



Passion undimmed

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Ismene Brown reviews Mikhail Baryshnikov at the Barbican

Two-thirds of Mikhail Baryshnikov's audiences these days have little idea that he was once the greatest ballet dancer alive. Young, open-minded, they see only a mature man in great shape, simply a dancer who makes them laugh, shrug, shiver, suddenly relish life more.

Baryshnikov's programme, Solos with Piano, or not is an evening for them, and, cunningly, also the sort that his older admirers have longed for as he toured with his White Oak company in the past. Just him on stage, no one else, apart from a pianist and a stack of nice popular records.

Divided into a "serious" half with piano and a more populist half with the recordings,

the choreography rarely pierces through the surface images of this extraordinary man. It's the humble care that he bends upon every moment of the two-hour show that is so illuminating and spellbinding.

Most of the six solos target easy jokes about age and infirmity, rather than trying to explore the still exquisitely disciplined mover. For, despite being 56 and a grandfather, the lithe blond man we see bared in red swimming trunks in Lucinda Childs's piece shows none of the creeping dessications and spreading collapses of normal middle age, and he is still capable of fiery, beautiful eruptions of speed.

The evening is dictated by his enjoyably eclectic choice of music, the piano pieces that Pedja Muzijevic neatly if drily plays between and for the dances - percussive Scarlatti and Nancarrow, washy John Cage and Debussy - and out-of-the-way old blues recordings.

Sadly, only Childs draws on his heartfelt musical expressiveness. In Opus One, she sweeps surprisingly classical phrases and arches of movement over Alban Berg's delicate piano sonata. Baryshnikov's arms curve through the darkness with a silken, floating density, his head leans attentively towards the ground, his feet have more springy flexibility and feathery strength than leading dancers half his age.

Cesc Gelabert's In a Landscape (to a disconcertingly romantic piece of Cage) feels too earnest, and Michael Clark's nevertheless, caviar (to Nina Simone and the Beatles) too throwaway - despite the hysteria-inducing glimpse of Clark and Baryshnikov on stage together.

Eliot Feld and Tere O'Connor are not awed by their old friend, and both highlight his faintly lunatic, Jacques Tati clowning and the black Russian bite inside it.

O'Connor's Indoor Man has him inhabiting a cardboard box, apparently examining

himself in the bathroom mirror for signs of decay; Feld's Mr XYZ caricatures him as an amorous geriatric in a frightful hat, ingeniously attached to an office chair while the bluesman Leon Redbone croaks: "I ain't got nobody".

Feld's Yazoo, though, is something more profound, in which Baryshnikov conveys a lifetime of inebriated pleasures, physical helplessness, silly hopes and ultimate pessimism, all in little shudders, waggles and grinning hints set to jug-band ditties that sound as if they were found in a car boot sale.

No one could be nobler than the younger Baryshnikov in a princely role, but here, sharing common fears and little experiences, he makes just being alive something noble.

- Until Sun. Tickets: 0845 120 7557