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Performance



'PASTforward' to the '60s

WHITE OAK DANCE PROJECT PAYS HOMAGE TO SEMINAL TROUPE

By Anita Amirrezvani
Mercury News

Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the most famous classical ballet dancers of our time, became fascinated with modern dance more than 25 years ago, when he first came to the United States. After his ballet career ended, he says he started

the White Oak Dance Project "to indulge my curiosity" about modern dance.

'PASTforward' offers an important lesson on a critical turning point in dance that occurred nearly 40 years ago.

major assumption about modern dance in the early 1960s.

His latest show, "PASTforward," which opened Wednesday at the University of California-Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, explores the work of Judson-era choreographers such as Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs and Yvonne Rainer, all of

WHITE OAK DANCE PROJECT

The upshot: "PASTforward" takes a fascinating look at the radical experiments that revolutionized modern dance in the 1960s.

Where: Zellerbach Hall, UC-Berkeley

When: 8 tonight-Saturday

Tickets: \$36-\$60; (510) 642-9988

whom have gone on to celebrated careers.

"PASTforward" offers an important lesson on a critical turning point in dance that occurred nearly 40 years ago. Until the 1960s, choreographers such as Martha Graham and José Limón had ruled the stage with intensely dramatic, psychological works, imparting their unique styles to their companies of highly trained dancers. The Judson group reacted against this status quo. No longer did dance need to have a plot, a set, costumes, music, fancy lighting, rigid choreography or even trained dancers. Why not use ordinary people, instead of heroic bodies? How about everyday movements, instead of big leaps? Just about everything was worth trying.

The locus of much of the creativ-

ity was the Judson Dance Theater in New York, which hosted 20 dance concerts from 1962 to '64. "PASTforward" re-creates some of the more important dances from the 1960s, as well as work choreographed in that mindset from the 1970s to the present. The fact that much of the work no longer looks earthshaking shows how great its influence has been on the dance world. The best of it is still terrific.

Organization man

One example is "Flat," choreographed by Steve Paxton in 1964, a solo work that uses ordinary movement and repetition to create a terrifying portrait of an organization man. Baryshnikov, wearing a formal beige suit and a white shirt, maintains a flat expression as he undresses down to his briefs, pausing between articles of clothing for a momentary walk in a conscripted circle onstage.

It's eerie to watch him freeze from time to time while he goes about his everyday chores, much like a machine that's starting to break down. As he disrobes, he hangs his clothes on himself, as if he were merely a coat rack. Even today, "Flat" gives a powerful vision of a person who has somehow lost his soul.

One of the things the Judson choreographers proved without a doubt is that you don't need trained dancers to make a strong statement. Two works, Paxton's "Satisfyin Lover" (1967) and Deborah Hay's "Exit" (1995), do so using members of the Berkeley community.



STEPHANIE BERGER

White Oak Dance Project dancers revive works by New York's Judson Dance Theater, a legendary avant-garde group of the 1960s.

In "Satisfyin Lover," people of all shapes, sizes, ages and dress merely walk across the stage, stopping occasionally to face the audience or to sit in one of three chairs. It could almost be a scene lifted from a bus stop, except that the experience of being in a theater forces us to notice each person and pay attention to his or her humanity.

Many of the works in "PASTforward" are unique, including Brown's solo work "Homemade" (1965). With a video projector attached to his back, Baryshnikov is charged with re-enacting a series of memories. While he does this, the projector displays a film of him on the back of the stage performing the very same movements. Sometimes the two don't coincide, like two brothers with different memories of the same event. Watching Baryshnikov and his double raises intriguing questions about how, why and what we remember.

Music and motion

Wednesday's program, which will be repeated with some variations today and Saturday, ended with a lively work created in 1993, Lucinda Childs' "Concerto." Set to Gorecki's Concerto for Harpsichord and Strings, the work featured all seven dancers — Raquel Aedo, Tadej Brdnik, Emily Coates, Rosalynde Le Blanc, Michael Lomeka and Emmanuele Phuon, not to mention Baryshnikov — in a carefully choreographed piece that was absolutely in love with its music. What a pleasure it was, after experiencing so many silent dance works, to see how dance has circled back to an appreciation of its own past, even as it has been changed forever by the experiments of the 1960s.

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