

The Guardian

Dance 16/8/01

PASTForward

Playhouse

★★★★★

For a whole generation of dance fans the austere, loopy experiments conducted by New York choreographers in the 1960s have existed only in history books. When the avant garde renounced virtuosity, spectacle and the mainstream it also renounced the chance to have its early works preserved on the professional stage. So, for some of us, the experience of watching Mikhail Baryshnikov's revival of the period is similar to music fans getting to hear some unknown early tapes of a band such as the Doors, with the music digitally remastered for a new era.

White Oak Dance Project's PASTForward is a moving, funny, time-warping event. At the Edinburgh Playhouse these 1960s works are being seen by an audience 10 times the size of their original public. They are being revived with sophisticated staging and virtuoso dancers — including Baryshnikov himself. Inevitably they retain little of the original out-at-elbow zeitgeist. But in Charles Atlas's brilliantly edited archive footage we see tantalising glimpses of those earnest, witty, gritty times.

Some works appear little more than curios. Despite Baryshnikov's compellingly nuanced performance of Trisha Brown's *Homemade*, the solo doesn't build beyond its original conceit: a dancer performing with a cine camera strapped to his back, which relays footage of him doing the same choreography at a previous date — a man dancing to his own memory. Yet some of the works seem as galvanising as when they were first made.

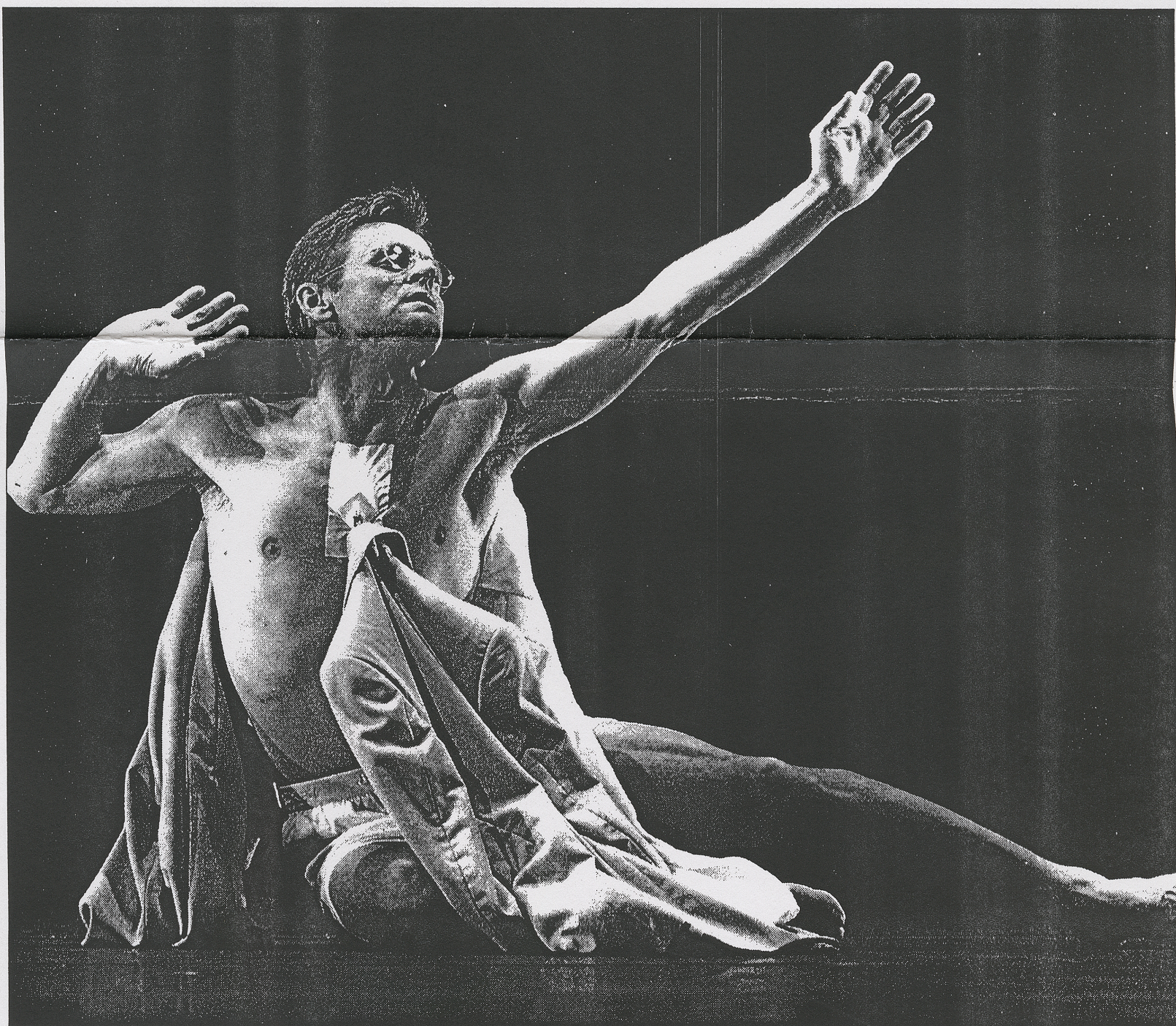
Lucinda Childs's *Carnation* is a ritual constructed from kitchen paraphernalia; in the excellent performance by Emily Coates it is part feminist subversion but also a masterpiece of exquisite surrealism. Yvonne Rainer — who was the most vocally rebellious — turns out to have been a choreographer of huge theatrical flair. She turned dance inside out in various versions of her famous *Trio A*, setting cool, prosaic moves hilariously at odds with the hot musical passion of Ike and Tina Turner.

The simplicity of much of this work is less about didactic puritanism than sharpening our eye to depths and possibilities. As Steve Paxton once said, the ordinary tends to look invisible. The passion with which these choreographers rendered it visible is best seen in David Gordon's *A Matter*. To the music from Petipa's *Kingdom of the Shades*, a line of people walk slowly across the stage, their faces projected large on to the screen behind. In ballet

such ordered progression transforms dancers into sublime abstract beauty; in *A Matter* it transforms an anonymous crowd into fascinating individuals. The 1960s weren't just about debunking, but about heroism and magic as well.

Judith Mackrell

Ends tonight. Box office: 0131-473 2000.



Travels in time . . . Mikhail Baryshnikov performs *Flat* as part of PASTForward at the Playhouse Photograph: Murdo MacLeod