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Dance

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Misha: impossible

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On Mikhail Baryshnikov & White Oak Dance Project at BAM

The picture that sized up Mikhail Baryshnikov for his new audience in the West was an Avedon shot that ran in *Vogue* in October 1974, four months after the dancer defected. He flew straight up from the page, arms outstretched, chest bare, sky behind him—huge. He flew out of the lap of *Vogue* and into light. The move could have been the trick of a diver or a gymnast, but the body was pure ballet—that immaculate musculature, the privilege in space, those toes. Baryshnikov had chubby cheeks, which was a shock, and big, round, sad, silent-movie eyes, a blue that sighed the word “persecution.” And it turned out he was small, about five feet six inches. So his round cheeks and round muscles and round-as-a-compass pirouettes and *tours en l’air* made him seem cherubic, a kind of opulent ballet angel. We knew he came from the Kirov, but with his blazing perfection he could just as easily have dropped from the sky, son of the sun. I remember tearing that photo out of *Vogue* and tacking it to the butter-yellow wall of my college dorm room.

The word Apollonian was soon tacked to Baryshnikov. In Gennady Smakov’s book *The Great Russian Dancers*, you find him in the chapter titled “Dancers Without Category,” an honor he shares with Vaslav Nijinsky and Rudolph Nureyev. All three came from the Kirov, all three popped the world’s perception of the male dancer. But the first two were hotbloods who inspired writers to enraptured animal metaphors—big cats, gold slaves, jungle lust. As exotically and marketably Russian as Baryshnikov was, he did not channel Dionysus. He was more like the love child of pantherine, dance-or-die Nureyev and icecap cool, super-correct Erik Bruhn, dance gods of the Sixties who had a romantic fascination with each other’s techniques (and a very brief fling). Misha was intense and aloof, charismatic and mega-correct, hot and cold. Though he was never dance-or-die like Rudi, when Baryshnikov was “into” his work, it was all systems go, classical dancing on a par with Vladimir Nabokov on a literary riff: plush, precise, the pedant in a paradise of plosives. It was articulation pressing the boundaries of the language, self-consciousness at critical mass (eternity just beyond the sound barrier). Misha was a man not a panther. That was the turn-on. His sensuality lay in his phenomenal, formal purity. He was objectivity imploding, conservatism climaxing. Which is why he made such a match with choreographer Twyla Tharp (one of those feminists who only really respects men)—they played mind games with the classical syntax.

In his dancing with American Ballet Theatre, Baryshnikov was always physically rapt, but over time his heart was missing. His Albrecht in *Giselle* became more false not less, as if Misha couldn’t believe in the ballet anymore. The boil of his *brisés* in Act Two, a diagonal that always stunned the audience, well, they boiled harder, as if to heat up the performance. Eventually, Baryshnikov stopped dancing the prince roles. And that ravishing fifth position of his—legs crossed in an airtight X, thighs and calves having the tempered curves of Brancusi’s *Bird in Space*—actually seemed less

ballet's Middle C, its intimation of infinity, than a place closed in, alone, a confessional molded to his use. It's funny, I can drum up memories of Baryshnikov dancing, but what floats up on its own is his face. I remember him looking out from his classical technique as if trapped in it.

Baryshnikov left ballet when he left his post as artistic director of ABT in 1989. He'd had it with the board, the development department, the whole arts marketing circus. And he'd had it with the New York critics, who poo-pooed his expensive production of *Swan Lake*, and questioned his leadership of the company in ways they'd never questioned his dancing. American Ballet Theatre lost an imperfect, inspiring director and has been improvising ever since. And Baryshnikov? He defected again, this time quietly. In 1990, with Mark Morris, he founded a small modern dance company called the White Oak Dance Project.

But can he be a modern dancer? Last fall Baryshnikov made a guest appearance with the Tricia Brown Company at BAM's Next Wave Festival. Together, they danced her solo "If You Couldn't See Me." It was a startling embodiment of the old adage: "You can take the boy out of fifth position but you can't take fifth position out of the boy." There was Brown, in her pigeon-toed, plain-Jane, haywire style—indecision in action—and there was Baryshnikov, doing the same steps at the same time ten feet away, making them look like commandments cut in travertine, neat, deep, decisive. The antithesis of the Brown style, he pulled the eye away from Brown and made the dance *his* solo (she became periphery). Such favoritism wasn't supposed to happen, of course, but you can't blame the brain waves for seeking order.

He does look different these days. A picture of Baryshnikov by Fergus Greer ran in *The New Yorker* a week before White Oak's BAM engagement.^[1] The face that used to be so round is now lean, that used to be all cheek is now all forehead (the Luke Skywalker hair has been shorn). Baryshnikov's expression is stern, even severe, gravity pulling at his chin. And the shot itself puts him in a tight frame in which he doesn't fully fit and yet attempts to do a dance (actually, an awkward, right-angle hand position from Merce Cunningham's "Septet"). This photo sums up Baryshnikov's situation in the White Oak Dance Project. That ballet space and sky is long gone.

The name "White Oak" comes from a Florida-Georgia plantation owned by the Gilman Paper Company, whose chairman, Howard Gilman, has put money into the company and given it a place to work. The words White Oak also propose a kind of parallel stature: Baryshnikov has left the pillars of classicism for the equally wise and pure Earth Mother oaks of modern dance. Nevertheless, it's not a particularly coherent or categorical bunch of dances he's put together and there seems to be no curatorial basis for what's included. Rather, White Oak reads like a personal collection of totems and taboos, a repertory that revolves around Baryshnikov, what he thinks he should try, and what he doesn't want to do again (i.e., anything he did before). He's cultivating a garden of think pieces and abstinence—or to put it another way, there's too much forehead and not enough cheek.

It's been a long time since I've seen such a dour assemblage of dances. Both programs contained the late Erick Hawkins's last dance, "Journey of a Poet," a work made in 1994 as a solo for Baryshnikov, and expanded posthumously into an ensemble. Set to a swarming string quartet, Hawkins's creepy-crawly *plastique moderne* makes "Poet" seem a crawl through Kafka, an abstraction or refraction of Baryshnikov's late Eighties Broadway performance as the cockroach in *Metamorphosis*. "Poet" is baloney, and also cause for concern. Doesn't Baryshnikov know how bad it is? And just because he commissioned the dance does that mean we have to see it three years later?

Both programs also featured the engagement's premiere, "Remote," a long and punishingly austere ensemble work by young choreographer Meg Stuart (with equally punishing string music by Eleanor Hovda). Warning bells went off when I read André Lepecki's program note, a two-hundred-word tone poem that began by quoting T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world" and went on to

describe “Remote” as “a dance moving around the limits of dancing. Reversing time, cutting time, expanding it to its annihilation, etc.” Luckily I had read *The New York Times* the previous Sunday, wherein Stuart explained that she was actually deconstructing a pirouette. And so “Remote” begins with dancers spaced out (both meanings), inching around in glacial slow motion, belaboring the head snap of a ballet “spot,” succumbing to *Le Sacre* spasms, starting over and over again. Time expands.

As for annihilation—grainy, gray projections of lost highways, barbed wire, empty windows, and blurred crowds hit the cyclorama in narrow shafts, like St. Sebastian arrows in the social skin. That pirouette, if you hadn’t already guessed, is symbolic. Pirouettes, like man, are self-involved and solipsistic, isolated and alienating. Pretty soon the pirouettes look not deconstructed so much as detonated. It’s a stage full of victims, everybody tripping and lurching, blown up and homeless. Two dancers try to Only Connect. Only they can’t. Baryshnikov does a pretty good imitation of a bag man who’s needling the audience and nodding off. The dance ends with Jamie Bishton in a cone of dust motes, convulsed.

That Stuart sustains the first half of “Remote,” the pirouette part, with such tonal security is an accomplishment. The dance is also slickly performed. But Stuart’s heavy, high school message is clichéd and dated. And on the evidence of “Remote,” her choreographic hand is *echt* Eighties, her sense of the body in space derivative, a meeting between Twyla Tharp’s violent off-centeredness and Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker’s repeating-decimal expressionism. I’m not surprised that most of Stuart’s work has been commissioned and performed in Europe. They eat urban angst for breakfast.

The two swing dances on the programs offered respite, though they too were lit low and dusty. Merce Cunningham’s “Septet” is an early charmer, one of the last dances in which he choreographed hand in hand with the music, Satie’s “Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear” (piano for four hands). Cunningham not only teases his title—the dance requires six dancers (Les Six?)—he teases the Twenties of Satie and St. Denis, posing his dancers in archly arty “modern dance” tableaux, framing them in air quotes, in Satie’s moments of studied stillness. With Baryshnikov at its center, you feel Marcel Marceau in the air, too, for Misha plays happily with Cunningham’s mimelike emphasis. It’s perhaps more than Cunningham would wish for, but endearing all the same.

“Unspoken Territory,” a 1995 solo by Dana Reitz for Baryshnikov, was the blessing of the engagement. It is performed in silence, with Baryshnikov costumed in a chiton, apricot-shaded and sheer—he seems a Grecian ghost. And in fact he begins the piece in relief, as if he’d danced right off the surface of an urn, the power of his profile still acting upon him. It is a stream-of-consciousness solo, a passage of unheard melodies. Jennifer Tipton’s lighting is a succession of half-lit geometries—pyramids and trapezoids—beamed down from the fly space, pitched in from the wings, widening and narrowing. Baryshnikov travels along rims of light, bobs in jars of shadow, strikes majestic poses in silhouette. He turns himself to stone, a centurian’s horse, wakes suddenly to his own image and fingers his face like Narcissus. Free association gives way to refrain. In a repeating sequence of two steps, a leap, and a landing, the rhythm of his feet on the floor is so powerfully certain that the sounds—scuff, scuff, silence, and a plumph—come to seem code for the secret self. That airborne absence is the closest Baryshnikov comes to touching his soul in this repertory.

Unfortunately, “Unspoken Territory” does- n’t compensate for the pleasureless, lusterless whole, the lack of kinetic kick. It’s hard not to feel there’s something punitive in this Project, hard not to hear Baryshnikov saying something like: you didn’t appreciate me at ABT, didn’t see how serious I really was. I may be reading this in, and it may be unfair. But at the very least, White Oak shows his taskmaster’s taste for the dogmatic and the cold—how he takes seriousness way too seriously. Why such dark tones and gloomy lighting? Why must string quartets sound like crazed cicadas or Soviet experiments? Why no joy, and so few jumps? Baryshnikov’s solos are soà *terre* you’d think he ordered the air off-limits. And yet in the instances when he performed a *jeté* (in “Septet”) or a series

of turning leaps (the Hawkins) you felt a sigh go through the audience ... *it's him, he's dancing.*

Who is Baryshnikov in this company? Large and lordly on the ballet stage—and make no mistake, even standing still little Misha flooded the Metropolitan Opera House with his presence—Baryshnikov's chief challenge here is to blend in, stay small. In the sense that the stylistic requirements of these dances scale him down, make him human, he does blend. He dances with modesty and commitment and splendid articulation. But without classicism there's no critical mass, and without mass there's no Misha. It's tempting to view Baryshnikov, in his self-imposed downsizing, as a statement on the diminished state of ballet. I suspect he wouldn't fight that interpretation. But I don't think it's that simple. Baryshnikov has always had a withholding side. He used to give his audiences wonder upon wonder. Now he wants to make us work.

Notes

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1. The White Oak Dance Project performed two programs comprising four dances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music from March 25, 1997, through March 29. [Go back to the text.](#)

Laura Jacobs's most recent novel is *The Bird Catcher* (St. Martin's Press).

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