

Los Angeles Times

ES.COM
184,688 SUNDAY

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2000
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AN EDITION OF T

DANCE

REVIVAL OF THE JUDSON ROGUES

Baryshnikov features 'vintage postmodern' works of the group in his latest White Oak project.

By JENNIFER FISHER

While Mikhail Baryshnikov was just learning how to plié back in Latvia in 1962, a new group of rogue New York dancer-choreographers, called the Judson Dance Theater, was pretty much deciding that all that barre work really wasn't necessary, that anyone could perform, and ordinary movement could be just as beautiful as ballet or modern dance.

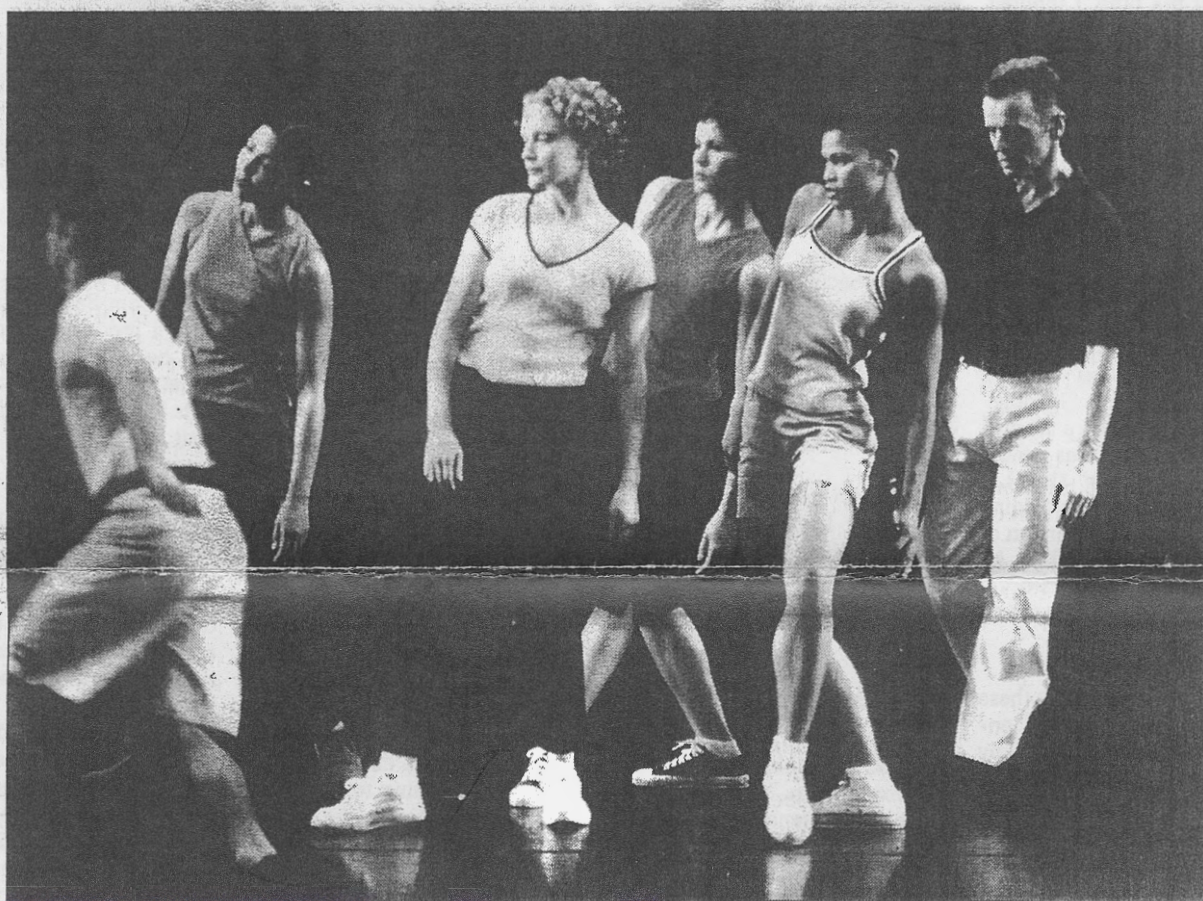
And while the future Russian ballet star was learning even more proper protocols in St. Petersburg and joining the Kirov Ballet, the Judson—fast becoming the cradle of dance postmodernism in Manhattan—continued to invent its own version of dance, which resembled no other.

If you had told Judsonites back then that they would be reviving their works in 2000 for the American company of a Russian ballet legend-turned-modern-dancer—well, they might have believed it, since the '60s were a decade when it seemed anything could happen.

And since the future is now, the latest program from Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project is called "Past Forward: The Influence of the Postmoderns." Coming to UCLA's Royce Hall Wednesday through Saturday, it features work by Judson leading lights Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer.

The usually startling exploits of these dance makers are legendary in dance circles, although fairly unknown outside of them. In the '60s and early '70s, Judsonites danced on the walls of buildings (using pulleys and ropes); wore street clothes or nothing at all; walked, hopped or stood still; and used chance or mathematical formulas to structure the action.

When Judson Dance Theater presented its first concert in 1962—naming itself after the adventurous Greenwich Village church that offered its sanctuary for concerts—the dancers were setting sail on already-occupied creative waters. Inspired by similar activities in other fields (Minimalism, "found" art, "happenings," improvisa-



Photos by STEPHANIE BERGER

The repertoire includes "After Many a Summer Dies the Swan," a new work by Judsonite Yvonne Rainer.



Baryshnikov performs "Homemade," a revival of a 1965 work by Trisha Brown.

tional theater), they were specifically spurred on by a no-holds-barred choreography class given by musician-composer Robert Dunn.

Titles from the era sometimes tell a lot: "Intravenous Lecture" (1970), for instance, was pretty much what it said,

in that Paxton talked while a saline solution was injected into one arm. Later, as Paxton led the development of the dance form called contact improvisation, the emphasis on process over product could be sensed in the title of several 1975 contact perform-

ances: "You Come, We'll Show You What We Do."

As the press material for White Oak delicately puts it, there were viewers at the time "who were puzzled by these performers." There were probably as many people who thought the work was designed just to shock as there were partisans who sensed that it was a historical moment capable of bending perception and opening new doors for dance.

Eventually, the Judson genre became known as postmodern, calling attention to its revolution against what had gone before—principally the florid Expressionism of dance modernists such as Martha Graham and her contemporaries.

Except for a television documentary film called, appropriately enough, "Beyond the Mainstream," work from the Judson era is rarely seen, although its liberating effects are woven through much contemporary choreography.

This is the first real revival, launched by Baryshnikov, who has been looking for adventure and whatever came his way since he arrived in this country in the mid-'70s. His thirst for innovation

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was well known, and from time to time, the contemporary choreographers he worked with in the 1980s or '90s—like Alvin Ailey or Twyla Tharp—would say to him, "You should have seen Judson."

"That's how I started to get interested," Baryshnikov says, on the phone from Lawrence, Kan., a White Oak date that precedes Los Angeles. "But my mind was somewhere else at the time. I thought, well, one day I'll have to really dig into that."

Now that the day has come, the White Oak program is not only recreating some of the Judson's most famous pieces, but offering newly commissioned works by Gordon, Rainer and Hay.

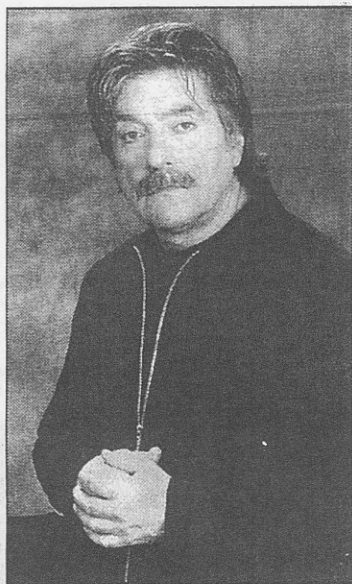
Iconic postmodern works from the past, restaged by their choreographers, include Paxton's "Satisfyin' Lover" (1967), a carefully scripted symphony of walks and pauses done by groups crossing the stage; Simone Forti's "Huddle" (1961), which is, yes, like a football huddle onto which various people climb; Gordon's "Chair" (1975), a duet for two dancers with folding chairs as partners; and a version of Rainer's ever-changing "Trio A" (1966), a series of evenly danced, low-tech movements that have an oddly meditative effect.

"You have to respect these peoples' guts and endurance," Baryshnikov says. "They were booed and hit by the press badly in many instances. Can you imagine if they all believed what [New York critic] Clive Barnes wrote about them? 'The disaster that is the Judson'—it was the worst review I've ever seen. They could have said, 'OK, we quit.' And we wouldn't have seen the stunning dances that followed, or all the discoveries."

While learning more about Judson's free-ranging experimentalism—Baryshnikov is an encyclopedia of names and facts from the era—he has been thinking back to his Russian years, and how different the dance options were.

"In the former Soviet Union, there were these great classical companies and the national dance ensembles, but nothing in between," he says. "People who wanted to dance after work were encouraged to join amateur ballet clubs and did poor versions of 'Giselle,' Act II. Instead, they could have taken steps to express themselves or introduce their ideas about dance."

He sounds frustrated and enthusiastic at once. "And they wouldn't have to be a trained ballet dancer. They could have danced like Steve Paxton and found their own language, their



MITSU YASUKAWA / For The Times.

"Past Forward" features revived works by David Gordon, Trisha Brown, center, and Yvonne Rainer, and is directed by Gordon.

own approach to movement."

It wasn't so much the fault of censorship, Baryshnikov thinks. "It was just a kind of narrow vision. That's why they have such a crisis with contemporary choreography there now, because there's no tradition."

"Nobody stepped in and said, 'You don't have to be a perfect classical ballet dancer to express yourself. Go in the studio and start to think—what does the stage mean, what could the movement be?'"

"The revolution in the arts in the '60s had an incredible influence for the next 40 years," says dance historian Sally Banes, the primary chronicler of Judson history in several books.

"The dance that people see today owes a huge debt to Judson—all the multimedia work, for instance, and someone like Bill T. Jones, when he brings his mother onstage, or when he makes dance using people from the community, or makes dances about peoples' lives. And so many young choreographers do these things without realizing that it couldn't have happened without the Judson."

For those who arrived on the scene after that most fertile era, descriptions of Judson pieces sometimes sound either boring or intriguing. How interesting was it to watch a dancer just smile for four minutes (Paxton's "Smiling," 1969)? Or stand on a Manhattan rooftop to watch Trisha Brown's dancers do semaphore gestures in the direction of downtown for 15 minutes, then uptown for the same amount of time ("Roof Piece," 1971)?

An even more pressing question is, what do these Judson pieces, which were part of the revolution then, have to say to current audiences?

Banes, who saw an early version of "Past Forward" in Princeton, N.J., last summer, thinks there are reasons that everything old can be new again. "I think what the work did in its time is what it can do now," she says.

"It kind of cuts through some of today's overly slick and decorated commercial work that goes by in a blink. There comes a time when people get to the end of what's current in dance and want to have the screen rinsed clean again."

"We can never go back to the '60s, of course. And we're not seeing that body of work or those bodies again, but a new version on exquisitely trained dancers. I think it will be refreshing to people, to see the immediacy, the intelligence and excitement about the body in motion in a very direct way. It really engages people in ways that are both emotionally and intellectually very exciting."

Gordon, who serves as director for "Past Forward," hopes that voice-over segments by some of the choreographers linking the various pieces will provide some context for today's viewers of what might be called "vintage postmodern" work.

"There are artists saying things about the pieces, so you get the idea that there's a human being behind this, who made some decision then and is making some decision now," he says, on the phone from Anchorage, another White Oak tour stop.

Throughout the tour, White Oak will recruit about 40 people from each community to fill out the casts of pieces like "Huddle," "Satisfyin' Lover," and Gordon's "The Matter." It's an authentic move—this is the kind of thing that was done with these pieces in the '60s—and a bid to increase audience involvement in the show. As in the old days, the recruits will be a mix of dancers and non-dancers.

Gordon admits, audiences tend to seek out Baryshnikov when he's with a group onstage. Some may still be surprised that the former ballet whiz does not, as he himself puts it, "jump around like a young goat anymore." But that doesn't mean his virtuosity has disappeared.

Gordon describes a solo he created for Baryshnikov in his new piece, "For the love of rehearsal," which is a mix of classical and "pedestrian" movement to a Bach score: "I have watched that solo 50 times and I'm just amazed every time," Gordon says, "because it's always a little different and always as if he's inventing it at the time. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with me anymore—he owns it."

For Baryshnikov, 52, getting to know the Judson alumni better has affected his outlook on endurance in the dance world.

"I think I've gotten tougher as a human being, you know," he says. "Being next to them, looking at the way they handled themselves in their careers, how they're dealing with life now and the difficulties of being an artist."

"You know, these people are still kicking. They're still in that discovery process, just in different directions. They probably haven't changed much since the '60s, although some of them have a tiny company now, some of them travel and teach, some do workshops, filmmaking, writing or work with students."

"They are tough and I highly admire that. There's no question in my mind that they are very important individuals on the horizon of American art."

"Isn't it ironic," says Gordon, starting to laugh, "that the keeper of modern dance history is a little Russian ballet star?"

From a Judson point of view, the

irony may be in the fact that virtuosity and personal charisma were *not* on the menu in the '60s, according to Rainer's famous "No manifesto."

This aesthetic statement, rejecting values of previous dance generations, also said "no" to things like "spectacle," "glamour" and "the seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer." Fortunately, no one ever said "no" to reconstruction.

Gordon says he was never one of the postmoderns who disdained classical virtuosity, a statement that emphasizes how different the Judsonites could be. However, he did fit into the general rebelliousness of the era—"looking for trouble" was the way he described art-making at the time. And he still sounds very Judson-esque when he describes what he looks for today in a theatrical experience.

"You know, I sat in the audience of a play in San Francisco awhile back," he says, "and behind me somewhere during Act 1, a woman said to the man she was with, in very pejorative tones, 'This is the craziest thing I ever saw.' It was obvious she didn't want to be there."

Gordon is offering this story when asked whether he thinks today's dance audiences are up for experiencing the wild-and-crazy Judson once again.

"I sat there for some time," he continues, "still watching the play, but thinking to myself—if I could possibly see the craziest thing I ever saw, I would think it would be a really lucky night." □

• *White Oak Dance Project, "Past Forward: The Influence of the Postmoderns," Royce Hall, UCLA, Wednesday through Saturday, 8 p.m. \$30 to \$60, \$15 UCLA students. (310) 825-2101.*

Jennifer Fisher is a regular contributor to *Calendar*.