

# A generation of far-out dance experiments returns to the stage through Baryshnikov and his White Oak Dance Project

by Caroline Palmer

Thirty-nine years ago a large and diverse group of young dancers, visual artists, and performers who defied (or rather denied) description entered the Judson Memorial Church off New York's Washington Square Park and changed the course of dance history. Like the punk rockers of the 1970s who knew they were shaking up the status quo but couldn't give a toss about it, this loose-knit and restless collective of artists felt much the same. Despite—or more likely *because of*—their extensive training in classical ballet and modern dance (including study with Anna Halprin's Dancers Workshop Company in San Francisco and Robert Dunn in New York), the dancers who took on the mantle of the Judson Dance Theater were defiant in their quest to upset the rules.

They strove to return to the essence of human movement through everyday examinations, to completely erase the boundaries between art forms. Lucinda Childs created a solo for a dancer sporting a colander decorated with hair curlers on her head and sponges stuffed in her mouth—an image of a nightmarish Fifties housewife. More macabre than that, David Gordon asked a biologist friend to design a costume and was rewarded with her bloody lab coat. All of the Judson artists embraced such intellectual play and worked according to a manifesto created by Yvonne Rainer, repudiating traditional costumes, pretense, music, style, camp, the “star image”—anything that pandered to the audience. And yet a lot of people came to watch, often sweating through marathon performances.

And then time marched on. The performers, including Trisha Brown, Childs, Gordon, Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, and Rainer, went on to perform with the Grand Union dance collective; to make film; to write, teach, start companies, travel the world, work in opera and theater. Some continued to collaborate, or at least stay in touch. Others drifted away when aesthetic and personal differences came between them. Now, these iconoclasts who once rejected the dance mainstream are being pulled into it through their participation in the White Oak Project's PASTForward program, appearing this weekend at Ted Mann Concert Hall.

The inspiration for a reunion began in 1999, when several of the original Judson Dance Theater works were revived during a benefit for the Judson Church. Mikhail Baryshnikov, among the world's best-known ballet dancers, was in the audience that night, accompanied by Suzanne Weil, former director of performing arts at Walker Art Center from 1968 to 1976 (where she presented Grand Union and many of the Judson Church artists) and current producer of many White Oak productions. Baryshnikov, whose 1974 defection from the Soviet Union was in some part motivated by his desire to perform modern dance, began a quest to unite the Judson choreographers with his own White Oak Dance Project—the company he formed in 1989 with intrepid choreographer Mark Morris.

“I’ve never known anyone with more curiosity. Modern dance propelled [Baryshnikov’s] career,” explains Weil by telephone from Los Angeles, adding that even while working with American Ballet Theater his repertory included works by modernists and postmodernists like Twyla Tharp, Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor, Gordon, and Brown. “This is the continuum. We worked with a core of dancers who were most representative of the period, and settled on seven choreographers. Misha was able to work with them one at a time in his studio at the White Oak Plantation [in Yulee, Florida]. There was a lot of opportunity for real experimentation.”

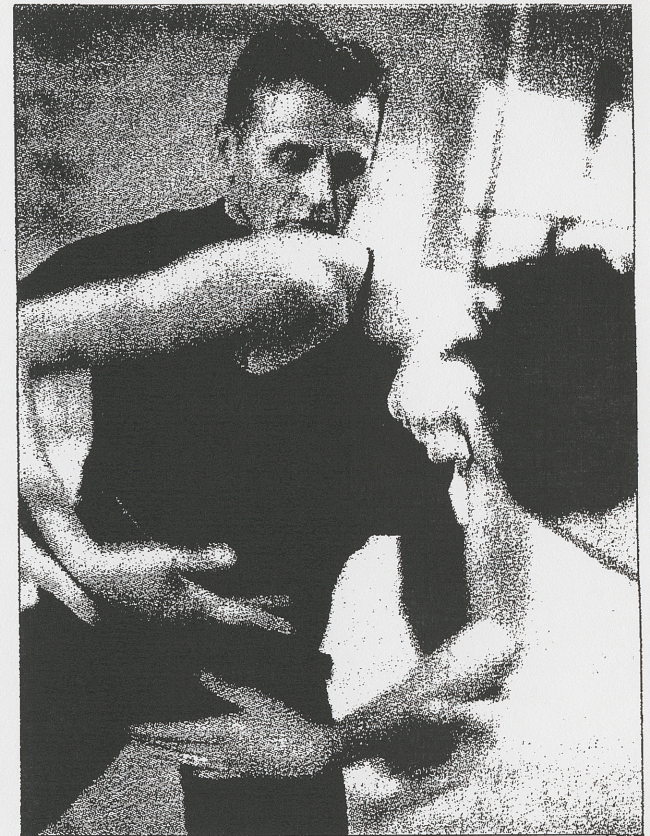
For Yvonne Rainer, the invitation from Baryshnikov was “an undisguised blessing no less than a most curious and unique cultural phenomenon.” Rainer has contributed three works to the White Oak repertory, including “Talking Solo,” a section from her evening-length 1963 piece *Terrain* that is noted for its use of random phrases selected by the dancers in

LeBlanc perform a reconstructed sequence, while the monologue performed by Lomeka is different from the original (once a short story by Spencer Holst, now an essay by Vladimir Nabokov). “Trio A Pressured #3” is culled from her seminal *The Mind Is a Muscle, Part 1* of 1966, and “Chair/Pillow,” is an excerpt from *Continuous Project—Altered Daily*, created between 1969 and 1970.

“There are those who will carp on the question of ‘authenticity,’” the 66-year-old Rainer says by e-mail from New York, noting that the White Oak experience of the present is far different from that of the Judson Church past. “The original performers were less polished, more like ‘ordinary’ folks, in keeping with the ethos of the period,” she notes. For the 53-year-old Baryshnikov and his finely tuned dancers to carry off Judson’s bare-bones aesthetic, they had to unlearn virtuosity and theatricality. “Turn off your headlights” was my instruction at one point,” recalls Rainer.

Weil notes that this paring-down of movement can prove challenging to audiences, especially those accustomed to spectacular, rapid-fire stimulation. “Some of it can be boring. There’s repetition and silence. But the concert is smartly produced and directed by Gordon and Baryshnikov,” she explains, adding that films by Charles Atlas and video by Peter Richards shown throughout the performance (including original Judson Church footage) help to establish context.

Though Rainer is enthusiastic about the wider audiences that Baryshnikov’s notoriety will bring to this once-underground work, she refuses to romanticize the latest Judson revival. “For all of Misha’s generous and adventurous validation, we cannot promise the present-day audience the same thrills of discovery that awaited a few of us,” she says. “We cannot promise the same intimations of



Brothers in arms: Baryshnikov and friend go back to the avant-garde of the Sixties and Seventies

through the palace gates of high culture, forced open to allow our rabble of poets, painters, composers, musicians, dancers, and friends to walk, run, drag, scream, fling, eat, or just sit still before the thirsting gaze of a new polyglot audience. We can’t promise any of that because the moment has passed and that audience has aged, as we have, and dispersed.”

But the touring of these choreographic recreations represents a lot more than a chance to witness what you missed. As the title PASTForward suggests, what’s on offer here is a prehistory of many of the dance and performance-art experiments that continue to be worked out on stages, in studios, and in many rambunctious minds today. **CP**

PASTForward runs Thursday, September 27, through Saturday, September 29 at Ted Mann