

## REVIEW

# Baryshnikov keeps us on our toes

## DANCE

BY ROBERT JOHNSON  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Lip-synching and a walkover by a man in high-heeled pumps come as no surprise. These features of "The Show, (Achilles Heels)," the new piece that White Oak Dance Company presented Saturday night at the McCarter Theatre, in Princeton, are to be expected of Richard Move, the cross-dressing cabaret artist turned modern choreographer.

Such standard nightclub fare would raise nary a plucked eyebrow in New York's meat-packing district, where Move's career began. The surprise is seeing former ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov in heels and a gold bustier. Offered the choice between two pairs of shoes, Baryshnikov's character, a campy incarnation of the Greek hero Achilles, chooses the sandals encrusted with glitter.

In his youth, Baryshnikov broke away from ballet classicism to dance for Martha Graham and other modern masters. Now 54, he directs and stars in White Oak, his own modern dance company. In "The Show, (Achilles Heels)," he parodies Graham's psychodramas, and lampoons his own stardom.

Yet "The Show" is a brilliant work, and the most revolutionary

piece Baryshnikov has commissioned. With music by Arto Lindsay and Deborah Harry of the rock group Blondie, and pop-cartoon sets by gallery artist Nicole Eisenman, it is also the most ambitious, the most contemporary and the most deeply satisfying.

Baryshnikov has enjoyed mixed success commissioning new works. He sank to an abysmal depth with Meg Stuart's "Remote" in 1997. But he scored a hit in '98 with Sarah Rudner and Christopher Janney's "Heartbeat: mb," a stunning biofeedback dance, also referenced in "The Show" when a thumping, heart-shaped lantern appears.

Along with iffy premières, Baryshnikov has orchestrated iffy revivals. Last year's tribute to the 1960s Judson era frankly bombed at the McCarter. This year, two pieces by Lucinda Childs offer more substance. Their delicate Minimalism balances "The Show's" theatricality, while hinting at the theme Move will elaborate.

In the melancholy solo "Largo," Baryshnikov seems to yearn for the vanished prowess of his youth with softly styled movements. Entering late, at the very end of the new, group work "Chacony," Baryshnikov dances alone again. The others abandon him and he looks nervously from side to side, throws



GEORGE McNISH/THE STAR-LEDGER

Former ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov, in heels and bustier, dances in "The Show, (Achilles Heels)," during a performance with the White Oak Dance Project at McCarter Theatre in Princeton.

himself into a heavy air-spin and dodges invisible punches. The piece suggests his uniqueness and mortality.

Childs' art has become more dramatic since the '70s. Yet her journey is nothing compared with the distance between "Chacony" and "The Show." Far from a pure dance piece, Move's première incorporates extensive text (mostly lip-synched), props, gags, songs and references to TV programs. Filled with witty, historical anachronisms à la the late Derek Jarman, the piece compresses different realities into a stunning collage.

Essentially, "The Show" conflates the story of Achilles, the hero-warrior who chooses an early death, with the real-life story of Baryshnikov, an aging superstar unwilling to retire.

Both appear wrapped in glamour and hopes of eternal fame. While Move does not rely on dance to tell this story, and borrows freely from a number of choreographers whom he admires, "The Show" strikes gold in two dance solos for Baryshnikov.

Alternating between poses of haughty beauty and moments when the dancer melts voluptuously in the intoxication of his own stardom, these solos paint an unforgettable portrait of a great artist.

Evidently, it's still too soon for Baryshnikov to stop dancing. In the words of Blondie, he must "fade aw-a-ay, and radiate."