



Baryshnikov gets radical

Ismene Brown is enthralled by one of the most fascinating pieces of dance archaeology of our time

By Ismene Brown

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MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV will be wearing an evening dress tonight. It will be a shock to his audience, many of whom will remember his younger self as one of the greatest classical ballet dancers they ever saw. And even those who know of him as the supreme maverick of dance today, the 53-year-old who still dances magically, the ballet star who is mad about modern dance, may be surprised at the programme.

For Baryshnikov's visits to Britain with his White Oak Dance Project, it has always been wise to expect the unexpected. From tonight, however, for his Edinburgh International Festival appearance, he revives a forgotten era of dance, a period of one of the great rebellions, by experimentalists whose ideas seemed crazy at the time but who have had the last laugh.

The programme is called PASTForward, and it is one of the most fascinating pieces of dance archaeology of our time. Baryshnikov has reunited the work of seven of the Sixties rebels in American dance, who formed the strangely titled Judson Church movement. It wasn't a cult, but a group of questing individuals who on July 6, 1962, performed - in a New York church, since no one else would have them - and charged the barricades of modern dance.

They launched what is now called postmodernism, declaring modern dance old-fashioned, just as modern dance 30 years earlier had condemned ballet. For years they were hardly acknowledged by critics, and their audiences were small, for they left the majority perplexed by their intellectualising of what looked so minimal in

performance: walking, sitting, eating, talking, playing with strange props, getting ordinary people to join in.

In 1965 the Judsonites' leading thinker, Yvonne Rainer, issued a manifesto, condemning all known rules about dance: "No to spectacle; no to virtuosity; no to transformations and magic and make-believe; no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image", and so on, right down to "no to moving or being moved".

Having set modern dance's pyre burning, the "boss-lady" disappeared from dance in 1975 to make films. Her name was gradually forgotten, while her colleagues - such as Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs - went on to become some of the most distinguished choreographers of America.

Baryshnikov and Rainer? It's an unlikely arrangement. Only Baryshnikov, with his box-office pulling power, could revive Rainer in this way; but ironically, he stood for everything she was against. Going to New York to meet this legendary radical, now 67, I was not expecting such a humorous, approachable character, so ready to admit to her pleasure at being approached by the great Misha.

"I wouldn't have believed it!" she laughed. "It's inconceivable! It was inconceivable, until two years ago when he approached me. I had seen him dance, of course, but I knew no more of him than I did of any other celebrity. We went out to dinner and I got very excited. He said: 'Maybe you'd also like to do something new?' "

With that invitation, Rainer came out of her 25-year choreographic retirement to offer White Oak a version of her 1966 signature dance, Trio A, and two new pieces (in one of which Baryshnikov wears the dress).

"It's just fun. It's what is left in life, to work with interesting people," Baryshnikov said recently of his decision to stage a postmodern retrospective. "These works have become classics. I want to introduce them to a new generation."

For Rainer too, some of her hottest thoughts are history. That manifesto, I asked, could we go through it? "Oh dear." She shook her head. "I have to disclaim it. A manifesto is of the moment. It is meant to clear the air, and to provoke." And you can deny the contents later? "Yes. Why not? I can't defend it, except that it was useful to my thinking at the time. I had no idea it would pursue me for the next 35 years."

She was not outlining a credo, she explained, but summarising the aims of a piece she was making at the time, involving 12 mattresses being lugged about by 10 dancers. Yet

her manifesto did make valid general criticism of modern dance, pivoting on the three giants, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and Doris Humphrey. The same restrictions had emerged as in ballet - dependence on technique, expressiveness, and the authority of a single personality.

It took a radical outsider to protest. Rainer was a failed actress of 26, not a dancer, when she began studying with Graham and Cunningham simultaneously - and collected one of Graham's immortal *bons mots* for her pains. "I never had any turnout. One day Miss Graham saw me struggling to get my legs apart on the floor, and she said, 'When you accept yourself as a woman, you will have turnout.' I never forgot that one."

Her struggles with Graham's dictatorial ideas had something to do with her own upbringing, as the daughter of anarchists in San Francisco. In the restless America of the Vietnam War, illegal abortion and rising feminism, in an art world of abstract expressionism, Rainer thinks she was only reflecting her time in her ideas for dance.

She and her colleagues also felt that the modernist Cunningham was not, with his insistence on strict technique, fully answering the experimental possibilities in the ideas of his partner, the composer John Cage, with his theories of chance and random selection. Why should not randomness decide who danced too? What was dance? Why was ordinary, spontaneous movement less worthy than formal steps?

Out of this unrest came the performance at the Judson Memorial Baptist Church that launched the cooperative experiment. In 90F, Rainer did a solo throughout which she talked. There was rollerskating, and a parody of a ballerina's promenade in a laundry basket. The Judson movement was less about finished dishes than discovering new ingredients and refusing received methods. Dance has been cooking with them ever since.

PASTForward's tour in America and France has been described as compelling and quaint - but ground-breaking no longer. "In New York, there was a great diversity of people and it was very moving," Rainer said. Didn't her manifesto say something about "no to moving, and to being moved"? "Oh," she shakes her head, "that was just perverse."

- The White Oak Dance Project is at the Edinburgh Playhouse (0131 473 2000) from tonight until Thurs.