Mikhail Baryshnikov David Gordon is from

But this unlikely duo just might popularize postmodern dance

By **Gia Kourlas** Photograph by **Eric Ogden**

Everyone knows that Mikhail Baryshnikov is a genius, but outside of the dance world, David Gordon's name doesn't garner the same respect and adoration. It should. Baryshnikov, for one, knows that Gordon's choreographic ingenuity equals magic. A major fixture of the avant-garde Judson Dance Theater during the '60s and '70s, Gordon may not be as famous as his Judson contemporaries Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. But at age 64, he continues to create cinematic works of dance-theater that are, gloriously, both emotional and detached—the antithesis of the romantic ballets that first made Baryshnikov famous. "PAST*Forward*"—Baryshnikov's dream project, directed and written by Gordon—is a program of old and new works by the first wave of postmodern choreographers (Gordon, Brown, Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti, Deborah Hay and Steve Paxton), performed by Baryshnikov and his White Oak Dance Project at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. That the former ballet superstar, who has blissfully extended his career by turning to modern dance, embraces the Judson philosophy is strange. In her famous 1965 dance manifesto, choreographer and filmmaker Rainer stated: "No to spectacle, no to virtuosity …no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image." In the '70s, Baryshnikov seemed to personify all that Rainer was railing against; now he's on *her* side. Over insane amounts of vodka (Grey Goose, Misha's favorite), the oddly compatible Gordon and Baryshnikov discussed their past and present partnerships. One thing is clear: Baryshnikov, 53, has fallen in with a gang of dance radicals, and he's not likely to disentangle himself anytime soon.

Time Out New York: **When did you two become friends?**

Mikhail Baryshnikov: In the late '70s, I saw David's concerts at Dance Theater Workshop. We met later, when I was running American Ballet Theatre.

David Gordon: I remember meeting Misha with Charles France in London at the Hyde Park Hotel to discuss the ballet I was going to choreograph for ABT, *Field, Chair and Mountain,* and sitting at the table getting progressively drunker as they named more and more dancers. I kept count in my head, and when I got to 20, I stopped counting. I thought, This is too terrifying.

Baryshnikov: He had never operated with so many people, but I thought that it would be a challenge. I kind of approach my work that way—I jump into the cold water, you know? Without closing my nose sometimes, with open eyes. And I expect other people to do the same. He said no at first. He said, "I'm not crazy," but then he said, "Maybe I'm crazy enough to do this." I haven't had a drink yet, you see? And see how fabulous the interview is going? [*Laughs*]

TONY: **Why did you say no at first?**

Gordon: Because I always say no. Then I can pretend that if the person never calls again, they didn't really want me. If they call back, then I've proven they do.

Baryshnikov: There's a very well-known person who saw pretty much everything at ABT during my tenure. About everything, he said, "Oh, that sucked, that was not good, *why* did you do that?" One piece he said was worthwhile—it was *Field, Chair and Mountain.*

Gordon: [*Raises his glass*] Here's to that guy.

TONY: **Didn't you say no after Misha asked you to direct "PAST*Forward*"?**

Gordon: Sure. And I quit several times.

TONY: **Oh, dear.**

Gordon: It's true.

Baryshnikov: I remember twice in one day!

TONY: **Why did you ask him in the first place?**

Baryshnikov: Oh, it was an obvious choice, and everybody agreed. He knew the material inside out, that's number one. And I've been digging out stories about Judson from him for over 20 years. You know—you sit, you get drunk, you speak about life. A lot had been said about Judson, yet I saw nothing. It was a bit frustrating. I was curious. But before I approached him—

Gordon: —he asked Paul Taylor, but he said no.

Baryshnikov: I met Yvonne, and she said it was right for David to do this. I knew that he would be skeptical but intrigued by the possibilities. [*Gordon tries to talk*] Let me say it first. I know David so well—we work well together; there are always little things. I annoy him! I *know* that. Can you imagine after a second martini?

TONY: **Another round!**

Baryshnikov: Some people wanted pieces from the past; others didn't. Lucinda and Trisha took the same route—one piece from the '60s, one from later. Deborah Hay said, "Fuck the past. What I do now is what's important." Then Steve Paxton says, "There is no past and present—there is just a piece. For me, it's all the same!" United thinking? [*Giggles*] No!

Gordon: The whole process was about both trying to deal with the realities of where this would go and for whom it was being mounted and, simultaneously, never capitulating about the work itself. How do you keep those balls in the air and arrive at something everyone can respond to? And that has been one of the great successes of this project. There are the people who continue to say, "This isn't dance." They said it 40 years ago.

Baryshnikov: And they're still saying it!

Gordon: But then there is a vast majority of the audience that sits at intense attention to the details of the work. Great dance is talking to great American artists who have not necessarily been acknowledged. In that way, "PAST*Forward*" is accomplishing something that Judson perhaps never even set out to. There was no holy message: We will bring the Judson into the 21st century! Part of the credo of the time was that success was a sign of failure. You had to feel a little guilty if you had a piece that everybody responded to.

TONY: **Why do you enjoy performing works by such iconoclastic choreographers?**

Baryshnikov: What can be better to do than *this*? It's ideas and spirit. It's about people and time. Like Bob Rauschenberg says, "Success was not part of the picture—activity was." You have to do something to contribute to yourself, so that everybody around you says, "This was not a wasted day!" Just *do* something. And it's rarely seen now. Everybody wants to be dancing at the Joyce Theater and the Brooklyn Academy and get grants and be a good boy or girl. There is no—

TONY: **—risk-taking?**

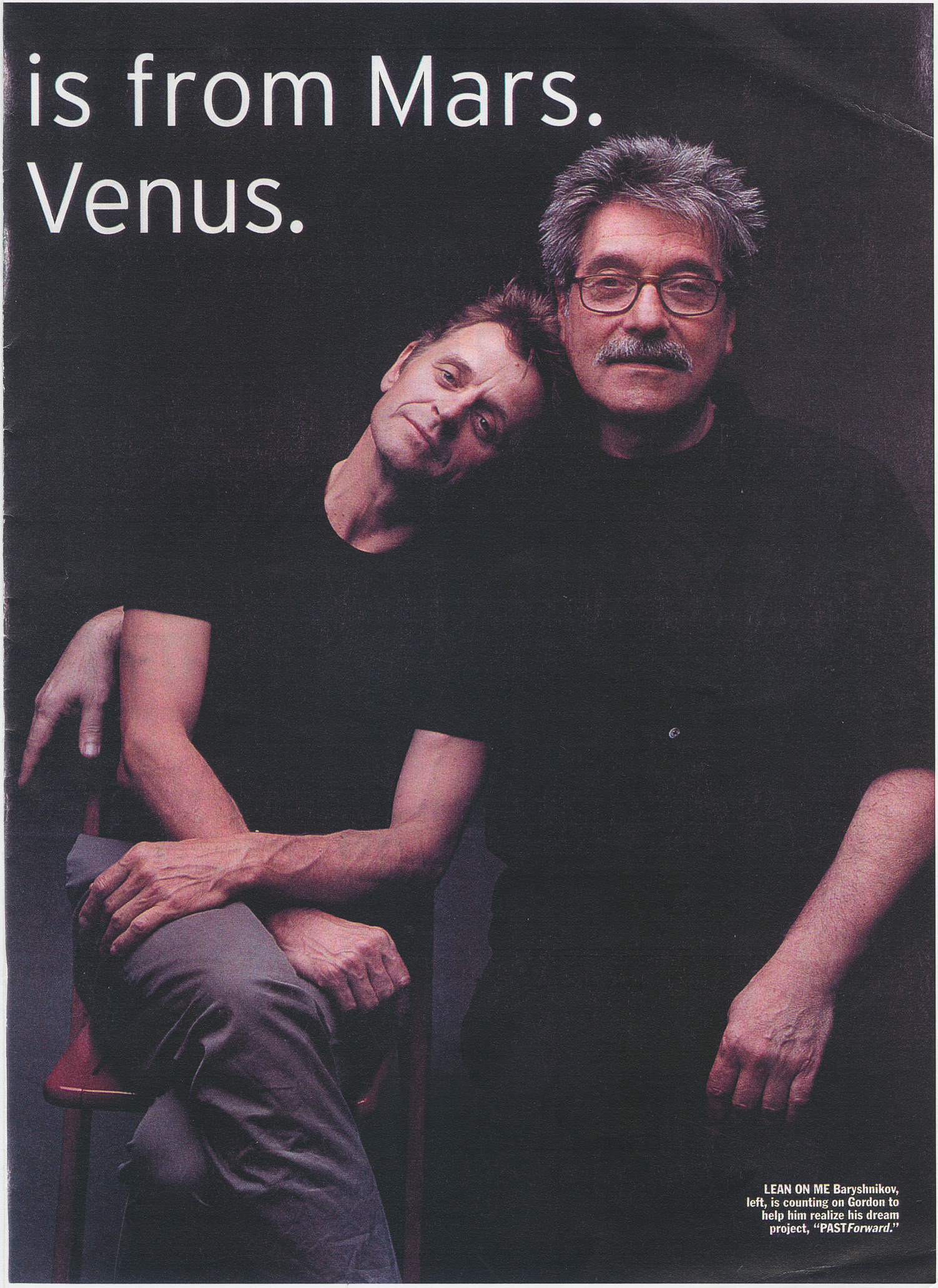
Baryshnikov: Yeah.

TONY: **What do you do when you're booed?**

Baryshnikov: The first time I was booed was at a gala at New York State Theater. I danced with Twyla Tharp; it was her first Sinatra tryout, and it was exquisite. Everybody was expecting me to do *Corsaire*—but I could not do another classical pas de deux. The piece is finished, and there is polite applause, and finally a few people from the balcony start going, "*Boo! Boo!*" It's an ABT gala, you know? Everybody's in black tie. When people's expectations are not met, it provokes really kind of stupid things. I was somewhere performing Steve Paxton's piece, and in the middle, this guy screams, "I am not a fool!" I almost screamed, "Indeed you *are*!"

"PAST*Forward*" is at Brooklyn Academy of Music through Saturday 9.

is from Mars. Venus.



LEAN ON ME Baryshnikov, left, is counting on Gordon to help him realize his dream project, "PAST*Forward*."