

+

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Baryshnikov moves ahead to 1960s, '70s

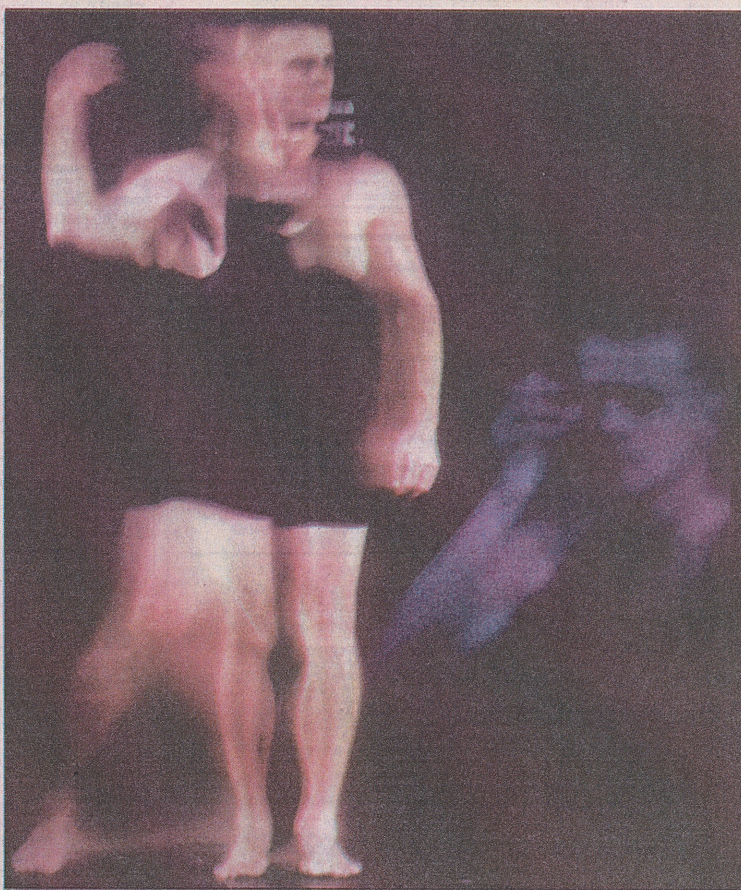
By Elizabeth Zimmer
FOR THE INQUIRER

NEW YORK — First, he was the darling of the Leningrad Kirov Ballet. After his 1974 defection, he was America's most famous male ballet dancer, appearing on stage, TV and in movies through the '70s and '80s. Then, Mikhail Baryshnikov took over the artistic direction of New York's American Ballet Theater, a job he left in 1989.

Now, in one of the most startling reinventions ever in the dance world, the 53-year-old artist has emerged as producer and performer in one of the country's most successful modern troupes, the White Oak Dance Project, which he founded a decade ago.

This season, in addition to repertory works by the likes of Mark Morris and John Jasperse, White Oak is touring "PASTForward," a program of dances by the first generation of postmodern choreographers, including Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, Deborah Hay and Trisha Brown. None of the chore-

See **WHITE OAK** on H8



Mikhail Baryshnikov is exploring the works of first-generation postmodern choreographers in "PASTForward," opening Wednesday at the Merriam.

Baryshnikov steps out of the spotlight for "PASTForward"

WHITE OAK from H1
ographers involved, all of whom are now in their 60s, have retired yet; several are at the pinnacle of the field here and abroad.

Appearing Wednesday through Saturday at the Merriam Theater, Baryshnikov and his six-member ensemble will be joined by members of the community, both professional and student dancers and "ordinary" Philadelphians recruited to perform in several pieces. In these works, such as Steve Paxton's "Satisfyin' Lover" and Gordon's "The Matter," the local cast will walk and run and huddle, creating a diverse and inclusive vision onstage.

"There's a bit of music in the program," says Baryshnikov, wearing jeans, an olive-colored shirt and gold wire-framed glasses, sprawling in a chair in his tiny Manhattan pied-a-terre. "There is film, spoken word, a bit of silence."

Affectionately known as Misha, Baryshnikov attracts legions of fans, women who swoon at his compact, boyish form and impeccable technique, and men who notice immediately that his skills — the ability to stop and turn on a dime, the remarkable height of his jumps — would transfer usefully to the basketball court or gridiron even though he's only 5-foot-6 and barely half the weight of the typical football player.

His career in the United States, roughly simultaneous

with the so-called dance boom, helped to make ballet a spectator sport for millions nationwide. For the last decade, he's trolled experimental spaces in several cities, looking for young choreographers deserving of wider exposure and mounting their dances in elegant productions with live music. He's a constant presence in many downtown scenes and would be out even more, "but I have some children to raise," he says. "They'll forget my face."

This season, Baryshnikov has committed himself to bringing the best work of the '60s generation of austere postmodern choreographers to a broad, new audience.

"This material is so important for the present generation of young dancers and choreographers," he says. "We did it in Paris, where young dancers know Yvonne Rainer's 'manifesto' by heart and Simone Forti's 'rules of engagement.' Paxton, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs are working nonstop in Europe [and not here] — which is kind of sad."

So he's used his considerable clout in the dance world to resurrect the best of the innovative '60s and '70s choreography, supplementing it with new work by some of the artists involved and taking it on the road. "PASTForward" has already played Princeton, Anchorage, Ala., Chicago and Paris and will arrive at New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music in early June before

heading to Edinburgh, Scotland, and London.

Baryshnikov's early career was steeped in what choreographer Rainer calls "monumentality," dance techniques that allow an ordinary body to project motion and emotion to the very last rows of an opera house. Now, Baryshnikov has joined forces with innovative artists whose very raison d'être ran counter to this notion, who craved (and still crave) dance performances on a "human scale."

The "manifesto" the young French dancers memorized, and which Rainer herself has since repudiated, said "NO to spectacle," as well as to illusion, climax and a whole range of common theatrical strategies. Instead, it supported literalness, simplicity, task-oriented movement and naturalness.

Buoyed by the spirit of revolution and resistance in the air of the late '60s — realized in the antiwar and feminist movements — a group of dance artists coalesced around a choreography workshop at New York's Judson Memorial Church, taught by Robert Ellis Dunn. The rest is the stuff of dance history, chronicled in numerous books (such as Sally Banes' *Terpsichore in Sneakers*) and writings by the artists themselves.

Baryshnikov has been working with several of the Judson

artists for decades. While directing American Ballet Theater in the 1980s, he commissioned choreography from David Gordon that brought to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House the same strategies — verbal and printed language, simple props like folding chairs, and humor — that Gordon had been refining in downtown lofts for decades. Now, Gordon, still choreographing and directing across the country, is the general director of the "PASTForward" bill.

Last year, Baryshnikov says, "we had many workshops, balancing the choreographers' wishes and desires. Charlie Atlas did the film material — a look back to the '60s, bits and pieces of interviews with Al Carmine [minister at Judson Church in the heyday of this dance movement], Robert Rauschenberg [the visual artist who designed scenery and costumes for several of the participating artists and occasionally performed in their works], Trisha Brown.

"It's a glimpse at the past, how it was important and provocative and controversial. Every piece is introduced by the choreographers on film, which makes the process of viewing a bit more complex. The audience will know what to look for — it makes the audience a participant in a way. It's a direct communication between the chore-

ographer and the audience."

Most of the works on the program were choreographed in New York between 1961 and 1979 by a group of experimental artists collectively known as Judson Dance Theater, who showed their early efforts in the Greenwich Village church's high-ceilinged sanctuary.

"At Judson, they were interested in getting a reaction," Baryshnikov says. "It was free. There'd be 300 people in the audience, and maybe 50 were the choreographers' peers."

"There's something about the boundaries these artists pushed," says the devoted entrepreneur, "the gutsy choices they made, the intellectual capacity of these individuals; all these qualities are so missing in the works of most of the young, postmodern choreographers. ... Forty years later, somehow their work is still very vital. You can learn a lot from it."

What has he learned from "PASTForward"?

"Tons. I learn how many things it has influenced. It's one of those never-ending examples of group camaraderie. They confronted each other with their innovations, learning from each other's mistakes, pushing each other to serious theatrical discovery. Very little of that is happening right now."

"PASTForward," he says, is "a real jam session — you feel the audience participation. People can relate to the pedestrian movement. They don't get

bored. They protest, or they adore. ... These choreographers still get under people's skin, all of them."

Potential ticket buyers expecting to see a princeling surrounded by ballerinas may be startled by what they find at the Merriam. Although Baryshnikov is often onstage (he re-creates a remarkable Steve Paxton dance called *Flat*, which was part of a program that won Paxton a Bessie award last season), he does not call attention to himself. Instead, he becomes a member of the ensemble whose task is to reestablish the relevance and sheer power of these classics of recent dance history.

"If you want to see *me* dance," he says, diffidently, "stay home. This is not about *me* dancing, although I dance. If you're curious about what I'm doing now, then come see it. If not, then stay home and watch CNN."

If You Go

Baryshnikov Productions, in association with the University of the Arts and Dance Affiliates, presents "PASTForward" 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday at the Merriam Theater, 250 S. Broad St. Tickets: \$26 to \$58; students \$15. Information: 215-732-5446, 215-336-1234, or www.whiteoakdanceproject.com.