

State Barris

'Merce Cunningham used to say that we were more John Cage's children than his'

16 THE LIST FESTIVAL GUIDE 9-15 Aug 2001

LIST 09/08/01

They were the 60s rebels with a grand cause: to revolutionise the stuffy world of American dance. Now celebrated in Mikhail Baryshnikov's PASTFORWARD, the Judson Dance Theater did all that and more. Words: Kelly Apter

merica, July 1962: a test H-bomb lights up the night sky from Hawaii to New Zealand; Martin Luther King is jailed for leading an illegal march in Georgia; 5000 soldiers are sent to Siam to counter a military offensive. And in a small corner of New York's Greenwich Village, Judson Dance Theater gives the world's first post-modern dance performance.

Earlier that year, a group of visual artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, theatre directors and dancers had found a creative home in the Village's Judson Memorial Church. Working as a collaborative group, the young artists launched a backlash against the American establishment; rejecting the formal theatrical structures of the 50s and commenting on the social and political flux. 'Judson Church already had a tradition of doing avant-garde things, says co-founder of Judson Dance Theater, Yvonne Rainer. 'There was a gallery, a poets' theatre, draft and abortion counselling services. So it seemed like a natural place to go. And it was also free - free to us and free to the public.'

The company's outside influences were impressive to say the least. Movers and shakers in the fields of dance, music and visual art such as Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg played a part in shaping these bright young things. 'We were all studying and/or performing with Merce Cunningham at the time,' says Rainer. 'And Merce used to say that we were more John Cage's children than his, in the way we followed John's ideas of using sounds from the real world and letting chance procedures influence our work.'

Although most of the Judson dancers had received formal training, they neglected it in favour of raw physicality. Walking, running, sitting, standing still – such basic movements became their stock-in-trade. They shunned any semblance of character or plot, and keenly avoided performance-enhancing costumes, sets or lighting. Pure, unadulterated dance was all that remained. Most importantly, they opened up dance to the community, with a of 42, when he swapped ballet for contemporary. In 1990, White Oak was born, parented by Baryshnikov and that *enfant terrible* of the modern dance world, Mark Morris. Their offspring has proved to be quite a chip off the old block, touring the world with adventurous, exciting works. And PAST*Forward* is no exception. Re-visiting post-modern dance is almost as courageous as creating it in the first place. 'His commitment to this is quite moving,' says Rainer of Baryshnikov. 'He really puts his money where his interests are.'

And when you're dealing with works which represent an integral era in US history, presentation is everything. Put on stage without context, the pieces would most likely confuse and dumbfound. White Oak's multi-media solution has been to provide audiences with extensive programme notes, and video footage shown prior to the performances. Moreover, works created by the choreographers over the past 30 years; including brand new dances from 2000, are set alongside those original pieces - forming an artistic curve documenting their careers. But, as Rainer points out, 'it should be kept in mind that it's a very special kind of event and you can't expect it to replicate exactly the way it was - times have changed.'

So too have the choreographers. Great things stemmed from those humble beginnings in Judson Church, a place where the group was forced to assemble having 'been turned down by the establishment,' as Rainer says. Despite being in their 60s and 70s, all the artists connected with PASTForward continue to create new and challenging work. Rainer has gone on to become an award-winning filmmaker; Deborah Hay is both a university professor and runs her own dance company; the Trisha Brown Dance Company, founded in 1970, continues to be one of the most successful contemporary outfits in the US; Steve Paxton, the man behind the dance technique known as Contact Improvisation, still cuts a dash on stage today; Lucinda Childs regularly choreographs and directs for companies such as Paris Opera Ballet and the Martha Graham Dance Co; Simone Forti teaches and performs around the world; and theatre director David Gordon has been instrumental in helping bring PASTForward to the stage. Despite this role-call of high achievers, it would be foolish to imagine that the work is the only thing drawing an audience. But maybe those who have come out simply to 'star-spot Misha' as Hay puts it, will discover more than a 53-year-old (albeit captivating) ex-ballet star. As Rainer says, PASTForward 'can be seen now as a kind of a museum fragments stored for the future.'



programme of outreach work that resulted in ordinary people joining them on stage for the more simple pieces.

Which is exactly what will happen at the Edinburgh Playhouse this week, when work created by the Judsonites is once again shown the light of day. Part of the International Festival, PASTForward celebrates the achievements of Rainer and her fellow choreographers Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti, David Gordon, Deborah Hay and Steve Paxton. In preparation for the event, local volunteers have spent the past two weekends honing their walking skills (because, as Rainer says, 'it's very different to watching people walk in the street, there's a formality about it') before stepping out on stage with professionals from New York's White Oak Dance Project. One of whom just happens to be ex-ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Having enjoyed his status as the preeminent male classical dancer of the 1970s and 80s, Misha (as he's affectionately known) made the second defection of his life at the age

.

PASTForward is at the Edinburgh Playhouse, 13–16 Aug, 7.30pm.

> Exclusive Merce Cunningham interview next issue. Out Thursday 16 August.

......

9-15 Aug 2001 THE LIST FESTIVAL GUIDE 17