

## White Oaks Dance Project *PASTForward* in Chicago

By Sybil Shearer

Setting aside all that happened and was thought of and worked on in the sixties, what is left today? – of what they thought about and performed at that time at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City.

Without Baryshnikov's interest in attempting to find out about everything he missed on his way to the top, and the interest of those who have not forgotten their pasts in this medium it would actually be, and actually is, for the most part, nothing but residue used unconsciously by "post-postmoderns."

The infiltration of rock music and the remains of "electronic" music (nature sounds distorted by electronic manipulation) or sound taken from and exaggerated by technology of the electronic instruments themselves has, with casual attire – tee shirts, shorts, sox and sneakers, and with muscle-based gymnastics – back packs, people as baggage carried from here to there – has changed dance composition for better or worse depending on the individual choreographer or performer in the last forty years.

The Judson Dance Theater was the "think" school of dance - "The Mind is a Muscle" as Yvonne Rainer named her signature work, and why Rainer was the leader at the time and why, I suppose, she left the field of dance for other venues, because dance encompasses so much more than muscle. It is the most basic of the arts and challenges on all levels of development from physical technique to human feeling and finally spiritual insight.

Most of the few compositions that Baryshnikov was able to dredge up were not remarkable as works of art. Deconstructionism is interesting mainly as backing up in order to start again. But if it goes on too long it impedes *clear* thinking. So thank goodness for Trisha Brown's explanation back then to John Cage when she said, "I don't really want to do this." And he said, "Why don't you do what you want to do?" And thank goodness for the talent of David Gordon who natively saw development as creativity.

It was the situation of the times that made the Judson group interesting, the revolt against Martha Graham and the early moderns who revolted against ballet, so that not only was ballet the enemy for the Judson group, but the earlier revolters against ballet were the enemy as well.

So what has developed out of this is not the specific style of an individual artist like "Graham technique," but a kind of free-for-all, later including speaking as well by the performers in order to explain what was going on.

# Ballet Review

I was a rebel too – a solo rebel – and also a minimalist among other things. I might have been an influence for some of these people through my New York performances. Because later when I began to look at dance instead of doing it, I saw quite a few suggestions that I had injected into the flow of movement ideas, although I never saw a full comprehension of what I was doing or what I thought was the purpose and aim of art as expressed through modern or postmodern dance.

What interested me was the willingness to go beyond the basic dance technique, and to see movement everywhere as the medium of expression for the dancer who is also a choreographer. My aim was rather the training of the body to become all those myriads of rhythms, qualities, and designs by controlling tension and relaxation. This to be used to say something, not about people in relation to objects, but about human thinking and feeling.

In an introductory film section of *PASTForward* the painter Robert Rauschenberg said that the Judson Church group was revolting against dance as entertainment. But that is exactly what the early moderns were revolting against. However, then it was entertainment versus art. The Judson group were now revolting against art as well (the art of dance) at the same time thinking of themselves as artists.

Their idea seemed to be – anything is art. You just have to see it that way because they thought of themselves as artists. They seemed to feel that everything they did was acceptable as choreography and that left them free to be accepted as artists (whether the press liked it or not). Since there is strength in numbers as a group they *were* accepted as a new direction in art by museums – perhaps accepted because Rauschenberg was one of them.

During the period when found objects were all the rage – I saw a group from the Judson Church perform at the Milwaukee Museum of Art. Among them was Rauschenberg. He had gone through the first phase of being a painter on a flat surface, and then felt he wanted to experiment with space so he extended his work out beyond the frame in solid structure and in this way became a sculptor. Then feeling he wanted his work out of the frame altogether and to move in space he became a choreographer. And finally he wanted to be out there himself performing in his own work as well, and he became a dancer. As a dancer he was a found object.

That's the way it was. He poured something into something else. At the same show Lucinda Childs, a quite beautiful shapely girl, proceeded to undress in the darkened gallery lit only by a group of turtles exploring the space with flashlights strapped onto their backs. Included in the evening's action were a stack of bricks to be knocked over, pillows, a very large vacuum cleaner, and a decorative popcorn machine. Every object had people attached to it in some way. It was indeed revolutionary, and in looking back it was much more interesting than today's Bill Viola who simply uses virtual reality in a large expensive way and calls it spiritual.



This brings up the question - What does Baryshnikov mean by *PASTForward*? Is it simply reviving pieces from the sixties and seeing what the same people did in the nineties? But this also brings up the question of what is forward. Is it just a matter of time or is it progress? At the end of a century of so much change as we look back, what was this search all about?

What is rare to me is not those who revolted, they abound unconsciously everywhere. It is the insight into the future that is rare. So where have we been and where are we going?

At Columbia College in Chicago in late November 2000, where Baryshnikov received an honorary doctoral degree, Chicagoans were able to witness works from the sixties and the nineties by Judson Dance Theater members performed by Mikhail Baryshnikov and the White Oaks Dance Project as well as performers from the community.

Because the sequence of events changed with every performance I shall report them in my own order.

The work of Yvonne Rainer, who had the longest program notes and received the most honors for her achievements at the time, seemed to border on story telling and entertainment, both in an intellectual way – on the dry side. So perhaps that is the reason why, although I saw three programs, I do not remember seeing “Trio A Pressured II 3,” which was originally called “The Mind is a Muscle.”

Steve Paxton only pretended to be dry. In his piece “Flat” he caused me to see this silent event as though I were looking out of a closed second story window at a man in the street taking his suit off by degrees, hanging it on his body and walking in a large circle imagining that he was playing golf or sitting waiting or closing a window; or on the way around stopping at a real chair while he made his clothing changes -- first off and then on. Sitting on my chair looking from my window this was a fascinating sight, curious, mysterious. The building that surrounded me turned the audience into bricks and mortar while the man outside in the street walked, sat, carried and left. I watched him go. This was Baryshnikov, a classic performance.

Simone Forti, on the other hand, was soft and folksy, rather out of place on a hard stage, more suited to a camp site with her dreams. One wonders if she was ever really in the Judson Church, if it was not just an inspirational idea for her as she rolled in the grass on a cloudless day in the country dreaming up imaginative folk dances for her campers; things like people climbing over each other in a “Huddle” pretending they were climbing a mountain, not very pleasant to look at or, I imagine, to do. But there they were huddling and climbing for long periods of time. And then they were playing traffic as they ran from the sides and passed through the middle without bumping.

These things were in progress as the audience came in and sat watching before the main program began, with Simone Forti hovering around admiring her creations.

Most of what modern choreographers have given Baryshnikov to do has been wide of the mark of his essential talent and range. After I saw “Single Duet” by Deborah Hay I went home and got out the video of him dancing in *The Turning Point* and waited for the part I remembered especially – his lyrical dancing in the studio (the dream sequence with Leslie Brown) and found that the video editors had removed his solo part, which had so impressed me, leaving the whole section simply a love duet. Later in the final scenes, however, when he danced so spectacularly from a technical standpoint, I saw that neither he nor anyone else could do this any better, and that this was perhaps the real reason for his search into other ways to move.

But also in other films and at other times on the stage I always saw in everything he did his ability to go beyond the limitations of the classroom vocabulary in a way that none of the other dancers understood. And he himself is still in the dark about his true gifts.

In Wendy Perron’s article in the October 2000 issue of *Dance Magazine*, Baryshnikov, watching a rehearsal of postmodern choreography, is quoted as saying, “It’s so exciting!” –and later, “you see it’s different every time.” Suddenly I saw that the stranger in his life for which he has been searching is *spontaneous improvisation*, the source of so much creative activity. His training from a child kept this hidden from him. And, without knowing it, this is what he really hoped to find in the works of the various choreographers he had sponsored through his White Oaks Project. But Deborah Hay, who is apparently his present mentor, is definitely of the “think” school. I just hope she has not put out the real flame, for which he has been searching, with her theory-oriented convictions that I first witnessed a few years back when she did an *hour long solo* at Links Hall in Chicago.

Then there was another cerebral experiment by Lucinda Childs, “Concerto,” described in her appearance on film as “musical configuration” – an abstract piece.

But these seven people in black had unintentionally been bewitched into a bunch of gnats, grounded on the floor instead of free in the air, captives of the choreographer’s choice of music. The audience responded very positively to this piece probably because it resembled people dancing. After an evening of walking and playing with chairs etc. suddenly it did look like dancing, that is if you never noticed (on a summer evening) a bunch of gnats doing much the same thing only better.



Among these works there were also two pieces by Trisha Brown, the one person in this group of sixties pioneers who made it to *Forward* very publicly, establishing herself as a choreographic artist and a continuing achiever, again and again. Her quality and range went so far afield from the Judson Church concepts that the excerpt from “Foray Foret” did not really belong on this program because she had made a clean break from the Judson experiments. The movement, the costumes, were not actually a development of what happened in the sixties. She was doing her own kind of developing, and was simply being generous to her friend Baryshnikov by offering a second piece beside “Homemade,” which was a “think” dance recorded into the camera and performed in almost unison with the film while carrying the camera on the back, clever in the order of the times.

So the activity of the Judson group was like a flash storm that changed the landscape, but not the principles of growth. This will take awhile to right itself.

But then there was David Gordon who directed this performance and pulled together for Baryshnikov the PAST*Forward* idea.

I understand that David Gordon did the chair dance (1975) himself solo in its original form, and it probably was the kind of solo manipulation that we now do with our cell phones when we are novices. Man-made objects are often more puzzling than nature, and need to be conquered and finally taken for granted.

Because he was and is an artist, Gordon made a fascinating cerebral version with two dancers and two chairs, with film added the second time around, worthy of umpteen viewings by a mathematician or perhaps even a physicist in order to see and remember all the variations.

The “Chair/Pillow” dance (1970) by Yvonne Rainer was simplistic by comparison done to the rhythmic music of Ike and Tina Turner and performed by today’s gymnastic dancers. In the old days it might have been comedy.

But David Gordon, not so spectacularly in the present limelight as Trisha Brown, demonstrated through his work “The Matter” which he said has metamorphosed through the years, arrived at the true answer of what the life struggle is all about.

In this work Gordon shows that there are those who put together to put together, and there are those who clean up, mostly in the background – the sweeping figure in the distance. Gordon gave Baryshnikov the role of putting together dead material of the past in the process of searching for the future. At the same time there are those who keep marching through life.

But through technology Gordon shows us what we so often miss with the naked eye. As the people walk accepting their lives, their looks, the available clothing and hair styles, the camera catches their faces, thrown large on the screen as they march into the light to the music of Leon Minkus (entrance of the *Shades* from *La Bayadere*), and we see who they really are. We see the soul of each individual.

Because David Gordon sees beyond the movement and at the same time into the movement (which remains only as memory unless mysteriously transformed by the inner experience of the individual viewer), he illumined a truth. Even though this work is called an overture, he has presented us with a real work of art – insight into humanity without the trappings. And he did this *through* the trappings, because on the big screen in the background we saw all these other spiritual selves. This is the aim of all great art, and why it so often takes the place of religion, because art demands individual insight, not group therapy.

And Gordon had the grace to present Baryshnikov as a person, and a dancer as well, in “Chair Intro 2000.” This was a kind of thank you for the personal sacrifice that Baryshnikov made by playing wooden soldier in so many of the other pieces in bringing to us these ideas from the sixties and letting us sort out past, present and future in the venture called PAST*Forward*.