

MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV will soon become director of American Ballet Theatre. The words themselves are easy enough to understand; their implications, however, are far from clear. The combination of Ballet Theatre and Baryshnikov, on one hand, is breathtaking: One of the great ballet troupes of this country—of this world—will soon be directed by one of the great ballet performers of our time. But the juxtapositions, on the other hand, are at least equally intriguing: The first company to be founded expressly for the promotion of American dance will be led by a dancer trained in the most disciplined of Russian traditions.

Is turning the company over to Baryshnikov a wise or foolish move? Is Baryshnikov himself, 32 years old—experienced as a dancer and experienced as a choreographer—sufficiently experienced to run a ballet company? Can he, having been a part-time resident of the United States for only five years, continue to nurture the “American spirit” of the company? These questions are being pondered by everyone connected to the world of dance, from the founders of the company to the dancers themselves. Their answers range from describing the young Russian as “uniquely qualified” for the job, to calling the appointment an outright “disaster.”

In order to have perspective on the American Ballet Theatre at the crossroads, one must return briefly to its beginnings. In late 1939, prior to the company's debut as the Ballet Theatre on January 11, 1940, the founders announced their policy in an official statement: “The organization is strictly American. What it offers is a perpetual and dynamically growing dance theater that is, in a sense, an ‘art gallery’ of all the great works of ballet, from the earliest extant to the newest and most modern.” This concept was the brainchild of the late Richard Pleasant, at the time a perceptive young man, keen to the fact that Ballets Russes companies were dazzling American audiences and obviously eager to whet audience appetites with some American fare. He convinced Lucia Chase to join him as a founder, and she became the principal benefactor of the fledgling company. In 1945, after a brief interlude during which the famed impresario Sol Hurok managed the company, Chase and Oliver Smith, a theatrical designer, assumed codirectorship.



Lucia Chase—From *Swan Lake* to stage crew?

Chase and Smith, who relinquish their posts to Baryshnikov on September 1, are responsible for a most remarkable record of accomplishment, one that has seen the American Ballet Theatre develop into a distinguished troupe in the select company of the Bolshoi and the Kirov, Britain's Royal, and the Royal Danish Ballet. Starting with Chase and Pleasant, Ballet Theatre (the name was officially changed to American Ballet Theatre in 1957, following several State Department-sponsored tours abroad) has produced more than 250 ballets and divertissements, representing the talents of more than 100 choreographers, both past and present; some 150 composers, both traditional and contemporary; and about 125 designers for sets, costumes, projections, and lighting.

One cannot begin to list the impressive array of talent fostered by Chase, at first on her own, and later with Smith.

With the ballet *Fancy Free* (1944), Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, and Oliver Smith enjoyed a collaboration that launched them, collectively and separately, to fame not only in ballet but also in theater. Agnes de Mille and England's Antony Tudor have also enriched Ballet Theatre, and continue to do so today. Chase and Smith made the public aware of a luminous array of other choreographers: Eliot Feld, who now heads his own company; Herbert Ross, the director of two major dance films, *The Turning Point* and *Nijinsky*; Michael Kidd, whose first work for Ballet Theatre led him to a position of eminence on Broadway and in films; and Donald Saddler, a charter member of the company, who has gone from creating *This Property Is Condemned* for Chase to Tony Award-winning status as a Broadway choreographer. Among many others whose choreographic talents were nurtured were Eugene Loring, in the early days and, recently, Glen Tetley, Michael Smuin, and Dennis Nahat.

Choreography was not the company's only contribution to dance arts. Ballet Theatre also studded the American firmament with dancers of true star status, many of them from the United States. Among the first of the prominent American dancers were Nora Kaye, acclaimed once as the top dramatic ballerina and today, as producer of two dance movies directed by her husband, Herbert Ross; the Cuban-born, American-trained Alicia Alonso, who was an American ballet star for more than 20 years and whose internationally famous Ballet Nacional de Cuba was launched with Ballet Theatre dancers in the Forties; and John Kriza and Leon Danielian, who became the first internationally recognized American classical male dancers. The pattern has continued to today's prima ballerina, Cynthia Gregory, and her other American colleagues.

Today, Chase—now 73—is ready to relinquish her title of director; yet she insists that she will not leave her company. She will remain on the board of directors, continue to perform mime roles, and do her best to serve the company on which she expended an immense portion (estimates go as high as an unlikely \$36 million) of her fortune. Recently, she reminded interviewers that Richard Pleasant had described Ballet Theatre in 1940 as “American in spirit and international in scope.” She proudly continued, “We

have achieved what Dick started."

As the company prepares to celebrate its fortieth anniversary with a 10-week season at the Metropolitan Opera House (May 4 to July 12), hopes and fears for the future are expressed on all sides. The key to the controversy is, of course, Baryshnikov. Is he qualified to lead the American Ballet Theatre into a future as artistically fruitful as its past, true to the visions of Pleasant and Chase? Why was he appointed to the post of director?

He was chosen, obviously, because his name is Mikhail Baryshnikov. That name has become almost a household word in America; it could well draw essential funds to the company, not to mention box-office take (although Baryshnikov is not dancing with ABT at the Met this season, he will perform in the fall). His dance credentials are unassailable. Are his administrative credentials equally impressive?

Donald Kendall, chairman of the board and chief executive officer of PepsiCo, Inc., is not only a successful businessman but also a generous and energetic supporter of the arts; he serves as chairman of the board of governing trustees of the Ballet Theatre Foundation, the corporate entity that administers the business affairs of the company and that selected Baryshnikov as the next director. According to Kendall, Baryshnikov "has already given the world the genius of his dancing, and he will now have the opportunity to lead his great company into the decade of the Eighties and beyond with his unique qualifications. Someone like him comes along once in a lifetime."

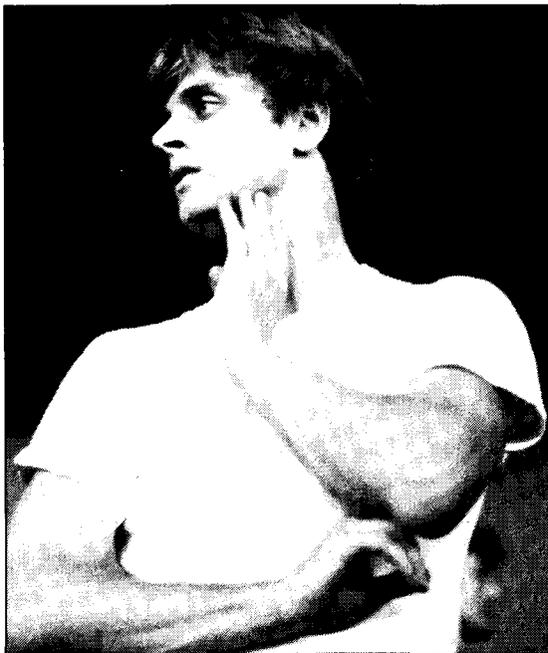
Kendall lauds Chase for her past accomplishments: "I don't think it possible to praise Lucia enough for what she's done. She was Ballet Theatre." He went on to say, however, that he would call for "better management" and that "in the future there will be no more short-range planning" for funding and management. For Kendall, the future of the company can best be guided by Baryshnikov. "I think Misha has found his home and his future. He can dance, choreograph, direct, foster talent, train dancers."

Others do not agree. Oliver Smith, the company's codirector with Chase, fears that under its new management "artistic supervision will replace artistic creativity."

"The American Ballet Theatre as we have known it for 40 years will cease to exist," he says. "With the new direction, the company will go through a drastic change. I am very concerned about the future of American choreographers and composers with respect to Ballet Theatre's incoming management. I wish the

new direction well, but I have my fears.

"Under Misha," he continued, "there is certain to be an emphasis on the classics. We have always offered the classics, but our cornerstone has been contemporary ballets. A new full-length *Swan Lake* is planned. Does the company need one? Our present full-length *La Bayadère*, which Natalia Makarova just finished



Baryshnikov—Can he nurture ABT's American spirit?

staging, cost \$500,000, perhaps more. Should millions of dollars go to restoring the past?"

Smith then answered his own question, bringing up yet another sore spot rubbed raw by the change in the company's direction—the troupe's association with the Metropolitan Opera House, which, according to Donald Kendall, will remain as a central "performing outlet" along with Kennedy Center. According to Smith, "Dollars will indeed have to refurbish the old Russian ballets if the goal is to sell 4,000 tickets per night at the Met. Only spectacle ballets can do that. But the Met and ABT could become so inter-related that Ballet Theatre would end up as a Met appendage. New works will suffer. If such a sad state comes to pass, I would buy some tickets for 19th-century ballet spectacles. But I wouldn't want to continue an association with the company. I can take just so much of great old dinosaurs."

Lucia Chase reports that she wants Smith to stay on the board of governing trustees with her, but Smith himself has some reservations. "Neither Lucia nor I has been consulted in any way whatsoever about the future of Ballet Theatre. That's the privilege of the new director and his staff; but I will not stay if I have nothing creative to do."

Other staff members are more optimistic. Nora Kaye, who recently served

Chase and Smith as associate director (along with Anthony Tudor), says she is "pleased with the choice of Baryshnikov." She had been associated with the young Russian previously when he starred in *The Turning Point*. Kaye is willing to continue as associate director, but only part time, since her present career is centered on her husband's projects.

Herman Krawitz, executive director of the company, has been associated with such major Baryshnikov activities as the television special *The Nutcracker*, the packaging of a related *Nutcracker* record album, and the most recent TV special, *Baryshnikov on Broadway* (with Liza Minnelli). Krawitz is highly praised by PepsiCo's Kendall for his fund-raising and management abilities—and indeed, he did succeed in garnering donations two seasons ago when ABT was on the financial brink. Krawitz is wholly supportive of Baryshnikov. He particularly wants to dispel rumors that Baryshnikov wishes to do away with Tudor and de Mille areas of repertory. "We will maintain ABT's roots while improving the classical level of the company."

Charles France, director of press and public relations for ABT, has been associated with the company for nine years. He edited the text and wrote the foreword of *Baryshnikov at Work*, a book published in 1976. "Misha has asked me to join his artistic staff," says France. "I don't know what duties he has in mind for me but they will be mainly helping in matters of coordination." Others believe he will be a major influence on Baryshnikov; he already is a spokesman for the star.

Baryshnikov himself was reluctant to speak of his plans, stating he would rather not discuss projects and changes while Chase and Smith were still in charge. He did render some assurances: "I want to maintain the great roots of Ballet Theatre. It has always had a tradition of having an extraordinary repertory by varied choreographers, and that tradition must be maintained and nurtured—it's the soul of this company. But I hope to improve the level of classicism."

It is difficult to prepare any kind of article on ballet and not take note of the proliferation of rumors. And it is next to impossible when there is a Russian ballet contingent involved, although no one expects a return to the days when shoulder straps were cleverly sliced by a razor blade to the breaking point or when ground glass was discovered in toe shoes.

It was called the "Russian invasion" in 1941 when Ballet Theatre came under the management of the late Sol Hurok. Hurok quickly engaged Irina Baronova, the British-born Alicia Markova, and others. In ads and posters across the

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country, he promised RUSSIAN BALLET, (in huge letters) accompanied by "Ballet Theatre" (in smaller print). The American-born Maria Karnilova, a charter member of Ballet Theatre and today a Broadway star, refers to that period, despite her own Russian heritage, as "that Russian takeover" and adds, "My God! Those Russians made such a muddle of our lives and of the company"

Certainly many of today's Ballet Theatre dancers are as worried by the incoming Russian-oriented regime as were their artistic forebears in the Ballet Theatre of 38 years ago. Among the dancers informed that their contracts would not be renewed is Kirk Peterson, who rose from corps de ballet rank through demi-soloist and soloist to principal dancer within this company. In recent seasons Peterson has danced leading roles that Baryshnikov himself performs. There are others who will also leave.

Cynthia Gregory, the company's American prima ballerina and a star of world prestige, has had troubles in the past with respect to what she felt was ABT's preferential treatment of foreigners. The most recent problem was over the new production of *La Bayadère*, in which she was to appear with Makarova. But Makarova had done the staging herself, and the Russian, sitting in the catbird seat, did not want the American in her ballet. So no *Bayadère* for Gregory, who will dance other ballets.

This is not to say that the Russians themselves have been left untouched by the change in leadership. Indeed, one dancer remarked, "Even the Russians in this company are divided into camps. I've never seen such intrigues." Miss Makarova discounted rumors which had spread from New York to San Francisco that she had not been reengaged by her colleague from the Kirov Ballet. "I am happy with my place in the company," she says, "but it is true I will be doing more things outside. I have plans but I'm not ready to announce them."

Rumors, both on the grapevine and published, suggest that behind-the-scenes Russian emigrés will have a strong influence on Baryshnikov. Others say he is his own man.

Only the indomitable Lucia Chase seems completely nonplussed about the coming changes. She has firmly announced that she will not be forced out of the company under any circumstances, and reports that the stage crew recently presented her with one of their very own union-crew jackets with the name "Lucia" on the pocket of the blue satin front. "I was in costume for my role as the Queen in *Swan Lake* when they gave me this wonderful present. I was deeply touched. But I'm also practical—maybe in Ballet Theatre's future I'll be eligible for a job on the stage crew!"

—Walter Terry



David Bennent as Oskar—He seems more a self-centered sneak than a moral Geiger counter.

THERE'S SOMETHING quixotic in the attempt to refashion densely symbolic, visionary works of fiction into film, but it's a challenge many moviemakers seem powerless to resist. Such films can't really satisfy the people who loved the books the movies were based on; does anyone who responded to *Song of Solomon* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* really long to see them translated into film? Books like these owe much of their power to the form which shapes them—a writer's unmistakable voice weaves the mundane and surreal into images that would lose much of their impact as pictures on a screen.

Volker Schlöndorff's film adaptation of Gunter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum*. (New World) underscores this dilemma, though it's as satisfactory a transplant as an earnest director's craftsmanship and fidelity could guarantee. Like its forebear this picaresque fable covers a wide span of time and travail (both personal and political) in impressive detail, pausing along the way to savor a host of engagingly macabre conceits. Yet the film *The Tin Drum* feels incomplete because the purpose behind this journey is so elusive on screen—all concerned seem to be weighted down by a lot of metaphoric baggage for which somebody mislaid the key. And when its portentous contents fitfully seep out, they don't provoke curiosity about the novel's thrust, but make you skeptical about Grass's intentions as presented here.

On the surface, at least, *The Tin Drum* resembles a host of movies emanating from Europe of late—*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *French Provincial*, *The*

Kingdom of Naples—in that it is a tragicomic chronicle of a family's endurance through several decades of turbulent European history. *The Tin Drum's* distinguishing feature is Oskar, its idiosyncratic hero and narrator. Born in Polish-German Danzig in 1924, this precocious tot makes the decision of his life at age three, and refuses to grow. The child is repelled by the excesses of the adult world, exemplified by some mildly louche behavior of his putative father and ascetic uncle, his boorish legal father, and his sensuous mother, during a Sunday family gathering. Time passes, nazism encroaches, but Oskar stays pint-sized. Meanwhile, his sole diversion is a tin drum supplied by the local Jewish toymaker, and his one talent, the ability to emit a shriek that can shatter glass. A peek at his mother and uncle in *flagrante delicto* prompts him to climb the cathedral bell tower and sunder every pane in the municipality.

If an allegory is to stick, it's first got to be grounded in the personal and concrete. Yet for all the amorphous hints at Oskar's symbolic identity, the perversity of the character we actually see is too banal to make conjecture seem worth the trouble. With his jug ears, soybean milk complexion, and avid, soulless eyes, the eerily ageless creature impersonating Oskar resembles nothing so much as one of those tykes from a grade-B demon-possession flick. He comes across as a self-centered little sneak, though the child within us all is, I assume, supposed to be stirred by Oskar's willful integrity. Perhaps Oskar is meant to serve as a moral Geiger counter. If this is the case,

our hero is something of a hypocrite, since he is all too eager to partake of the carnal himself once puberty invades his diminutive form. Yet considering the epoch in which the film is set, there's clearly another, more resonant function in store for this character. Around the time Oskar's insistent tom-tom disrupted a mini-Nuremberg rally, it began to dawn on me. He's no less than the capricious Conscience of Germany. (A few other hints: The movie's resident humanists, Oskar's uncle and the melancholy toy merchant, have the highest tolerance for both the dwarf and his little instrument, and Oskar, while presiding over the funeral of his Nazi father at the war's end, actually begins to grow again for the first time in 20 years.) Earlier, Oskar has casually betrayed Daddy to the Russian "liberators" rampaging through the family cellar, by which point I had already decided that if this be conscience, I'll take it.

Oskar aside, *The Tin Drum* seems ever more shallow as it strains for the mythic. There's a long central passage devoted to Oskar's mother and her refusal to eat eels fished out of a horse's head found on the beach; her obstinacy turns to a greedy obsession to sample anything slimy and scaly, which leads in turn to her death. On a simple narrative level, this is arbitrary at best, and in the higher significance department it is exceedingly coy. Beyond its hero-as-national-microcosm routine, this *Tin Drum* apparently subscribes to the school of highbrow fiction and low-grade Freudianism that defines Woman as Womb, categorized either as "indomitable life force" (Oskar's grandma, seen lifting her capacious skirts to hide and comfort three generations of mankind) or as "unconfined libido" (his mother, and the lubricious teenager who succeeds her at Father's shop counter and in bed). Schlöndorff's images—the peasant matriarch crouched in a field, munching scorched potatoes and staring into space and the future—often have an emblematic power if you can resist analyzing their meaning, while the cast from Mario Adorf (the father) to Charles Aznavour (the doomed Jew) tries with some success to give human juice to all these walking archetypes. Yet the heavy-breathing obliqueness they're forced to serve turns *The Tin Drum* into a ponderous nugget of whimsy.

—Stephen Harvey