



## No dress, but plenty of adrenalin

Ismene Brown reviews PASTForward performed by the White Oak Dance Project at the Playhouse

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SAD to relate, Mikhail Baryshnikov did not wear a dress, as we had been led to hope. The programme was changed. Still, there was plenty else to upset the Playhouse audience at his celebration of one of the most curious phenomena in dance history, the postmoderns of 1960s America.

The celebrated ballet star did three solos: a city gent's striptease, a cack-footed tango with a folding chair, and a strange outing in a sort of Edwardian deep-sea-diving outfit with a film projector on his back. The second and third fell rather flat, but the striptease, Steve Paxton's Flat (1964), was anything but.

Postmodernism was frightening stuff in its day. "People went expecting ballet and got people eating apples," as the choreographer Lucinda Childs described it. A generation on, we cannot be shocked like them; we can only be entertained or not.

Baryshnikov rightly helps us to enter this surreal past by wrapping the 15 short dances in a film presentation - introduced by footage of himself as a boy, executing exact, cat-footed classical entrechats at the Kirov's school. He uses his own ignorance and curiosity to lead us quickly to the personalities of the postmoderns: gentle Paxton, elfin Yvonne Rainer, folksy Trisha Brown, beautiful, glacial Childs.

With this sweetening, educative coating, the dances of PASTForward make a diverting evening, the best surprise of my year. The only things that look silly or dull are Simone Forti's group hugs and Deborah Hay's recent Whizz.

Most of the rest looks alert, inspired (a rebuttal to the dim, fogged dance theatre that has emerged since). The unpredictable, visionary Rainer shines out in her tirelessly ingenious Trio A.

Simple observational brilliance makes Childs and Paxton the charmers of the night. Childs's 1964 housewife going quietly insane in her kitchen in Carnation (gagging herself with washing-up sponges, sticking curlers into a colander) is the blackest, most heart-rending comedy. The procession of walking Edinburghers in Paxton's Satisfyin' Lover of 1967 is a calm and, yes, satisfying experience of the poetry of common humanity.

A more calculated play on our emotions comes in David Gordon's 1979 The Matter: the crowd now marches across the stage to the great hallucination scene of the ballet La Bayadere, which usually summons up shimmering waves of ghostly ballerinas. Behind the walkers, Baryshnikov is erecting a ridiculously comic construction from an ironing board, a supermarket trolley, foam rubber, a plastic duck.

It's amusing, but it's too complicated. The on-stage simultaneous filming, intended to help, comes to intrude. Simplicity was the postmodern genius. We could also do with more of Baryshnikov's sublime dancing. This style of movement isn't too testing, not for a disciplined, fit 53-year-old superstar, and his explosive kinetic ability still jumps out, even amid his seven young, superb colleagues.

One sees it best in the climactic closer, Childs's top-speed, minimalist 1993 Concerto, in which Baryshnikov's pure Kirov arm-shape is branded on the mind's eye, along with the sheer adrenalin rush of how much excitement can be achieved with so little means. Catch this if you can.

- Today. Tickets: 0131 473 2000

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