

• OCTOBER 27, 1987 •

BY MINDY ALOFF

# David and Misha and Valda and Rhoda

**M**ikhail Baryshnikov is hardly the first ballet star to work in film and video, but he may be the first to approach those media contently from the standpoint of what they can showcase best, rather than how much theater the camera can swallow. This sensitivity to the moving image has governed his performances in even his most disappointingly organized American screen projects. What a joy, then, to see such timing and scale couched in a harmonious setting, as it is in *David Gordon's Made in USA*, a new project for Dance in America (Channel 13, October 23, 9 p.m.). Over the course of an hour, the show features Baryshnikov in three sorts of Gordon comedies. *Valda and Misha* is a very words-and-movement duet with Valda Setterfield, Gordon's stage partner, spouse, and inspiration of 25 years. *TV Nine Lives* is a broadly clowning quintet for Baryshnikov and four men from Gordon's Pick-Up Company. And *Murder* is a video transcription of Gordon's satiric 1986 mimodrama American Ballet Theatre. A vehicle for Baryshnikov's mimicry, it presents him as a mad scientist, a dueling officer, a stagehand, and, *en travesti*, an unusually vital Camille.

One of the remarkable things about *Made in USA* is how thoroughly it registers as a collaboration. Baryshnikov is the focus of the program, but not the sole interest. In *Valda and Misha*, the finest part of the hour (and the only one conceived for television from the start), he is keenly and steadily matched by Setterfield, whose vocal magnetism and physical charm—one part glamour to one part wit and one part serenity—offset his technical perfection and casual beauty in slow motion. The bright, video-generated drawings of John Sanborn and Mary Perillo, with their tinge of childhood freshness and optimism, provide curious psychic relief to the remorseless punning in the quintet and duet. And the Edward Gorey designs for *Murder* are appreciatively framed in all their acidulous detail.

The major New York-based collaborators speak with great fondness of working on the program: Gordon, Setterfield, Baryshnikov, and coproducer Rhoda Grauer, in whose eye it first gleamed. "I thought that *Murder* was

very, very funny. And then I thought, it would be great to have a dance on TV that would be funny for a change." Grauer approached Baryshnikov with the idea, and he immediately suggested adding a commissioned duet with Setterfield. To round out the hour, *TV Nine Lives* was developed from material incorporated in another dance with an Old West flavor (one never performed in New York). "Misha set this all in motion," Gordon emphasizes. "PBS commissioned it, a rare circumstance now. And Rhoda really knocked her brains out convincing everybody how the money was going to work." Furthermore, the program's award-winning director, Don Mischer, had worked with Baryshnikov before, including on programs with Twyla Tharp, and so brought a double-edged understanding of television and dance values to his decision-making. On virtually everyone's part, the project was not only a labor of love, but also of wisdom. That delicate level of specialized experience is part of the magic the program holds in reserve. "It is a weird little special," Baryshnikov says fondly. "Although it's for public TV, you probably have to think and know a little bit [to respond to it fully]."

During interviews with Gordon, Setterfield, and Baryshnikov, the theme that kept naturally bubbling into conversation was what makes dance succeed in what venues. Baryshnikov is particularly concerned with the scale of his movement for the rectangle, and how the action of the performer relates to that of the viewfinder. "When I look on a screen, I know when something is wrong," he says. "Every piece [of a dance] requires a different camera [approach] and different movement. Some movements the camera flatters; some it tones down."

Setterfield also has analyzed the performer's effort to calibrate the scale of an action according to the medium. "Projection has to do with an infusion of energy. If you blow out a candle that's far from you, you use more force, more breath, than for one that's closer. The great tease for me is how do you deal with pedestrian movement—by which I mean anything that does not require a fully stretched limb—and amplify that. Gordon worked on the dia-

logue—so offhand it sounds—for *Valda and Misha* with a similar objectivity. First he interviewed them, prompted their spontaneous memories, asked them to speak to a list of topics he had in mind. Then he began to throw out and pare down until "I developed a script of what they should have said. It's a lot true and a couple of lies." (One characteristic of the dialogue that would seem inconceivable to manufacture is that Setterfield's responses are always slightly more vulnerable than Baryshnikov's—and, in the context of the duet, more confident for their vulnerability.)

"For me, it was the most fascinating experience," Baryshnikov says of the effort to talk and dance at the same time. "I was like a child, like a Gerry Ford. As we did the movement, we talked. The duet's not that exhausting, 15 minutes, a pretty quiet number. But I was surprised how easy it looks when [Gordon's] people are doing duets. It looks so easy and beautiful. With my triple complex about my English grammar—I speak English like I play guitar, in four chords—I was challenged. I'd have a perfect answer [to Setterfield]—in Russian—but I'd lose the steps. I was fighting with myself in concentration."

The idea of America as a destination in life and in dancing weaves through *Made in USA*. Gordon's style, which gives the illusion that it commingles inner life and the facts of constructed art, is an important part of that idea. Even to say that, however, is to traduce the effect, which isn't intended as heavy-duty philosophy, but some light undercurrent, a momentary reflection of a face in a windowpane. And yet, one can't like Gordon's work without coming around to its curiously impalpable depth. This is true for Baryshnikov as well. "It's never boring," he begins his assessment, "the most important thing in any visual art. I like the way he approaches movement, the ABCs of his work. It is very much natural, a very human art. The walk, run, partnering, communication of support in many ways—it is very beautiful and symbolic."

And what does Gordon remember about the experience of filming in California? "I knew I was in Hollywood. Esther Williams was in the Shrine Auditorium watching Misha do *Giselle*." ■