

Baryshnikov looks back at postmodernism

Zellerbach show features 40-year-old dances, hints of future

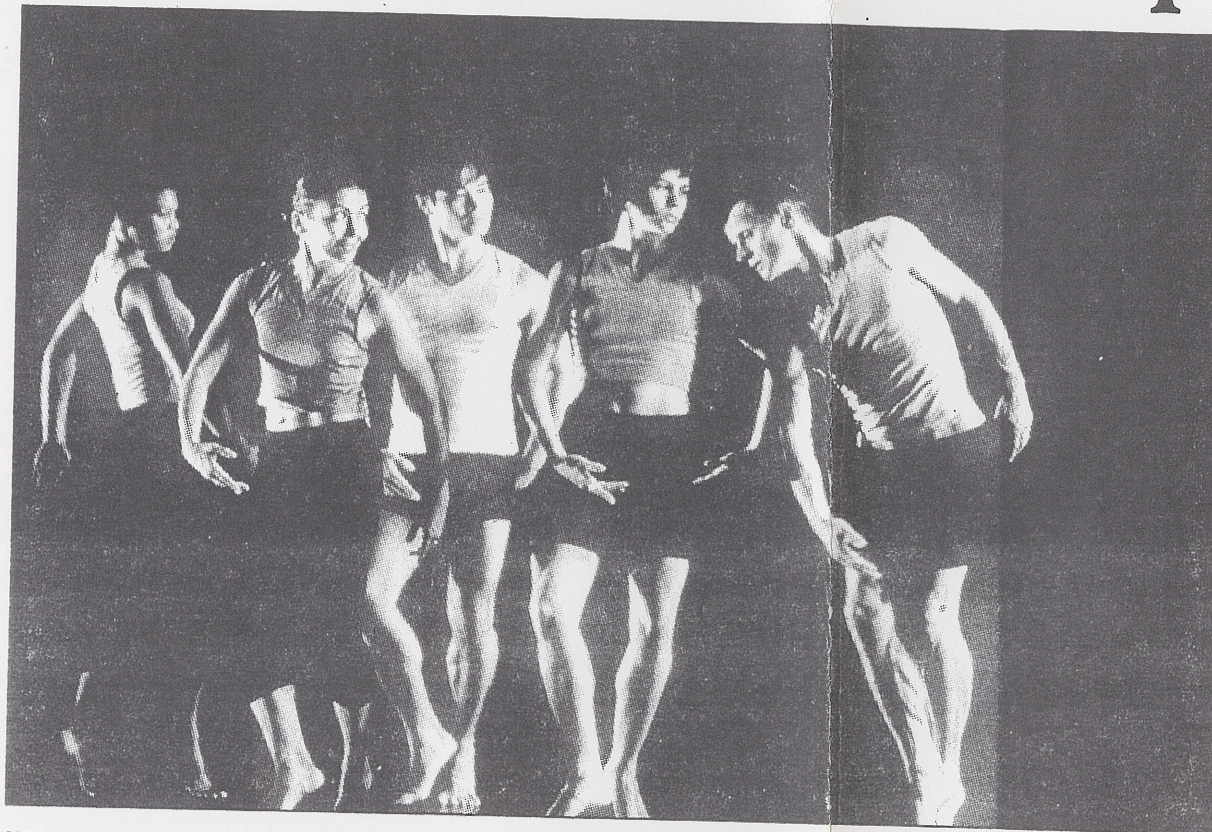
By Allan Ulrich
EXAMINER DANCE CRITIC

BERKELEY — They said no to virtuosity, but did they also say no to entertainment? Not according to the White Oak Dance Project.

This week, Mikhail Baryshnikov's 10-year-old chamber troupe has returned to UC-Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall for a daring venture in choreographic time travel. "PAST Forward," the extensive retrospective of works produced by leading members of the Judson era of postmodernism, offers more thrills than snoozers. It clarifies where American dance has been and even provides a few hints on where it will go. At 52, White Oak's superstar co-founder remains one of the dance world's most questing spirits. Even folks who came hoping for triple pirouettes Thursday evening and witnessed Baryshnikov indulging in a very gradual, semi-striptease may find a measure of satisfaction.

Anyone who believes contemporary dance is suffering from a surfeit of clutter, derivativeness and psychological hokey will inhale the pure oxygen on the Zellerbach stage and maybe suffer mild vertigo. This is dance stripped to its pedestrian, democratic, non-musical, non-narrative and even non-emotive essence. The project salvages what one had thought unsalvageable. Given Thursday's cordial reception, "PAST Forward" adds up to more than a wallow in nostalgia for sophisticated baby boomers. In disdaining systems (of both the classical and modern dance varieties), these choreographers seem to speak across the generations.

No, the evening is not an exercise in arid theorizing. For one



White Oak Dance Project members perform "Whizz," choreographed by Deborah Hay, one of the Zellerbach numbers.

thing, the program (a second follows Friday and Saturday) has been splendidly prepared. David Gordon wrote and produced it and Charles Atlas has prepared a video, incorporating new and archival footage (there's an agonizing dearth of the latter), to preface the dancing. The lighting is by the masterful Jennifer Tipton. Video screens allow you to see the dance from several perspectives at once.

Moreover, Baryshnikov, who narrates the video, received full participation from these seven featured choreographers, who revolutionized dance in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these dancemakers — who made Greenwich Village's Judson Church a cauldron of invention a generation ago — even supplied premieres for this tour.

In addition, the current White

Oak roster abounds in beautiful dancers. They are Raquel Aedo, Tadej Brdnik (last seen with the Martha Graham Dance Company at Stanford last spring), Emily Coates (formerly with New York City Ballet), Rosalynde LeBlanc, Michael Lomeka and Emmanuèle Phuon. In addition, the troupe has enlisted 50 members of the local community for several of the major numbers.

Featured on Thursday's Cal Performances program were Simone Forti's "Huddle," Gordon's "Chair Intro 2000," "Chair/two times" and "Overture to 'The Matter,'" Steve Paxton's "Satisfyin Lover" and "Flat," Deborah Hay's "Exit" and "Whizz," Yvonne Rainer's "Chair/Pillow" and "Trio A Pressured 3," Trisha

Brown's "Homemade" and "Foray Forêt" (excerpt) and Lucinda Childs' "Concerto."

Baryshnikov appears in the "Chair Intro 2000," "Homemade" and "Flat" solos, and integrates himself into the ensemble elsewhere with a wonderful sense of self-abnegation. To watch one of the most expressive, most communicative dancers of this age adopt that austere glaze that one associates with Judson speaks volumes about his artistry.

What fascinated most was tracing choreographers evolving from a position of austerity to an involvement in the allied theatrical arts. In the 1965 "Homemade" (performed by Brown in this hall several years back), Baryshnikov launches a solo with a movie projector on his back. We see the film of his dance in unison with the live gestures. The synchronization was off a bit Thursday, but the movement, drawn from the dancer's own experience, was arresting. Then, 15 years later, Brown is using "Stars and Stripes Forever" to accompany the perceptual games and volatile confrontations in "Foray Forêt" (danced with élan by Aedo, LeBlanc and Lomeka). Concept surrenders to sheer theatricality.

Hay's 1995 "Exit" (in which the choreographer danced with the ensemble and the community recruits) used Barber's Adagio for Strings (on tape) for a slow diagonal procession, mostly in silhouette, across the stage to the exit sign on the other side. The group gradually metamorphoses into couples, yet the crowd keeps moving as a unit.

Gordon remains Judson's foremost wit. His new chair piece for Baryshnikov, who transforms this

mundane bit of furniture into a miniature stage, tickles the fancy. "Overture to 'The Matter'" (1979) is something more. The work derives from Gordon's erstwhile career as a window dresser and his discovery that the repetitions in the Minkus score to the "Kingdom of the Shades" from "La Bayadère" adumbrate the minimalists. So, Baryshnikov carries in paraphernalia, while Lomeka sweeps the back of the stage and a long line of non-dancers slowly walks across the front in time to the music. It's one of American postmodernism's most sophisticated jests.

"Satisfyin Lover" (1967) keeps you in suspense as people enter, pause and walk on, a few of them sitting in chairs. Paxton's "Flat" is the one in which Baryshnikov traces an oval, removes articles of clothing and affixes them to a sticky patch on his back, then keeps walking. There's a point to be made about our fascination with prosaic activity, but Baryshnikov's innate sense of pacing elevates the piece to gripping dance theater.

Where Judson was heading was to Childs' 1993 "Concerto," the astute program closer. This stylized pattern dance, set to Henryk Górecki's Concerto for Harp, string and Strings and dressed by Anne Masset in hieratic black, yields voluptuous movement trajectories, intricate unisons, abrupt transitions and smashing diagonals. The eight dancers formed a tight, dazzling unit, confronting us with their rather terrifying absorption in the material.

Program B, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., will include a new duet for Hay and Baryshnikov. For tickets, call (510) 642-9988.