

## Not so much a hero, just a man dancing



Photo: Justin Leighton

### ***On the eve of his London visit, Mikhail Baryshnikov grants Ismene Brown a rare interview***

THE LAST time I saw Mikhail Baryshnikov he was in his pyjamas. Pink satin ones. I have to admit that it was in public, performing at Sadler's Wells last year. Yet it seemed incongruous: I hadn't had him down as a pink satin pyjama man. Or a pyjama man at all, really.

I lobbed this little pleasantry into our conversation when we met last week, and it dropped like a stone in a drought. Eventually Baryshnikov admitted that the day before he had had an encounter with a journalist whose sole interest was his private life. "They want to photograph me in *bed*, and talk about tumult with women, not about dance. I couldn't believe it," he said furiously.

Well, I'm afraid I could. Baryshnikov's fame as a dancer is almost matched by his past visibility as a ladies' man. It seems to me and many other ballet-lovers that his natural sexual charisma is inextricable from the glory of his dancing. But there you are. He undoubtedly has good reason to play down the wild oats now that he has become a family man, with the dancer Lisa Rinehart - along with Peter, almost four, Anna, one, a big house on the Hudson and a family Jeep in which to visit elder daughter Alexandra, 12, and her mother Jessica Lange.

It's not only Baryshnikov's lifestyle that seems to have cooled down. Professionally the classical romantic heroes have been supplanted by the more cerebral works of American choreographers like Mark Morris, Hanya Holm and Twyla Tharp - whose work his company, the White Oak Dance Project, offers London this week.

It is the programme of an all-American dancer. Line up the three great Russian defectors, Nureyev, Makarova and Baryshnikov, and he's the odd man out - simply because he's assimilated so well into the new-found land.

On stage and off Makarova is a beautiful work of art, richly wrought; Nureyev was the perpetual loner, searching for the unattainable, surrounding himself with icons of perfection. Baryshnikov doesn't wear jewels or turbans or stress the Russian accent. When we met in Berlin last week he was simply if starkly dressed in black polo neck, white trousers and black-and-white trainers. The overall effect is stern and yet modest - it certainly doesn't shriek \$40million a year at you, pouring in from Misha cosmetics, dancewear, a New York restaurant, guest appearances and so on.

He took it well. "It's *nonsense!* It's *exaggeration!*" He was laughing, those great blue eyes crinkling up, though taken aback. "Maybe it's the overall operation gets to that amount of money - I wish it all goes into my pocket... ha ha!"

Yes, I do admit it was a personal question, but isn't there something ironic about the way the label "Soviet defector" became the passport to riches in a dance world notably lacking in big money?

"Rudolf started that really, when Sol Hurok [the impresario] started to introduce him to the world. He opened this money-market. Rudolf didn't work for money but he was paid well. And he deserved that."

They do, they do, these dancers. Baryshnikov is only 45 but he already has enough knee and back problems to ensure him high odds on an uncomfortable old age. And could one put a price on the experience of seeing him dance? That utter naturalness, that ability to make an incredible leap or turn seem as normal an expression of life as picking up the phone. The dance world is as prone to hyperbole as any other - perhaps more so - but Baryshnikov really is in a league of his own.

But he wasn't pleased when I asked if it was lonely on the pinnacle. "I never thought about it. You *cannot* use the words Best Dancer, it's not a sport, there's no score."

Modest may not be what a number of women in his life think him - nor some of the dancers he

commanded as artistic director of American Ballet Theatre for 10 years - but in our interview he spoke with a modesty that did not ring false. Even when we got on to the subject of those women. Well, in fact I was asking him about his greatest ballet partners. But as it happens some of these were not only ballerinas but former lovers.

"Who was your best partner?"

A long pause. "Between Kolpakova, Makarova and Kirkland. All of them were extraordinarily important in my life. But there was also Lynn Seymour and Sibley."

Antoinette Sibley of the Royal Ballet is an old friend, and he smiled with pleasure talking about her: "so quiet and organised, such exceptional concentration, at the same time very vulnerable - I like her a lot."

On Seymour he became merrier, breathless, his body straightened, his eyes wide open and apprehensive: "We did *Romeo and Juliet*, believe it or not. It was amazing, *amazing*. She's such a powerful performer, you know, big *woman*, you know? I was nervous to partner her. I admire this woman, she is one of the most fascinating artists on stage."

At Makarova's name he fell quiet. "Natasha is a whole different story..." A former lover, I belatedly remembered, from Kirov days. "Well... I was not the most comfortable partner for her. She felt more comfortable with a bigger man who holds her precisely, like Anthony Dowell or Ivan Nagy. Somebody who could hold her with two fingers, she's used to that kind of attention. But when it clicked we really had some good performances."

AND GELSEY Kirkland. Gelsey may not be generally famous in Britain but she is reckoned by many who saw her at her prime to have been the only ballerina of our time to compare with Fonteyn.

Her partnership with Baryshnikov in the 1970s seems to have beggared all the descriptive powers that critics could muster. Tiny, skinny, pliable, she moved apparently like an autumn leaf; and since she was madly in love with her partner too, there was a whole lot more going on than just Giselle and Albrecht.

In due course all this and more became clear when Kirkland published her autobiography, *Dancing on my Grave*, in 1986. It made headlines not only because of her description of their torrid, heartbreaking affair, but because she revealed her own and other dancers' cocaine addiction. Baryshnikov told me he hadn't read it - which was the only thing he said that I didn't entirely believe.

"We never really had a sparky time until the end, when she was out of her mind, and that was a bit irritating from my point of view. But before, even if we had little disagreements about interpretation, always on stage she was completely professional. I liked the unpredictability of Makarova and Kirkland. They always surprised you on stage."

I suspect that he enjoys a bit of friction, finds it stimulating. When one considers what would have been his probably fate had he not defected in 1974, it is perhaps no wonder. What if he had stayed?

He seemed to rear out of his seat, quivering with revulsion. "Ach," he made a disgusted sound, "I don't want to think about it. I wouldn't have been able to *live* over there. It was a constant lie, manipulation of the truth, let's say. It was depressing."

Professionally too he was heading for a dead end. The Kirov, then directed by Konstantin Sergeyev, had typecast him because of lack of height as a Wayne Sleep type, the *demi-caractère*, condemned to an endless round of peasant *pas de deux*, and eventual oblivion in the second rank.

He got his break because the Bolshoi asked for him. Sergeyev suddenly tumbled to what he might be losing and capitulated to Baryshnikov's demands for leading roles. He was a huge success on a Kirov tour to Canada - and defection was the obvious step.

But perhaps not for the obvious reasons: stardom, recognition. For Baryshnikov, even more than for Nureyev, the motivation was experimentation.

"I was fascinated by the idea of creating new ballet, but I knew almost nothing about it in Russia. A couple of ballets by Petit and Balanchine - that was our knowledge of dance in the West. It was *scary*."

Russian ballet now impresses him as little as it did then. I reminded him that Grigorovich, the Bolshoi's director, boasted that the great defectors would be replaced because Russia was "a dance factory". He was both repelled and amused. "Look, that's what his ballets look like, one big factory. It's what those Kirov and Bolshoi dancers look like now, empty faces, no complexity, no grace, bored to death."

He is still transparently in love with dancing, particularly now that modern dance spares him the rigours of turn-out and fifth position. He shows as little inclination to desert the stage in his middle age as Nureyev did, but "*he* was a workaholic. Rudolf performed eight times a week. I hate that. I like the creative process more than I like performing. I take months and months off, just doing class and working on a new piece."

Although he says he still gets stage-fright, he seems a man very much at peace, dancing and life in perfect harmony. Not simply a dancer, but a *man* dancing, I suggested.

"For me there is no other way. I always wanted to see a woman on stage, or a man on stage. It is a

matter of believing that dance can do *anything*. A man can be feminine on stage but still be a man. And there are beautiful masculine aspects about a woman too."

For an instant, as his blue eyes bored into mine, it was clear just why there is such a tumult of women in Baryshnikov's life.

*The White Oak Dance Project is at Sadler's Wells on June 4 and 5*