

SPOLETO TODAY

TUESDAY, JUNE 1, 2004

'The Baryshnikov show' flawed, but worthwhile

Ignore the overlong title "Forbidden Christmas or the Doctor and the Patient." Everyone in town calls it simply "the Baryshnikov show" because the famous dancer is the star and the reason for the play's existence. The play is written and directed by Rezo Gabriadze, who also is credited with sets, costumes and even the sound collage of all sorts of noises, from auto crashes to folk songs.

In the play, Mr. Baryshnikov plays a man who thinks he is a car. His name is Chito. He has a key and a crank to turn himself on, and for seven years he chugs

around the streets of the small town in which he lives (which is in Soviet Georgia) more or less happily. The people who brush against him venture mild concern about his peculiar delusion, but most humor him. One woman even loves him so much she leaves her husband for him.

In the end, a doctor loses patience with Chito and lets him have it. He furiously and methodically strips Chito of his delusion and leaves him psychologically naked and defenseless. The result of this gives the final scenes of

See *FLAWED*, Page 8A



ROBERT JONES

Overview

'The Baryshnikov show' flawed, but worthwhile

FLAWED from Page 1A

Mr. Gabriadze's play great poignancy.

It is, unfortunately, a clumsily written, awkwardly constructed play that bites off considerably more than it can chew, emotionally speaking. The play lasts barely 90 minutes, and for the first half it looks like it has been dreamed up in some late night living room by a group of amiable amateurs who happen to have become friends with a great dancer who no longer dances but is eager to do something on the dramatic stage.

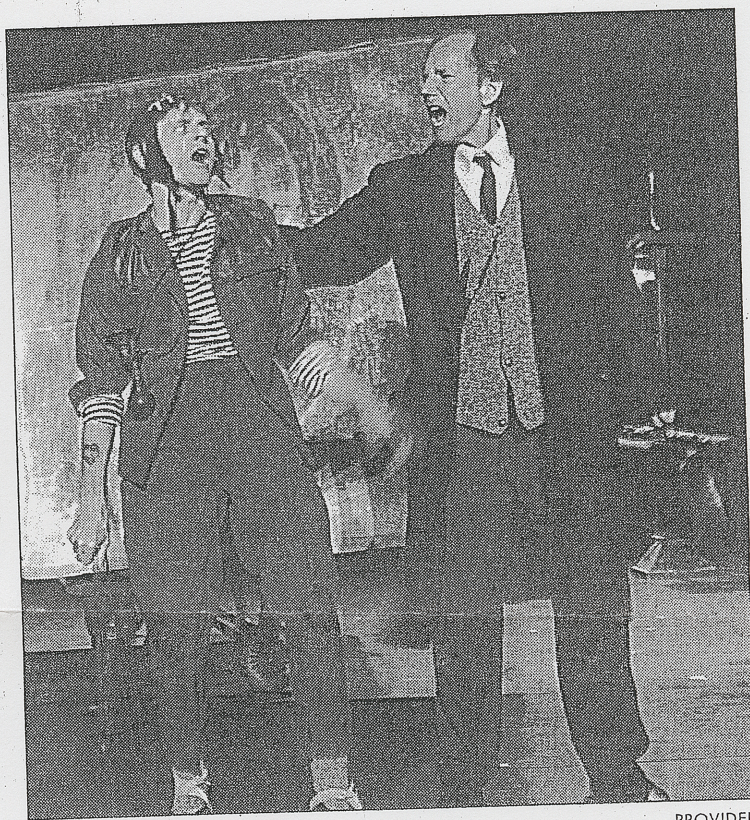
The first half hour of Mr. Gabriadze's play bored and irritated me. Then I realized what he was trying to do and became fascinated by poor Chito and his curious affliction. If only Mr. Baryshnikov had aligned himself with Oliver Sacks, a really strong piece of theater might have happened.

Oliver Sacks, you may recall, is clinical professor of neurology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, among several other important positions. He is also a brilliant writer with a number of books to his credit, several of them best sellers. In one of them, "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat," Mr. Sacks tells of a man whose alcoholism has marred his brain so that he now remembers only three minutes into the past and lives in a perpetual 3-minute bubble of time. Having no concept of a future and no memory of a past, he is perfectly happy in his endless "now." Mr. Sacks has a more famous book called "Awakenings," which was made into a movie starring Robin Williams as Sacks himself. So the premise of "The Doctor and the Patient" is not as far-fetched as you might think.

Mr. Baryshnikov is not a persuasive actor, but he has presence and charm and it goes without saying he knows how to move around the stage. The best actor is Jon DeVries, powerful as the doctor dedicated to dragging poor Chito out of his happy delusion and into a considerably less happy "normality."

In sum, "Forbidden Christmas or The Doctor and the Patient" seems to me an honest and heartfelt attempt at a play about subjects somewhat beyond the grasp of the authors. Nevertheless, it will hold your attention and rouse your pity, too. I recommend it.

Two other elderly dancers are behind a show listed as "The Chairs." The two are Valda Setterfield and David Gordon, a married couple who have been noted figures in the avant garde dance world for many years. The Gordons have performed at many



PROVIDED

Mikhail Baryshnikov and Jon DeVries perform in "The Doctor and The Patient."

Spoletos over the years, most memorably in 1991 in Philip Glass' "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" And I'll always remember the lovely sight of Ms. Setterfield dancing naked in a pool of water in Mr. Glass' "The Photographer" at BAM in the early 1980s. Setterfield is still a woman of unearthly beauty, and though she doesn't really dance anymore, her every movement is packed with grace and meaning. I would rather watch her slim, white-haired presence than most other dancers a third her age.

"The Chairs," though, was not finished in time for the Festival, and the Gordons have replaced it with "Couples," a casual-looking exploration of relationships, especially those between loving couples, married couples and couples of different generations. The early part of the show involves the casual home life of the Gordons, who obviously love each other but are a bit spacey and focused on dance matters rather than on who cleans the house and who makes coffee this particular morning. The show ends with a real coup de theatre, the Gordons performing a mesmerizing slow walk across the full depth of the stage while roaring energetic music of a minimalist type pours its energy into their moving but nearly motionless figures. Simple? Yes. But, in its way, awesome. I left thinking of the old claim that a good actor can read the telephone book and make it interesting. In the same sense,

great artists like the Gordons and Mr. Baryshnikov only have to walk from here to there to command attention.

The Alvin Ailey company also has to be described as awesome. I went to their Sunday matinee to see "Treading," about which I had been hearing great things. The piece is on the Ailey's Program A, and is set to Steve Reich's "Music for Eighteen Musicians," one of my favorite pieces by this major figure in the early Minimalist movement. It is the work of choreographer Elisa Monte.

Dancers have always been fond of minimalist music, whose strong rhythmic pulse and insistent repetition is ideal for physical exertions of any kind. Certainly it was for "Treading," a piece for two dancers doing indescribable and thrilling things with movement. It brought down the house, but then everything on the program did that. The audience looked to me like a sellout, and it was, in showbiz parlance, a "hot" audience, every item sending the audience into screaming approval.

The opening work was "Heart Song," evocative of Morocco in sound and setting. Fascinating. I also liked the fierce impact of "Juba," danced by a quartet of savage-seeming types. The afternoon ended, of course, with the company's signature work, "Revelations." Deeply religious and strenuously ecstatic, it seemed to levitate both the stage and the audience. A great afternoon.