

**He was the greatest dancer in the world. Now at 48 he is preparing to return to the London stage. Ismene Brown met him in New York**

## The reinvention of Baryshnikov



Photo Ferdinando Scianna/Magnum

**"Just to watch the Kirov company was like going to church, having a holy experience... when life was miserable the magic of dance was overwhelming"**

THERE wasn't a pair of white ballet tights discarded in the gutter as we passed but there might as well have been - all the other symbols were in place. Coming into New York, there were skyscrapers ahead, and to my right a gigantic municipal cemetery, acre upon acre of tombstones. Even the building in which Mikhail Baryshnikov has his office is the Time-Life tower.

The passage of time is always cruel to dancers, but never crueller than to the skyscrapers. All dancers know that their career is fugitive, but those who soar above the others have further to fall, and moreover they are flattered into believing that they have a special invincibility not accorded to lesser performers. Who dares tell them when time is up? Or is there another way?

Up on the sixth floor, in a hushed, pale place more art gallery than office, a slight, lined man with blue headlights for eyes and a flat, warning voice walked into the room to meet me.

*"He was the greatest male dancer on the planet. His talent was beyond superlatives. He vaulted into the air with no apparent preparation; he was literally a motion picture. It seemed to me that he had somehow managed to weld technique and style together into a perfect voice... supported by athletic ability and by what appeared to be a series of artistic choices. Even the toss of his head produced a subtle effect. I tread the fine line between intense curiosity and infatuation."*

There is a lot that Mikhail Baryshnikov wishes had never been written about him in a notorious book by his greatest partner and jilted lover, the American ballerina Gelsey Kirkland. It showed him with his trousers down, in every sense; it probably made him the wary interviewee that he is. But her description of first seeing him at 24 in a Leningrad studio is almost unimprovable.

The only thing she missed is something that perhaps only the lay public picks up - that Baryshnikov made it all look so normal. Nureyev's appeal was perfumed, jewelled, romantic; his younger compatriot's was fresh-faced, airy, sexy.

He's coming to London later this month to dance at the Coliseum. In the past, the mere announcement of his name would be enough, there would be no need of this "dirty work", this interview. But this is 24 years later, and Baryshnikov is no longer the boy-god he was.

"I'd like to see full houses," he said, in a thin Russian-accented tenor, his face not puppyish and teasing, as in the famous photos, but drawn and tense, those hooded eyes drifting away. I protested, wondering which one of us is kidding ourself. "Mmmm," he grunted doubtfully. "August is a queer time in London."

TWENTY years ago he was a marketing dream. Where Nureyev was the prince of princes, and Makarova the swan of swans, young Baryshnikov bounced in, the virtuoso of virtuosos, fickleness written all over his grin.

In ballet, men's jumps are mating calls, and the close holds and lifts of their ballerinas are promises of love - Baryshnikov, as any video shows, made it all look not just physically impossible but absolutely, treacherously plausible.

Ballerinas and film stars answered the call, Makarova, Kirkland, Liza Minnelli, Jessica Lange among them.

He roared like a flame over the world's stages, made cheesy dance films in Hollywood, and Broadway shows. He controversially directed American Ballet Theatre, the US's second-most famous company, and left in a storm over budgets and bad man-management.

In his forties he unexpectedly changed tack; discarded the white tights, settled down with an ex-dancer, Lisa Rinehart - they have three children, aged seven, four and two - and started a small company called the White Oak Project, which is probably the best calling card modern dance has ever had. The black-tie patrons of his classical days flood in by thousands to see him; he brings them his passion for broader horizons.

He also broadened the horizons of dance itself. It's arguable that this is his most historic achievement: that when the Royal Ballet, say, commissions Twyla Tharp, or perhaps Mark Morris in the future, it could not have happened without Baryshnikov. Or rather, Baryshnikov getting old.

Unlike Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov was already an established star at his defection in 1974. He made American friends at once, one a paper magnate named Howard Gilman, who offered the young Russian a *pied-à-terre*. Now, on White Oak, the Florida ranch where Gilman breeds endangered species and keeps his stables, Baryshnikov and his dancers wander among the cheetahs and giraffes on their way into the most glamorous dance studios in the country, where for two months a year they plan their tours.

Their New York office is the Gilman headquarters, where their patron's exquisite tastes are displayed in cabinets of equine statues from several civilisations. Even the soap-dishes in the staff washrooms are perspex sculptures.

The luxury of it all makes me pinch myself, remembering the dank stink of London's premier modern dance toilets at The Place. But then would one wish it on any man to see constantly in the eyes of people he meets disappointment at the withering away of his golden former self?

The fact is, Baryshnikov ageing is better than almost anybody young. Mark Morris, the modern choreographer who founded the White Oak Project with Baryshnikov, says: "He was fabulous, still is fabulous. It's all true, what they say. Obviously, the giant leaps and turns that people gasped about, I gasped at too. And when I worked with him, doing my work, I liked the subtler musical smartness of him. His qualities really are unusual. It's to do with growing up the way he did; that sort of system and training, however bad or good it was politically, there's still nothing like it."

The background point is one that struck me too; that the fall of the USSR did not end just the era of defectors, it may also have fatally wounded the draconian training system which produced these outstandingly passionate dancers. Is there its equal anywhere else?

Baryshnikov was a happy little football-loving boy until he was 11, when his adored mother ran away and hanged herself. His father, a Soviet army captain posted in Latvia, remarried, and young Misha escaped into the great Maryinsky School. Alexander Pushkin, who had been Nureyev's mentor a decade before, became a father-figure to this intelligent, bereaved youth.

That sort of relationship remains common in the Russian ballet system, as nowhere else, and, says Baryshnikov, it fostered powerful emotions that were channelled into performance.

"You had a special relationship, immensely intense, with your teacher. You felt part of their lives, and the urgency of the instruction, and especially the privilege of being chosen from a thousand kids to the best school in the world. It gave you a ... vibration, that dance was something so special. To have that from a very young age - for the most gifted, obviously, not for 100 per cent of the children - something happens to your attitude, your respect for the craft, and your inspiration in it.

"In my time, for instance, just to watch the Kirov company was like going to church, having a holy experience. It was really magical, to see maybe 20 or 30 leading dancers of world standard, nobody better anywhere else, except maybe a couple of people in Moscow, and Fonteyn. At that time, when life was miserable, the magic of the theatre, the magic of dance, was overwhelming. It was something to go to, to climb to.

"And years of very personal relationship with your teachers was sometimes disturbing, emotionally. It's your most fragile time, at 12, 13, 14, 16, and you become a little person of the theatre."

He recoils from the tyranny of it even as the warmth with which he's speaking betrays how intensely that feeling of inspiration still burns in him. He refused to return to the Soviet Union nine years ago when Gorbachov invited him, but he told me that "of course" he will take his children there one day

The fierceness with which he detests his Russian past even tinges his view of Europe. He once described European bureaucracy as "scary", but he loves London. He hadn't planned to come here this summer, particularly in the dog-end of the year, but the Coliseum, caught short by a cancellation, begged him, and he has fond memories here.

He speaks with affection of Antoinette Sibley and Lynn Seymour, former partners here, of the dancing of Anthony Dowell and the "fabulous" young Michael Clark. Above all he misses Frederick Ashton, the choreographer, who used to take him off for late-night vodka sessions, and wrote him a scintillating ballet, *Rhapsody*.

He prefers the company of choreographers above anyone else - you can trust a choreographer, he says.

THE White Oak company, six years old now against even Baryshnikov's expectations, is unique in America. It is truly an instrument for people to write new dances for; and yet it has to make 100 percent of its income at the box office. This is unthinkable in our terms.

The difference, of course, is Baryshnikov's personal imprimatur. He lists himself alphabetically among the dancers, but his is the name that enables it all to happen. When he stops dancing, he says, the company can perform without him, though "it would be a different kind of audience" and "would need, um, some kind of financial support". How the company must dread that day.

Hard decisions loom, but not just yet. He goes on dancing, he says, because he is hungry, and he's still learning. He is still frightened and elated by it.

"Maybe it's less noticeable when things are wrong in modern dance that when you land badly in ballet from a double tour onto arabesque on one leg, but actually it's much more difficult with the simpler steps to take the audience into your spell and the choreographer's spell."

I asked him if he watched videos of himself, in his classical heyday, those videos that inspire young dancers, that replenish the memories of an Adonis of ballet. "No." Quiet, unemphatic.

Didn't he ever wish he could have seen what the world saw, himself flying on invisible wings? "Yes," he says hesitantly. "Probably it would be interesting." He videotapes himself now, when he dances a new work, to check how to make clear on stage what he does not like to reveal too much in an interview.

"What we *do* is the most important thing. Talking about it is just senseless, because the words get a bit superficial. or you have to sort of... invent... make the story more interesting than it is. But I guess that's what people do with life every day - you know, try to brush it up."

Any life that needed less brushing up than Baryshnikov's is hard to imagine, but one can understand his meaning when he applauds modern dance for being "more exposed, your personality is plainer in it. Classical and romantic ballet is really a style, that makes it easier to separate yourself from the audience."

But the more artificial that ballet is, I say, often the deeper the human truths that can be drawn out of it, which is why the audience keeps coming. It wasn't only Baryshnikov's technique that people were drawn to, surely.

Once again, he thrust that bold young ghost behind him: "You know, I felt that my work improved as limitations took over my physical approach, because when you're young and full of blood, you have a tendency towards overkill, to over-dance, to being silly, being foolish, being too cocky. Few dancers understand that in the most mannered form of dance, you have to be the simplest. It's difficult to make it less, because you want to do more."

And the public want more, I say. "Yes, but sometimes they are badly advised, you know. They are looking for physical sensationalism. Maybe ballet was overdone, it was a bit of a business in the 70s and 80s, done too much and perhaps not too well.

"It is on a bit of a slope just now, but there will be a renaissance in the next 10 years, I'm convinced. It's a matter of somebody tastefully renewing the spirit, and interesting a new generation of dancers in why it's beautiful, why it's complex, why it's so romantic, why it's so pure, why it works.

"Maybe we will be thankful for all these ice-skaters and gymnasts that we see now, that they show us this physical stuff so much better than dancers can do. Dance is something else, and you have to look into matters of *dance*, subtleties and inspirational matters."

He suddenly spotted his daughter, 15-year-old Shura, outside on Sixth Avenue, and his beam lit up the room. By the time she came in, a bonny blonde with Lange's dark eyebrows, Adonis had shrunk into a short, fretting, middle-aged father.

And do I leave with my curiosity satisfied and my infatuation knocked for six? Do I, hell.

*The White Oak Project is at the Coliseum (0171 632 8300) from August 20-24. The Mark Morris Dance Company is at the Edinburgh Festival (0131 225 5756) August 12-14*