

Dialogue With Arabesques

Using TV to bring dance and words together

BY JANICE BERMAN

Since he moved here from Russia, Mikhail Baryshnikov has been exploring beyond the realm of classical ballet. He's danced with Liza Minnelli in the TV special "Baryshnikov on Broadway," with Twyla Tharp's company and, recently, in Martha Graham's modern-dance classic "Appalachian Spring."

But dancing with talking?

That's what he asked for, and that's what he got. The result, "Valda and Misha," directed by Don Mischer and produced by Rhoda Grauer, is part of "David Gordon's Made in the U.S.A." It's on "Great Performances," Friday at 9 p.m. on WNET / 13.

Gordon was commissioned by Dance in America to make "Valda and Misha" for dancer Valda Setterfield, to whom he is married, and Baryshnikov. It is the first of the hour's three Gordon dances, which are strung together by video artist John Sanborn and Mary Perillo's childlike drawings.

The other works are "TV Nine Lives,"

Mikhail Baryshnikov and Valda Setterfield in 'Valda and Misha,' choreographed by David Gordon.



MITZI TRUMBO

also created for the show, and "Murder," a comic ballet centered on Baryshnikov and commissioned in 1985 for American Ballet Theatre, where the superstar is artistic director. "TV Nine Lives" presents the wild West through two classic American folk heroes, the Cowboy and the Vaudevillian. "Murder," a gleefully ghoulish gothic sendup, has sets by Edward Gorey.

Gordon — who shed his customary title of "constructor" in favor of "choreographer" to be eligible for an Emmy — is no stranger to talking with dancing, but such operations normally take place

in small loft-like spaces. Miking is impractical for opera house performances like ABT's.

When the television special was suggested, Baryshnikov saw his chance and jumped at it. In the piece, he and Setterfield, both in jazz shoes, also arabesqued, turned, walked, tapped and, of course, chatted all the while.

The conversation is between two old friends, linked by occupation and by the fact that the U. S. is their adopted home. They arrive in a cartoony, cardboard boat and disembark into a painted-on dance studio.

Setterfield recalls her childhood in wartime England; because of its privations, she always eats the whole apple, even the core. So does Baryshnikov.

They exchange other confidences: Baryshnikov says he's "not a happy type." Setterfield says her color TV is bigger than her mother's refrigerator. Baryshnikov says his mother "took me to see things"; Setterfield's Aunt Vera did the same thing.

All the while, they're dancing, matching each other for random charm and fluid conversation. Like the dance, the dialogue was scripted, based on conversations between the two that Gordon recorded in England, then cut down for the taping in New York.

Talking and dancing alters the perception of dance and talk. Sometimes the hearing makes for better seeing, and vice versa; sometimes not. "Valda and Misha" offers a large audience a rare chance to stop, look and listen. ●

Baryshnikov: Time to Take Chances

Few people have this kind of connection onstage," Mikhail Baryshnikov said recently of his collaboration with David Gordon and Valda Setterfield. "Onstage, it's nothing forced, it's total comfort. There's a different rhythm between two friends, sharing life experiences and memories."

It's exploration that Baryshnikov welcomes at this stage of his career "instead of rehearsing a few hours every day on good old 'Giselle.'"

Baryshnikov had seen dances by Gordon's Pick-Up Company and asked Gordon to make him a piece.

"I've learned," he joked, "that in modern dance, 'ballet' doesn't exist.

It's a piece, a work — stuff."

Gordon created "Field, Chair and Mountain" and "Murder," in which "Misha could play Alec Guinness playing many parts," Gordon said.

There are other things Baryshnikov wants to do. MTV for one. And, although he said he likes dancing less than he used to, he still sees "a lot of ballet possibilities."

Now 39, Baryshnikov last season did not dance at all with ABT, although he did dance with his own touring company and, of course, in his new film, "Dancers."

"What do you feel is out of your range now?" he was asked. "Nothing," he replied firmly. — Berman