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Mastery: Mikhail Baryshnikov

Ismene Brown

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"Holyoke is a dump," sighs a fiftyish divorced lawyer in the Holiday Inn bar. She spends her days glumly removing babies from cocaine-addicted mothers in the housing projects of this bleak little Massachusetts town. It is surreal – pure Homer Simpson land.

Holyoke is famous only for its shopping mall, Springfield truly is just down the road, and the bar is full of pear-shaped beer-drinkers playing pool while sports roar from the wall-sized plasma TV.

Yet, in this unlikely place, the object of her and a million other women's fantasies is staying – Mikhail Baryshnikov, extraordinary dancer, legendary lover, and now star of TV's fashionable *Sex and the City*.

Yes, I saw him tucking into a Super Sizzlin' breakfast in the restaurant only this morning, an anonymous little lined-faced man in glasses, slotted as happily into a vinyl banquette in the outer wastes of discount mall-land as if he'd been snuggling up to Sarah Jessica Parker in one of New York's hippest restaurants.

That he's here speaks volumes about him. He is headlining the Massachusetts international Festival of the Arts to help the renovation of Holyoke's long-closed Victory Theatre. A lost cause, says my lawyer friend.

Perhaps. But in all the agony and ecstasy that has surrounded Baryshnikov's every move – the matchless dancing, the seething love-life, the mediocre film career, the downmarket commercial activities – it has taken time to see that his greatest claim to world gratitude is the almost unbelievable generosity with which he has marketed his talent.

He became one of the most famous dancers of all time when he defected from the USSR in 1974, following Rudolf Nureyev and Natalia Makarova from a regime of artistic and personal darkness into a new western world that, he rapidly saw, was limitless.

Not satisfied with burnishing America's classical ballet with his virtuosic Russian technique and contagious passion, he sparked the finest modern choreographers into a ferment of activity. Ballet companies use modern choreographers all the time now, but Baryshnikov was the man who made this happen in the 1970s. He was the mould-breaker.

But there were always two performing Baryshnikovs – the silent one who still dances so eloquently on stage, and the one who is forced constantly, and extremely reluctantly, to explain his talent in words.

He has agreed to an interview because London is one of the international stops on his tour with his new solo programme, and I brace myself as I go to his room. I have met few people more private than Baryshnikov.

In the glare reflected from a snowbound car park below, the famous blue eyes loom out from a tired, hawkish face. Next to memories of 1970s video of the ultimate dancer soaring in skyscraping leaps, this body looks ghost-like.

To the tricky question of why a 56-year-old continues to dance, he answers disarmingly, "I'm doing this always for my own selfish reasons."

He has just had a six-month recuperation from a knee operation, and is hastily performing surgery on his programme. Of most British interest, Michael Clark's solo for him is currently beyond the knee's capability – "It's very delicate and twisty, and the knee is under a lot of pressure. I was just on the phone to him, he's working on it with his group for the London dates."

Why a man of his age is back on the road dancing at all is because, simply, Baryshnikov can. A year older than Nureyev was at his death, Baryshnikov has been luckier in defying time, and remains a seraphic dancer. There are no more brilliant tricks; but now he dances with a pianist, like a Lieder singer, drawing on deep experiences and private mysteries, as well as charming with the self-mockery he's blissfully capable of.

He is dancing to satisfy his still hearty "appetite", as he puts it, but also raising money to build his new Baryshnikov Arts Centre. This three-storey complex opens this year in Manhattan, New York's first purpose-built creative kitchen for choreographers and other artists supervised, incredibly, by Baryshnikov and friends such as Merce Cunningham and William Forsythe.

In his thin, delectably Russian-accented voice, Baryshnikov explains how a very, very talented and rich man spends his money:

"I figured out the formula – luckily I know it will be sold out and it will make this much, and the cost of something will be this and this, and so I think, why not?" He chuckles amiably.

"It's like the old Jewish joke – two men meet and one says to the other, 'I didn't know your daughter was married?' 'She is not.' 'Well, I passed the house and she was sitting feeding a baby.' 'Well, if you have a little bit of time and a little bit of milk...' 'I just have a little time and a little bit of milk!'"

It's a startling association, but his earthiness is not the least appealing of the qualities that flash through Baryshnikov's speech. When the Kirov's most prized male ballet-dancer burst into America, a myth-making machine was set in motion that he lost control of long ago.

The tabloids blared the boy-god's sensational love-life (actresses Liza Minnelli and Jessica Lange, ballerinas Natalia Makarova and Gelsey Kirkland) while the broadsheet arts critics were clawing over his career choices. He caused consternation by moving freely between New York's two great, pigeonholed ballet companies, the classical American Ballet Theatre and the creative New York City Ballet of George Balanchine.

Baryshnikov grimaces as he talks about critics. He hates them, yet it seems he still can't stop himself reading his enemies' comments. It is surprising, seen from today's perspective, that an obviously inquiring artist should cause such fury in aligning himself with the country's greatest choreographer, his compatriot George Balanchine. But it was, said leading New York critic Clive Barnes, as if President Carter had become a Republican.

"I knew people would pick on me that I was not the right person or the right dancer, but I just went to be with this man – I didn't care where it took me as a dancer," says Baryshnikov.

"This frenzy, people were so possessive about everything. He'd say, 'Relax, everybody! It's just dance, come on!' It's what I really like, that he reminded us that art is an illusion, a pleasurable luxury... let's not make dogmas out of it, let's not point fingers and try to decode the formulas."

But Balanchine was old and ill, and could not make the new ballets for the glowing 30-year-old Baryshnikov that they'd both hoped. So the dancer accepted the directorship of his previous company, American Ballet Theatre.

He raised a marvellous generation of native ballerinas and threw modern choreographers explosively into the classical audience's face, but it was a messy, painful business that put him off ever running a large company with state funding again.

After that, he made sure his career was all private enterprise, from [his unique White Oak Dance Project](#) – which commissioned 43 works in its 12 years – to his new centre. "I cannot stand authority," he says passionately. "I like to make my own mistakes."

Talking of mistakes, I raise *Sex and the City*, because his performance in the last series of this remorselessly silly TV comedy is now being seen in Britain.

"You know what? I don't know why I did it. My wife [former ABT ballerina Lisa Rinehart] thought it would be interesting maybe. Another joke comes to mind – the old, tired worm that falls into a bowl of spaghetti thinking there's an orgy there!"

It seems that if one of New York's legendary bachelors hoped for a nostalgic tour of those heady, bed-hopping days, he found it instead a nerve-wracking challenge to work in front of the camera, shooting pages every day, directors and lines changing on the hoof – so different from the intense, detailed focus of dance rehearsal.

He says he likes being scared by new things, and that it was also useful "psychotherapy" – "a step towards controlling my nerves" about a theatre tour he's doing this year for his fund-raising. Anyway, "It's good money which will go towards the centre. My character was not important – they just needed a bit of meat! But there will always be people who say, ugh, why did he do that?"

It's not a flawless defence, and I warm to him for it. Baryshnikov has got rich selling own-brand perfume as well as dancing; one reason he appeals to so many is perhaps that he loves both Josephy Brodsky and James Cagney. As he points out, he's dealing with the unconcern of today's America for culture.

"I think I got disappointed over the years about New York, about the States. You know, sometimes you go and visit Europe and see good old socialism in its good part! You see public concern about art, and young people's participation and young faces in the audience. Then you arrive in the States and it is \$150 to go to an opera. Ridiculous. We have so much young talent on the streets, but because everything is commercial they finally drift away from their dream of their life."

Baryshnikov is now a grandfather – the eldest of his four children, Jessica Lange's daughter Alexandra, bore a baby girl a year ago. He loves fishing, golf, and dogs, and recently produced a book of Russian children's stories.

Every day he warms up remembering the man who showed him how to achieve the dream of his life. His boyhood teacher, the extraordinary Alexander Pushkin (Nureyev's mentor at the Kirov too), taught him that artistry meant to develop personal opinion and to engage it humbly with the only people whose authority he admits: choreographers.

"That somebody has the vision to put a few steps together and make a dance out of it, there is already a certain power implanted. My job is much easier – it's just to put a light in it.

"I've been fortunate enough to sit on the floor and watch them make their choices. It's like being a fly on the wall in the most intimate, horrifyingly beautiful moments of the creative process. I like that!"

- Baryshnikov's 'Solos with Piano, or not...' is at the Barbican (020 7638 8891), Feb 17-22.

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