

REVIEW / Dance

Misha Meets the Judsonites

By ROBERT GRESKOVIC

NEW YORK—"PastForward," the witty, word-play title for the current program offered by Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project (recently given at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and touring internationally), turns out to have layer beneath layer of meanings. The most obvious reference identifies the avant-garde aims of the variously old works on view. The two-act, 16-part repertory (including pre-curtain casual-looking dances performed in the lobby as the audience arrives) is the work of seven dancemakers, all of whom have been known since the 1960s as Judsonites and are now recognized as the instigators of postmodern dance. Directed and written by David Gordon, the show-and-tell bill reclaims and continues the experimentalist dance initially put on in the Judson Memorial Church of New York City's Greenwich Village. Those were rebellious days when all dance practiced up to that point by the reigning purveyors of both ballet traditions and modern-dance methods got questioned through and through.

Indulging His Curiosity

As Mr. Baryshnikov puts it in his recorded commentary, the efforts of this era long remained a closet book to him. He was a ballet student working dutifully in the sheltered environment of what was then the Soviet Union's Vaganova Ballet Academy in what was still Leningrad. By the time the upstart Judson experiments peaked and made their way into history, Mr. Baryshnikov was beginning to wonder what artistic worlds lay outside the enclave of the Kirov Ballet, where he had become the troupe's newest and, arguably, most pure and technically advanced star. Once he bolted from those confines, dramatically and permanently in 1974, he became passionately interested in the newest aspects of contemporary choreography. About this array of works by Judson alums, which the Russian-born superstar put together for himself and his WODP dancers, Mr. Baryshnikov states: "My purpose: to indulge my curiosity."

The individual choreographers whose work is on view also speak in the program's video portions, but only about themselves and their work. Lucinda Childs, for example, tells how in those early days these dancemakers might start



Mikhail Baryshnikov (center) and his White Oak Dance Project performing postmodern works by the anti-dance Judsonites.

their day by taking a ballet class and then set to work on a dance that utterly and specifically disregarded anything that smacked of the methods and aesthetics of that class.

An implied, though never spoken, irony of "PastForward" itself is that Mr. Baryshnikov's own ballet stardom has given fresh life to these dances. Though each of the participating choreographers seemed game and generous enough to join this often retrospective enterprise, I wondered how many of them, besides Mr. Gordon, who has worked eagerly with Mr. Baryshnikov in the past, would have been paying much attention to the most internationally acclaimed exemplar of ballet's art if he hadn't made the initial overtures.

Most of the WODP dancers have substantial ballet backgrounds, but the contrast and perhaps even conflict of the two worlds was most striking when Mr. Baryshnikov himself essayed the postmodernist excursions. When, for example, the still trim and toned 53-year-old silkily and slyly worked through the twists, turns and matter-of-fact paces of Mr. Gordon's "Chair Intro 2000," a charming exploration for a dancer with a metal folding chair, plainly plotted choreography became brightly illuminated by classical rigor.

Against Expectations

While Ms. Childs and her contemporaries may have taken the odd ballet class, Mr. Baryshnikov remains pervasively grounded in ballet's pristine precision and indelible form. If, however, the choreographers of the everyday movements and anti-dance emphases of the Judson era felt any discomfort about Mr. Baryshnikov's fine

renderings of their plain work, they kept it to themselves.

I don't mean to indicate that Mr. Baryshnikov proved incapable of or uninterested in getting at the intentionally informal tone of the various dances. On the contrary, he worked scrupulously to ground each in its own, offbeat range. Nor do I mean to imply that the older works on view needed ballet-schooled dancers to make them count. Overall the program happily proved that however interested its individual creators were in bypassing the accepted methods of theatrical dancing, they mostly remained committed to sound theatrical structuring in well-gauged theater time. (Any number of today's self-proclaimed upstarts would be well advised to study just what makes these dances tick, to discern what makes their sometimes casual or outlandish aspects read and live as theater.)

In these regards, Yvonne Rainer's and Steve Paxton's dances (all from the 1960s)

served up mint examples of how to go against standard expectations while bringing the observer in to follow and ponder unadulterated action as fanciful event. In keeping with the former era's egalitarian mood, a supplemental group of performers "drawn from the community" filled out the program's personnel. Little, however, of their activities, as devised by Simone Forti toward re-creating some of her experiments from the '60s and '70s, counted for much more than a reminder of the frequent tedium attending such anti-theatrical aspirations. Still, even if WODP's Emily Coates lacked some of the deadpan acumen Ms. Childs formerly showed when performing her 1964 "Carnation," the task-dance remained an amusingly absurdist vignette for an unassuming young woman ritualistically toying with a lettuce strainer, sponges and foam-rubber hair curlers.

Oddly enough, the unconventional program aimed for a traditional "big finish" by closing with Ms. Childs's 1993 "Concerto" (to Henryk Gorecki), which turned out to be a misfire of dimly plotted, monotonous paces. More suitable, it seemed to me, would have been ending with the program's penultimate offering, Mr. Gordon's "Overture to 'The Matter.'" This utilizes 19th-century ballet music to underscore a single-file, gravely paced line of "average people" behind which one dancer methodically brooms the stage. At the center of it all, Mr. Baryshnikov cast himself as a stagehand who kept arranging and rearranging props he fetched from backstage. In the process, dressed in coveralls and working mostly with his back to the public, he transformed unassuming work into momentous theater.