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DANCE

A Place for Artists to Shoot the Breeze

MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV announced last month that he would open an arts center, called the Baryshnikov Center for Dance, in 2004. It will occupy three floors in a new performing arts complex at 450 West 37th Street, with rehearsal studios, offices and access to a 300-seat theater. The center's board of advisers and participants includes Pedro Almodóvar, the filmmaker, and Susan Sontag, the writer. Mr. Baryshnikov, who also announced the closing of his company, the White Oak Dance Project, talked about the plans with Ms. Sontag recently in a conversation taped at Mr. Baryshnikov's Manhattan apartment. Here are excerpts.

SUSAN SONTAG I think it's a great, heroic project to create an arts center now in New York. It seems to me very much needed. But unfortunately, there has been for some time in this city a shrinking sense of possibility, a cynicism or discouragement.

MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV A sort of pessimism about—

SONTAG Possibility. So when I say your project is heroic, I mean that it dares to challenge the widespread feeling that really good things, really imaginative things of a cultural nature aren't going to happen in New York. Commercial considerations, bureaucracy, lack of interest or just plain old cynicism will block an idea here. Of course, the people who say this also deplore the situation, so I think it would be wonderful to prove the cynics wrong and create something like your center, which really thumbs its nose at this spirit of defeatism.

BARYSHNIKOV You know, people now feel the best you can do is to hold the line.

SONTAG Yes. To keep the main cultural institutions in New York going at a reasonable level of funding. If you can just keep them going, that is already almost utopian.

BARYSHNIKOV And a lot of those arts institutions are functioning in the red, you know, and that's a bit of an agony to keep up. Forget about having the fortitude to encourage newer, maybe risky work. The first agenda is to survive.

SONTAG It's a kind of Darwinian situation in which each institution fights for itself. But what you're envisioning is not a home for, let's say, the White Oak Dance Project. On the contrary, you've disbanded the company you've worked with for the last 12 years in order to create an arts center. How did you come to want to do this?

BARYSHNIKOV Well, how this idea emerged is difficult to explain. A few years ago, I started to question what are really my main interests in life, and where did I



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mikhail Baryshnikov and a rendering, above right, of the new performing arts center he is opening in Manhattan.



John W. Averitt & Associates, Architects

and actors coming to the center will provide his future inspiration. Though they might benefit from asking questions about his films, he'll get just as much from the exchange.

SONTAG So, clearly you're not talking about a center exclusively for dance, but a center for the arts in which the core would be the performing arts. There would be dance and dance-related performances, but it would certainly also include theater. It would include film. It would include—

BARYSHNIKOV Visual arts. Photography.

SONTAG But what I think people should understand is that this is a teaching institution without having any aspect of being a school. It sounds something like Marlboro Music, which is a very intense rehearsal situation in which chamber musicians from all over the world participate. You'll find an older musician playing the second violin in a string quartet, and it will be a 20-year-old playing first violin. The audience will hear what the musicians have decided they are ready to perform.

That means there could be two levels of performance. There would be this marvelous theater company from Lithuania, Necrosius, doing "Hamlet," let's say, and then there might be one or two more slots a week in which people would come to the center knowing they're going to see something really interesting, but they don't know what it is they'll be seeing. I think that could be an exciting and unique experience in New York.

BARYSHNIKOV Well, that's related to why I wanted the center in New York. There should be a kind of discovery of the unexpected here. After all, this city is the most cosmopolitan of American cities and should be able to attract and display emerging talent. Otherwise, we lose creative artists to countries that are able to fund the arts more generously, and with each loss the inner life of our city is poorer. Just like a person, a city without an artistic life is a pretty dismal thing. □

want the experience of the last 15, 20 years to lead me. I kept coming back to my time spent with Howard Gilman at the White Oak Plantation. [The plantation, in Yulee, Fla., was the home of Gilman, the arts patron and philanthropist, who died in 1998.] Howard had an extraordinary knack for pulling together talented people from diverse fields, and providing a comfortable environment where they could relax with each other. Something about the easy camaraderie without pressure was the richest atmosphere for me, and when I thought about it, it was how I learned most of what I consider valuable. I decided I wanted to create a place with that same feeling, a place where young creative artists can sit amongst their mentors and shoot the breeze. I suppose this is a lot to hope for in Midtown Manhattan, but I think it's possible — and necessary.

What's important is that young artists are given the opportunity to ask questions, and exchange ideas with more experienced, established artists. I think the mingling of generations is stimulating for both sides. I spoke yesterday with Pedro Almodóvar, who will be on our board. He said he hopes meeting beginning playwrights