Egalitarianism



White Oak Dance Project

**Mikhail Baryshnikov's hungry magic makes a dance intellectual's feast.**

would have been unthinkable before Judson. The dancers in flowing black garb spilled over the stage with balletic precision but were engaged in a High Egalitarianism—there were no stars among the group, no stand-outs. Even Baryshnikov was just another dancer. One gets the feeling that that's the way he wants it.

—Ann Murphy