

Mikhail Baryshnikov, perhaps this century's greatest dancer, has been appearing everywhere—on stage, screen and at your local perfume counter. Where will it end?



Perpetual

He is waiting in an American Ballet Theatre dressing room marked TWYLA THARP/MARIANNA TCHERKASSKY. A bundle of toe shoes hangs on one wall, battered but elegant. A card reading "To Marianna" is perched on last night's lavish bouquet. A distracted and wary Baryshnikov leans back in his chair, shoulders curled forward protectively. In response to my thanks for his time he gives a formal nod and a courteous but dead "My pleasure."

Since Baryshnikov's 1974 defection from the Soviet Union, his hungry talent has not let him rest. The man has tried *everything*: dance, film, theater, dance-wear design and perfume development. For each venture that enhances or exploits Baryshnikov's image—his Russian romanticism, his puckish sexuality—he takes full responsibility. "It's always my initiative," he says, "because I put a new challenge in front of myself and go for it. I will never blame anybody for this. I choose this myself."

Now, near the end of a long, dazzling dance career, he is looking for financial security and new ways to speak. "Now when you're forty," he says, describing himself (he is forty-two), "your memory, it's not that sharp, your body's not that young. I wish this mental aging process would occur just twenty years before. Sometimes it feels like such a waste what we did in our late teens or early twenties, spending time on nonsense, instead of doing something meaningful."

I ask, but he won't say what "meaningful" would have been. His yearning for expression makes him most at home in the process of creating something—anything. "Working in different fields triggers different sides of you that you never expected you had," he says, pausing long and often in his continuing tussle with the English language. "You live twenty, thirty, forty years, and the minute you touch something which you never thought you would, you get a lot of different kinds of urges, different kinds of ideas, you know? It stretches you."

But what is he stretching toward? "It's maybe too many hats," he says wearily. Wondering where his passion for trying new tricks will lead him, I ask whether he has more ideas or whether his plate is full. With a long, ironic laugh he says, "The plate is cracking."

Baryshnikov's quest took a turn this past fall when he abruptly left his post as artistic director of the American Ballet Theatre. He had headed the company since 1980, after then directors Oliver Smith and Lucia Chase, wanting to pass the company's torch, lured Baryshnikov from his stint at the New York City Ballet. Moving beyond his role as the world's premier dancer, he took his directorship seriously, though he was pressed into it more by outside expectations, less by his own impulses.

"He's had tremendous influence on dance," says David Howard, the renowned ballet teacher, "mainly because he's the greatest dancer of this century. But just because you're incredibly talented as a dancer doesn't mean you have those levels of talent in any other direction. And you can't be everything to everyone just because you're able to get onstage and excite the audience. Maybe that's where it starts and finishes."

Baryshnikov received mixed reviews for his performance at the ABT. He attempted to dismantle the company's star system—which had



embraced him the moment he defected—just in time to pull the rug out from under the rising career of the immensely talented Fernando Bujones. Mature, popular ballerinas such as Martine van Hamel and Cynthia Gregory were shunted aside, and younger artists were pushed forward. "He started a new company," says Susan Jaffe, the prima ballerina of Baryshnikov's *Swan Lake*. "He cleaned out a lot of people and put in people he wanted, pushing the younger dancers that he chose into prominence. Before Misha came, the company itself was really not very good, and they had to bring foreign stars to sell tickets."

He could be inspiring or intimidating to his dancers, but by shunning personal connection with them, he lost control of the soul of his company. In the opinion of one ballet observer, "We'll never see a talent like that again, but when he came out for his bows, there was nothing. He never loved his audience, he never loved his dancers, he never loved the American Ballet Theatre. He didn't know half the dancers' names. They're kids, and a ballet company has to be like a fam-

By Joan Arnold

Motion



ily; dancers want to feel like someone cares."

Baryshnikov did strengthen the ABT's reputation and level of technique but was reluctant to be identified with the company. During the last years of his tenure, the ABT seemed like a jealous wife watching her man step out. Many there have wondered why he danced for Martha Graham and not for the ABT, why he toured the nation with his own troupe—the only man among ten selected ABT ballerinas—and avoided the New York season. And some have complained that he was too busy promoting himself to promote the company.

Baryshnikov has always been a magnet for publicity, but it was associate Charles France who encouraged him to capitalize on it. "Misha would be as in the limelight as Stallone is," says one ABT source, "if it were up to Charles France." A smart, gifted balletomane who began at the ABT as a fund-raiser and publicist, France has been Baryshnikov's cohort from the beginning. "When Misha defected," this source explains, "Charles hooked onto his wagon."

Their symbiotic friendship is a study in contrast: Insiders have ascribed to the corpulent France a hideous temper and a love for antique fans and old jewelry. It follows that he would befriend and serve such an electrifying presence as Baryshnikov, who in turn, got a protector and hatchet man. When there was bad news—the switching of a cherished role, the loss of a job—France delivered it.

According to one source, France exerted a strong influence on Baryshnikov, to whom the price of soup and a sandwich was as unfathomable as the news from his lawyer that he had made his first million. When Baryshnikov was willing to accede to fiscal limitations on a production, this source explains, "Charles [would say], 'No that's wrong. They shouldn't say no to you.' If you would say to Charles,

'You have a ceiling of this much money,' Charles would rebel against that, like a little child who tests his limits all the time."

When Baryshnikov made France his associate, the two were working with a worshipful board and indecisive management. France's personal extravagance spilled into artistic policy, with expensive changes of mind and schedule and outrageous prices paid for tights and props.

One employee recalls "a ballet where shirts and skirts got thrown from the wings onto the stage," adding that the cost of one shirt obtained through costume executioner Barbara Matera was three times what it would have been in a store. Though Baryshnikov supported hiring Jane Hermann as executive director in 1989, her effort to make the company solvent compelled her to rein in the spoiled children, which created a deep breach in her long-standing and close working relationship with Baryshnikov. Before Hermann's arrival, says an inside source, the ABT had never had anyone on "the business side with managerial ability who would actually say yes, no, and then take responsibility for it—never."

The rift was reported by the September 29, 1989 *New York Times*: Baryshnikov had suddenly left his post as artistic director just short of the ABT's fiftieth anniversary. "Nothing is ever too expensive if it furthers the repertoire and artistic standards of a dance company," Baryshnikov said in his official tantrum to the press, and Hermann replied, "That's a very nice thing to say, if it's paid for somewhere. Unfortunately we're not a European opera house where the ministry of culture supports us."

An associate commented, "I can imagine [Misha] not get-

ting what he wants, and from a woman. I was so surprised when they hired her. I thought, *Did anyone tell Misha that Jane is a woman?*"

Though Baryshnikov's leadership has been questioned, no one disputes the force of his drive. Terri Wagener, his personal assistant from 1980 to 1988, says, "He works harder than any person I've ever known. He works himself to death. It's more than a compulsion. It's almost like a death wish. I've never known anyone to have such discipline. . . . I waited for him to be lazy, and he never was. If he took a day off, he was like a caged tiger. I remember thinking, *God I'm glad he's a dancer, not a terrorist.*"

As he catapults through his experiments, it's hard to remember how much he has lost. Baryshnikov was born in Riga, Latvia, to a stern, remote military father and a sensitive, uneducated mother who took her son with her to see the opera and ballet she loved. The last time he saw her was through a train window as she walked alongside on the platform, her face streaming with tears. The family had planned a vacation together, and at the last moment his mother stayed behind, letting twelve-year-old Misha and his father go on alone. The boy returned home to learn that she was dead, and a few years later overheard in a conversation that she had hanged herself. "I have never really known the reason why," he has said. "For me at the time, it was the end of my life."

It was also the beginning of his dedication to ballet. Baryshnikov shared a chilly home atmosphere with his father until his dance teacher recommended him to Leningrad's Vaganova Institute. By his own description, "I was like a young goat, knocking over tables and chairs." But

his facility and presence were remarkable by the time he was sixteen. In addition to sterling ballet training,



his teacher Alexander Pushkin gave him warm, fatherly support and encouraged him, despite his slight stature, to carry principal roles. Contrary to tradition, he was launched to the status of soloist as soon as he joined the Kirov Ballet, at the age of eighteen.

Though Baryshnikov's account of his defection in Toronto has varied throughout the years—a gradual process or a sudden bolt—it is still the tale of a restless spirit willing to pay the price for artistic freedom. From the moment he arrived in New York City he electrified audiences as a soloist with the ABT but in 1978 put art before stardom when he went to work with George Balanchine's New York City Ballet. Charles France notes that during that time Baryshnikov could have amassed enough money touring to cushion the blow of a dancer's short career. "As an artist," says France, "he showed remarkable courage and vision when he joined the New York City Ballet to work with Balanchine. As an emerging superstar, of course, it was sheer madness." But Baryshnikov had always dreamed of working with the master. At that point, Balanchine was in declining health, and Baryshnikov was in the shadow of NYCB's "starless" system, straining his body to fit the Balanchine mold.

With utter dedication, he has poured enormous talent and energy into a dance form that draws a romantic veil over pain. When a bone in Baryshnikov's foot popped out of place in the midst of a performance of *Giselle* in Los Angeles' Shrine Auditorium, he exited in agony, unable to point or put weight on his foot. Seven thousand audience members had no idea that during the star's four minutes offstage, physical therapist Peter Marshall snapped and taped the bone back into place in time for Baryshnikov's next entrance.

But he can cross the line from dedication to destruction. One observer notes that "he took ABT dancers and costumes, toured for a month and made a million dollars with Baryshnikov and Company, but he ruined his body, ruined his knees." That one month, plus years of extraordinary impact on the joints, as well as the stress of different techniques, have made

his body rebel from the complicated battering of self-absorption and self-denial.

When he did dance with the ABT, he ultimately alienated his most famous partners. After a glorious beginning, Natalia Makarova

stopped dancing with Baryshnikov and said, "To be brutally honest about it, I feel I give him more than he gives me." As with Makarova, there were moments of unforgettable onstage magic with Gelsey Kirkland. David Howard, Kirkland's coach and close friend, worked with the pair in the studio when Baryshnikov first defected and chose her as a partner: "I was always interested in what Gelsey had to say because I felt that it was a much greater intellect coming from there. You take someone like [Misha] from Russia who comes with a different point of view, and, though Gelsey was interested, she wanted to find her own way. That's the key. That's what made her so interesting. Dancers like Gelsey and Natasha [Makarova] are unusual because they are interested in the pro-

gression of the art form on a daily basis. They worked very hard in class. Misha couldn't wait to get on and jump around the room."

His explosive physicality and sexual charge make Baryshnikov a compelling presence. "He has an amazing charisma that is overwhelming," says Wagener. "I'm no stranger to celebrities, and I've never seen anyone have that kind of effect. When he walks into the room, everyone stands up, and they don't sit down again until he leaves. He has this energy that is exhausting." He can use his riveting persona to fulfill a role beautifully, playing his charm for all it's worth. At the *Swan Lake* benefit gala, when Nan Kempner snagged the heel of her evening slipper in a grate, a *Times* article reported that Baryshnikov "caught her and led her in an impromptu pas de deux. 'What's this? Cinderella?' he asked, retrieving the slipper and placing it on [her] foot."

'Prince Charming,' Mrs. Kempner replied as they glided to the table. She plucked a sprig of sweetpeas from the centerpiece and tucked it behind Mr. Baryshnikov's right ear."

He is not averse to milking his Russian-ness, as in a video portrait in which he says, "I still don't know why I dance, really. It's a giddy feeling, weak in the knees, like too much vodka on an empty stomach." Exploiting every angle of the moody émigré enamored of American entertainment, he appeared in *Baryshnikov on Broadway*, *Baryshnikov in Hollywood* and *White Nights*. John Gruen observed in the May 1982 issue of *Dance-magazine*, "It's getting a bit tiresome having him cast in the role of the innocent abroad."

In the process of creating an image, he has become a huge celebrity. Wagener describes sifting through a deluge of Baryshnikov fan mail—letters from inspired children, invitations to family shindigs, offers to have his baby and snapshots of bedrooms done in Contemporary Misha. She recalls letters from fans who "fantasized that they were on intimate terms with him. They thought they were meant for each other and that he really should come to Duluth."

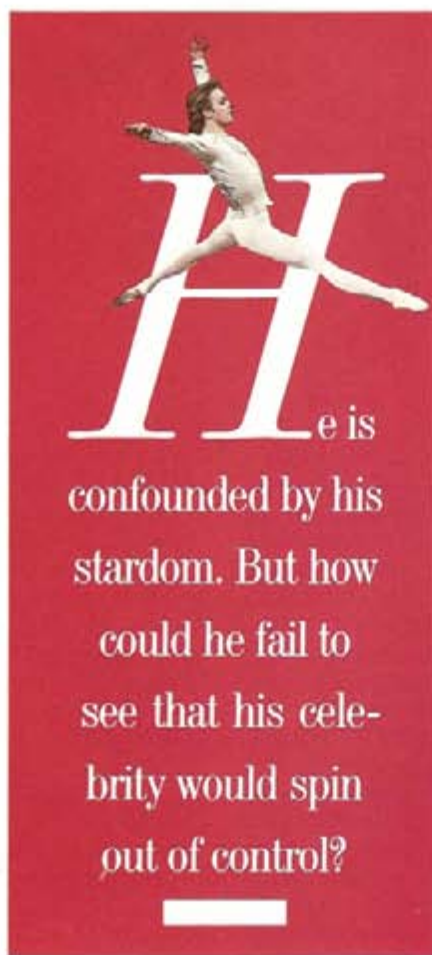
The adulation can be horrifying. Wagener recalls walking with him on the street: "People stopped and pointed at him and screamed as if he were an alien." Frenzied balletomanes have spotted him driving his car, pounded on his window and thrown themselves across the hood, yelling, "I love you! I love you!"

Paradoxically, Baryshnikov responds to this self-inflicted adoration with a mixed reaction of fear, detachment and rage. "I feel uncomfortable when people are trying to intrude in my private life," he says. "Then I'll ignore this or I will fight back. But any artist is very much used to being stripped in front of the general audience." Reluctantly, he pays for his fame with his privacy. His unlisted home phone number changes every six weeks.

But he is not so delicate about his private life that he won't toss it into the fantasy mill, and his reputation as a relentless womanizer has become Hollywood movie fodder. In *The Turning Point* and *Dancers* (both based on

Baryshnikov's stormy character) he entrances and drops young, impressionable ballerinas.

The knowledge that his audience wants more inspires promotional material full of the illusion of accessibility. "What's important is not what people know about you privately, but what they know about your emotional self," he says. "We really sold this many years



ago. It's too late to be embarrassed about it."

In a publicity shot, he happily hugs a group of young girls prancing in his Baryshnikov Bodywear. The copy advertising his perfume suggests that you, too, can carry Misha around in your purse wherever you go. "It is a bit of my fantasy," Baryshnikov says of the image peddled by the fragrance campaign. "It is an idea of a man, but it is not by any means me." In an American Express ad he is (sigh) scantily clad, frolicking with an oar. "You should have seen him," the ad seems to say, "when we were out on that boat alone, together."

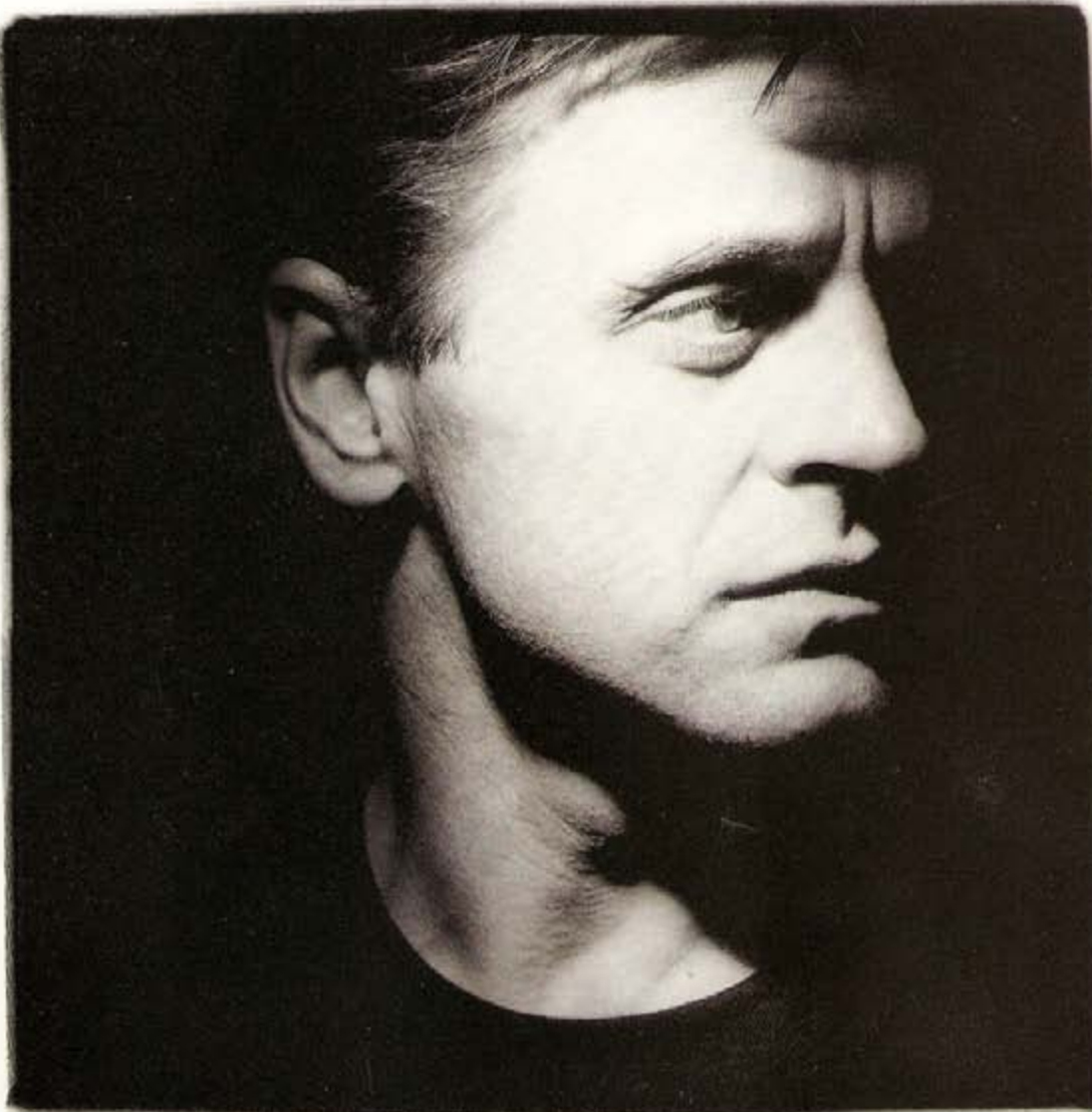
Though he has courted and exploited stardom, he claims to be confounded by it: "I didn't want to be a celebrity. I wanted to be a dancer, and I wanted to be a good dancer—that was my goal. But I never wanted to build up any kind of image of who I am, what I am." Linda Shamlan, who worked in the ABT office and handled Baryshnikov's fan mail says, "It overwhelms him, that all these people would take the time to write a letter, put a stamp on it and send it to New York City. 'What's the point of it?' he'd say. 'They want my signature? They want my picture? Why?'" But how could someone so canny about his effect fail to notice his celebrity spinning wildly out of control?

Perhaps because it can be useful. Some of his projects have been launched purely on the power of his name, like *Metamorphosis*. The backers lost a large part of their investment on this curious bomb in which Baryshnikov played an overstressed dung beetle. "I thought that no matter, flop or success, I will learn a lot," he says. "That's what is most important. It was a bit scary. I'm scared every time I play in front of the audience."

The thrill of risk continues to spark him. When he performed in the opening night of Martha Graham's *American Document*, there was a bolt of excitement when Baryshnikov appeared. I was in the fourth row—too close to see the sweep of the choreography, but close enough to see, as he paused stage right to get a breath, a slight tremor. He was nervous. Graham has spoken of "that vulnerability, that openness, that goes beyond technique. It is that that Misha brings to the stage."

He is rarely so vulnerable in his private life, and there are scores of women willing to abandon good sense for a moment with him. Known for his worshipful cruelty toward women, Baryshnikov has been abandoned only once—by Jessica Lange. He has said his relationship with her, which produced a daughter named Alexandra (after his mother), was the most important in his life. His children are his only family, and Wagener describes Baryshnikov as a doting, devoted father. Though he has had some ecstatic partnerships that spanned both stage and bedroom, none have endured.

He is now involved with Lisa Rinehart, whom he met in 1976 when she was a corps dancer at the ABT. Rinehart, like so many



others, seems to have fallen into the black hole reserved for those who come too close. "When things fell apart with Jessica," said an ABT associate, "he went to Lisa, and when he found somebody else, he left Lisa. She's been the woman that he takes for granted." In July 1989, Rinehart gave birth to their son, Peter. Of Baryshnikov she has said, "This bizarre world we live in demanded so much from him, and people placed so many expectations and hopes on him, that he couldn't possibly find a small space to be simply himself. . . . He is also a loving, kind and generous person, and that is something few people give him credit for."

As Wagener puts it, he can be "generous to a fault," as shown by his substantial financial contributions to the ABT and dedication to fund-raising for AIDS research. "He can be extremely gracious and very kind. He'll give anything to anyone who needs it. He will give money away as if it were water to friends, particularly old friends. He offers his hospitality. His home is like Grand Central Station."

But, she says, "He doesn't really offer him-

self or his time. He's very protective of both." He is bent on protecting what he *does* have left. "He never shines a light inside," says a friend. Sitting close to him, one can see that time has stripped away youth's seraphic layer. As his expressions shift from boyish charm to regal displeasure, it is clear that considerable losses and a relentless schedule have taken their toll.

Now, on the brink of yet another metamorphosis, he meets the pressure by trying to accomplish more and top his past performance with the next one. But he is an unimaginably hard act to follow. And he seems to be rushing from the unanswered questions of his past, from what is near him and from what is inside.

Obscured and exposed by his own celebrity, he claims to "feel pretty comfortable because actually people, they don't know who I am anyway." His voice hardens, "No matter what they write, and what people say, I say, what the hell, write whatever you want. I'm not worried about that. They will never know who I am."

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