

By Georgette Gouveia
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For many people, 40 is a turning point, that make-or-break age when you realize the world is no longer a place of endless possibilities. For the dancer, whose work depends on the bone and muscle that ultimately fail, 40 is particularly poignant, since it signals the twilight of a career.

On Jan. 27, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rockland's most famous Russian, enters that twilight zone. But as seen in his many performances this month, he shows no signs of slowing down.

Film fans can catch him in "Dancers," which weaves the 19th-century romantic ballet "Giselle" into a modern love story that parallels the ballet's plot. Baryshnikov plays a womanizing dancer who's making a film of "Giselle," the story of an innocent peasant girl's fatal attraction for a faithless nobleman. It's a ballet close to Baryshnikov's heart, the first he danced on stage after defecting from Russian on June 29, 1974, in Toronto. Some have also suggested — most notably ballerina Gelsey Kirkland in her autobiography, "Dancing On My Grave" — that the hero's playboy personality resembles Baryshnikov's own.

Movie critics are hardly leaping for joy over "Dancers." But they have been captivated by Baryshnikov's art, as they were in "White Nights" and "The Turning Point," in which he played another dancing Don Juan.

Baryshnikov will also appear on the Arts and Entertainment Cable Network Thursday in the 1981 documentary "Baryshnikov: the Dancer and the Dance" and on Channel 13 on Oct. 23 in "David Gordon's Made in USA," a wonderfully funny, inventive new installment of PBS' "Dance in America" series that mixes modern dance with animation and a witty text.

Last week, Baryshnikov served as host of the "Dancing for Life" AIDS benefit at Lincoln Center, in which he and members of American Ballet Theater previewed "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," an amusing, quirky piece by Mark Morris that showed off Baryshnikov's humor and aggressive approach. The next night he made his debut with the Martha Graham Dance Company at Manhattan's City Center Theater, offering a superb interpretation of the farmer-bridegroom in Graham's modern-dance classic, "Appalachian Spring."

Wanting it all

Baryshnikov's willingness to embrace everything from movies to modern dance offers the key to the dancer: He's a collector of experiences.

"It's sick," he tells hostess Shirley MacLaine in his documentary. "I'd like to do everything."

That desire propelled him to leave the relative security of stardom at the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad.

"I did all there was to do. I wanted to do more. So I left," Baryshnikov says while dancing with Valda Setterfield in Gordon's breezy "Valda and Misha" on the "Dance in America" program. That piece, in

Misha at 40

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Mikhail Baryshnikov dances with Valda Setterfield in 'TV Nine Lives' on the 'Dance in America' program airing Oct. 23.

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which Baryshnikov talks about his love for gangster films, MGM musicals, stick-shift cars and the American supermarket — "I spent more time there," he says, "than in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" — says more about him than all the magazine profiles and biographies put together.

If Baryshnikov's hunger for new experiences is his strength, it's also his weakness. Besides the overexposure and injury that have resulted from his trying to dance everything everywhere, it's difficult to track Baryshnikov's evolution as a dancer and pinpoint his contribution to dance. You can't point to a body of work created with one choreographer, the way you can with Peter Martins, the former New York City Ballet star who worked with George Balanchine and typified the male Balanchine dancer in the mid-'70s and early '80s.

The heart of his mystery

With Baryshnikov, there is only Baryshnikov, and, of course, that's quite a lot. Many critics have tried to analyze his

enduring appeal. There's the puppylike melancholy that makes women want to take him home and feed him chicken soup. There's also the exhilaration of Baryshnikov in flight.

"He uses the air the way other dancers use the earth," British ballerina Antoinette Sibley says in the Arts and Entertainment documentary. In "Configurations," the Choo San Goh work seen in the documentary, he leaps across the stage and angles his body like a rocket streaking across the sky.

Baryshnikov also possesses a quality that all great dancers have, the ability to create clear, vivid images. In last week's performance of Graham's "Appalachian Spring," he offered a memorable interpretation of the frisky, protective farmer, jumping up and slapping his thigh, gently escorting his quivering bride, played by Terese Capucilli, a graduate of the State University of New York College at Purchase.

"He's totally giving as a partner and totally into the immediacy of the moment," she says. "His value as a dramatic dancer

is very great."

As seen in "Appalachian Spring" and the "Dance in America" special, Baryshnikov is dancing with more relish and a cleaner technique than he has in recent years.

How long he will continue to dance with this enthusiasm and clarity is anybody's guess. Goodness knows, there are other things to occupy him. He could devote himself full-time to American Ballet Theater, where he's been artistic director since 1980. He could concentrate on films, in which he's proven to be a crossover star. He could also try his hand at choreography, for which he has said he has the will but not the skill. (His Freudian staging of "The Nutcracker," however, continues to be a popular, provocative alternative to the sugar-coated versions.)

"He is first and foremost a true artist," Capucilli says. "He looks for challenges to the body and the mind."

The smart money says Baryshnikov will stay on his toes as long as the challenges remain fresh.