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Fleeing the Soviet Union, Dancing on the West Coast

An interview with photographer Donald Bradburn

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Abstract

In the 1970s and 1980s, Los Angeles audiences saw Soviet defectors Mikhail Baryshnikov, Alexander Godunov, Natalia Makarova, and Rudolf Nureyev in the prime of their careers at the Hollywood Bowl, The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and the Greek Theater. Dance photographer Donald Dale Bradburn, a local Southern California dancer describes his behind-the-scenes access to these dancers in this interview. Perfectly positioned as Dance Magazine's Southern California correspondent, Bradburn offers a candid appraisal of the Southern California appeal for such high-power Russian artists as well as their impact on the arts of Los Angeles. An intimate view of Russian dancers practicing their craft on Los Angeles stages, Bradburn's interview is illustrated by fourteen of his photographs, published for the first time in this issue of Experiment.

Keywords

Donald Bradburn – Los Angeles – Hollywood – Dance Magazine – Mikhail Baryshnikov – Rudolf Nureyev – Alexander Godunov – Natalia Makarova – Alicia Alonso – Igor Youskevitch – Eugene Loring – Galina Ulanova – Margot Fonteyn – Bolshoi Ballet – University of California – Irvine – Fresno Ballet – American Ballet

Theater – National Ballet of Canada – National Ballet of Canada – Nederlands Dans Theater – Nureyev and Friends – New York City Ballet – Hollywood Bowl – The Music Center – Dorothy Chandler Pavilion – Greek Theatre – Gelsey Kirkland – Anthony Dowell – Marcia Haydee – Ivan Nagy – Peter Martins – Apollo – Dances at a Gathering – Medea – Giselle – Swan Lake – Le Corsaire – Raymonda

In 1956, a shy 15-year old boy sat in a Fresno auditorium, a Brownie Kodak camera in his lap. Onstage was Alicia Alonso, performing at the time with Igor Youskevitch and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Alonso went on to found the National Ballet of Cuba. The boy, Donald Dale Bradburn, went on to become a dancer, choreographer, and photographer. Since then, Bradburn has published more than 350 photographs in *Dance Magazine* (and served as the magazine's Southern California correspondent and West Coast editor), many of iconic Russian dancers on tour in Los Angeles. Beginning his work as photographer for *Dance Magazine* in 1969, Bradburn was perfectly positioned to photograph the Russian dancers Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, Alexander Godunov and Mikhail Baryshnikov, all of whom defected from the Soviet Union in order to dance in the west in the 1960s and 1970s. Fourteen of Bradburn's previously unpublished photographs of these iconic dancers on tour in Los Angeles are presented here in *Experiment* for the first time.

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Johnson: "How did your background prepare you to be a dance photographer?"

Bradburn: "My first love was dance. I was impressed by the spectacular visual images that appeared on stage through the synthesis of dance, design and music. A magical fantasy world existed. Photography was a natural extension of seeking to capture that fantasy world as well as the artists who inhabited it. My dance training involved ballet at the San Francisco Ballet School and with Eugene Loring at the American School of Dance in Los Angeles. I performed in both concert dance and films, and was the youngest dancer cast in the film *Funny Girl!* Much later, I became the official photographer of the Los Angeles Ballet and then of *Dance Magazine*."

Johnson: "What are your earliest memories of Russian dancers?"

Bradburn: "The Russian/Soviet ballet, especially the grand Bolshoi Ballet, along with Margot Fonteyn and the Sadler's Wells Ballet of England at the other end of the ballet spectrum, was instrumental to my deciding to become a dancer.

Huge, dramatic theatrical ballets seen on early color television NBC specials appealed to my love of drama, stagecraft and beauty. That was when I saw the Bolshoi ballet film, *Romeo and Juliet* (1954) with Ulanova. I was fourteen at the time and took the train down from the Central San Joaquin Valley to watch it. Later in 1958, I entered UCLA, choosing that UC campus over Berkeley, so I could be in Los Angeles for the first Bolshoi Ballet performances in spring 1959. While I was at UCLA I was carrying around issues of the *USSR* and *Soviet Life* Magazines. Not for political reasons, but solely because the issues would always have large full color photos spreads of the Bolshoi Ballet. The two week season at the Shrine auditorium opened with Ulanova in that same *Romeo and Juliet*. I was eighteen years old and desperately in love with the stage spectacle that was Russian ballet. I first saw Nureyev perform with Margot Fonteyn in guest appearances with the San Francisco Ballet in 1964. I later returned to Los Angeles in the hopes of dancing with a resident ballet company in Los Angeles and was a supernumerary with the Australian Ballet for Nureyev's production of *Raymonda* at the Music Center in 1966. He and Fonteyn were the stars."

Johnson: "How did Russian culture and the arts influence your work?"

Bradburn: "I was fortunate during my career to participate in adjudication panels for dance festivals and competitions in the former Soviet Union while I was teaching at the University of California, Irvine and the California Institute of the Arts. When I became artistic director of the Fresno Ballet in Central California in 1992, it was the 100th anniversary of the Petipa/Ivanov *The Nutcracker* (1892). I created my own original production as a re-imagining of Petipa's, setting it in Imperial Russia during the time of the Tsars. Fresno State University has a strong Russian department, and one of the professors who traveled to St. Petersburg brought back two of the most talented recent graduates of the Vaganova Academy to dance with my company. I taught them the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo Ivanov/Petipa pas de deux and variations—very different from the version they were familiar with in Russia! I researched Ivanov's notes for the Snow Scene and used huge matrioshka dolls in my stage setting for the doll divertissements in the Party Scene."

"I have always been fascinated by the tradition and cultural heritage of Russian ballet. In 1993, I was invited to Russia to help found the first dance department within a university in Novosibirsk. It was an amazing thing, to witness in person the training methods of Vaganova which produced so many of the finest classical dancers of our time. Things came about full circle for me in 2004 when I was invited by the the Bolshoi Theater to photograph the first full Balanchine program at the historic theater in Moscow. I was given full access to wander the main theater and to photograph what I liked. Standing on that

huge Bolshoi stage that I had dreamed about for so long absolutely filled me with joy! That enabled me to have very exclusive and historic photographs. I feel very fortunate to have been there with my camera. My Russian connection came full circle.”

Johnson: “Who were the Russian dancers who visited Los Angeles when you were a photographer? How did you gain the access to be able to photograph them?”

Bradburn: “Looking back at my photographs of the period of the 1970’s ‘ballet boom’ in Los Angeles, I realize how opportune the timing had been. During that period, I was allowed to photograph the four main defectors from the Soviet ballet here in LA. Chronologically, these artists are Rudolf Nureyev (defected 1961 in Paris), Natalia Makarova (defected 1970 in London), Mikhail Baryshnikov (defected 1974 in Toronto), and Alexander Godunov (defected 1979 in New York City). Their names were known to even the general public for both artistic and personal reasons, scandals and all, and soon they took on the aura of media superstars. When I started photographing for *Dance Magazine* in 1969 and for many years after, I was also myself performing and choreographing. I was able to forge friendships that allowed me to be present, both front and backstage, in order to photograph their rehearsals and performances with American Ballet Theater, National Ballet of Canada, Nederlands Dans Theater as well as the various Nureyev and Friends presentations and Baryshnikov’s appearances with New York City Ballet at the Hollywood Bowl. My Nureyev and Baryshnikov interaction went on for many years with both of them. Misha Baryshnikov hired me personally to take photos of Susan Jaffe, Cheryl Yeager and Robert La Fosse in the 1980s when he promoted them to principal dancers.”

Johnson: “What do you think the draw was for these dancers to come to LA?”

Bradburn: “Given their high media visibility it was not long before Hollywood came a calling. Russians were always an exotic species to Hollywood. Nureyev acted and breathed heavily in Ken Russell’s *Valentino* opposite Leslie Caron in 1977. The documentary *I Am a Dancer* came much later in 1994. He later appeared on stage in *The King and I* and, as his health deteriorated, conducted the musical instead of appearing in it. I last saw him in Paris for the Paris Opera Ballet premiere of his *The Nutcracker*. He was very ill (Nureyev died of AIDS in 1993) but was still jet-setting back and forth from his private island. In 1977, Baryshnikov starred in Herbert Ross’s ABT-based film, *The Turning Point*,

followed by *White Nights* with Gregory Hines in 1985 and finally *Dancers* in 1987. In between, there were various guest appearances on television and special appearances, including Baryshnikov on Broadway. Makarova, while not doing any major Hollywood films, successfully appeared on Broadway and on tour in *On Your Toes* and did numerous variety shows on stage and television including the popular success, *Natasha*. Alexander Godunov joined American Ballet Theater and soon after appeared with the company in Los Angeles. Going back to his dressing room after photographing his debut performance in *Swan Lake* I ran into the actress Jacqueline Bissett heading in the same direction. Soon they became a Hollywood item. In his first film, *The Witness*, he played a young Amish man and received accolades for his sensitive portrayal. In 1991, he and Bissett self-produced *The World to Dance In*, a revealing portrait of the man and artist.”

Johnson: “What are your personal memories of photographing these dancers?”

Bradburn: “What I remember most about Nureyev was his statement, quoted many times in many different versions, that ‘I live to dance’ and ‘I am primarily an artist.’ But he also loved his status and his wealth and all that fame brought him. Almost to a hedonistic level; and that passion was evident in his performances.”

“On the other hand, Baryshnikov was quoted as saying: ‘If I couldn’t dance, I would be happy being a truck driver.’ Having been privileged to watch both of them extensively in rehearsals and non-public situations, the difference in their styles, manners, approach to their work and treatment of the fellow artists became very clear to me. Both really did love to dance, but for Rudi it was all consuming. His personality and charisma were irresistible. Misha, in contrast, had the more refined technique and was certainly Nureyev’s equal with his amazing feats as a dancer, but in a smoother and quieter manner. Misha seemed almost deferential at times.”

“Alexander Godunov was Misha’s childhood friend, and Baryshnikov brought him into ABT after Sasha defected. Four years later he was officially “let go” from ABT by Baryshnikov; Sasha was emotionally devastated. Alcohol seems to have brought about his death in West Hollywood in 1995. In Godunov’s two photos (shown below) his imposing physical presence comes through. Godunov embodied large scale dynamics in both his dancing and his acting. He was 6’ 2” and was totally different in style and body type to Nureyev and Baryshnikov. For all of his size, he was actually quite shy and non-temperamental. Godunov seemed a gentle giant.”

“I spent two rehearsal days and two performance nights at the Hollywood Bowl with Misha, who was appearing with Peter Martins and several ballerinas from The New York City Ballet. During all that time, no voices were ever raised and Misha worked quietly and professionally with Peter Martins. Baryshnikov danced *Apollo* on the program, which of course was one of roles Martins had been coached in by Balanchine himself.”

“I particularly like the relaxed photo of Misha eating his lunch at the Hollywood Bowl, as I think it indicates his overall manner. No catered meal, no formal break to leave the Bowl stage for a restaurant. Instead, Misha is ‘brown bagging’ it just like a blue collar worker.”

“I think one of the reasons I was allowed such access to the lead dancers and choreographers of the time is that they realized I was also a dancer, and so I became the ‘fly on the wall’ with them trusting that I would photograph them carefully and honestly.”



FIGURE 136 *Rudolf Nureyev rehearsing Giselle with the National Ballet of Canada, Greek Theater, Los Angeles, 1977.*

PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN

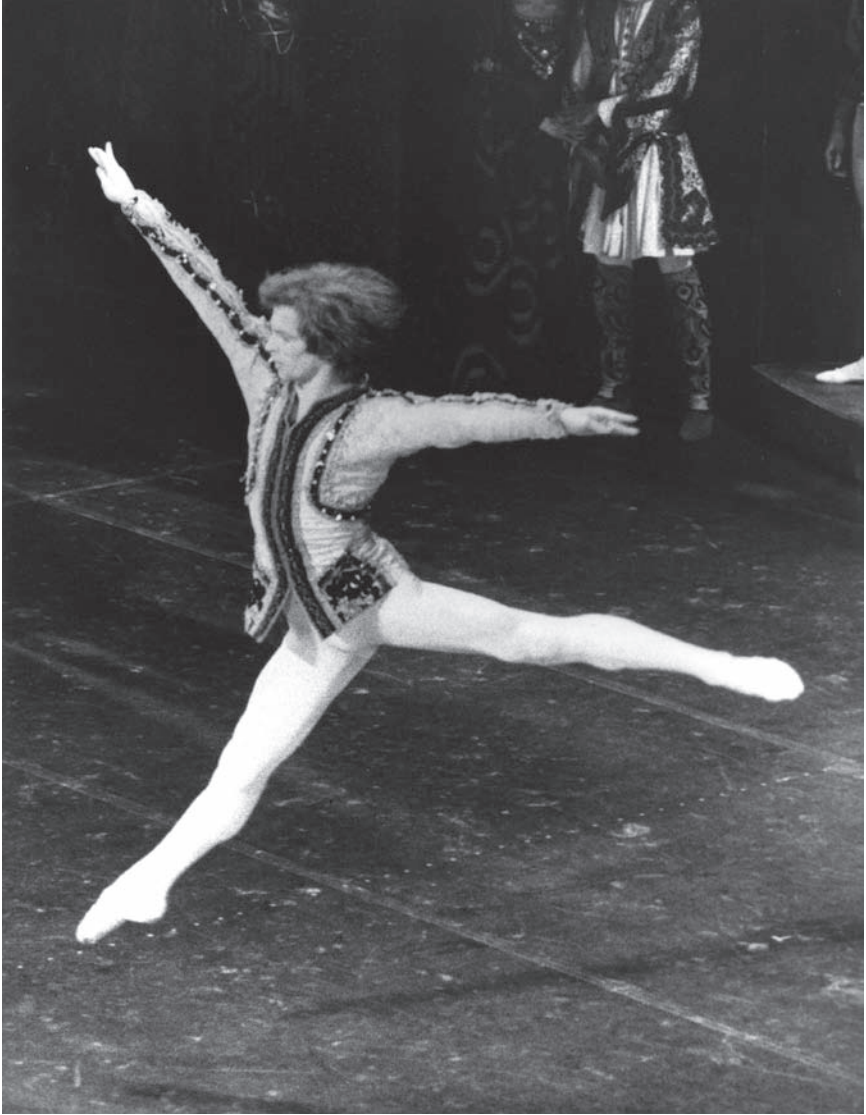


FIGURE 137 *Rudolf Nureyev in Raymonda with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1976.*

PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN



FIGURE 138 *Rudolf Nureyev and Gelsey Kirkland in Raymonda with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1976.*

PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN



FIGURE 139 *Natalia Makarova and Anthony Dowell in Giselle with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1977.*

PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN

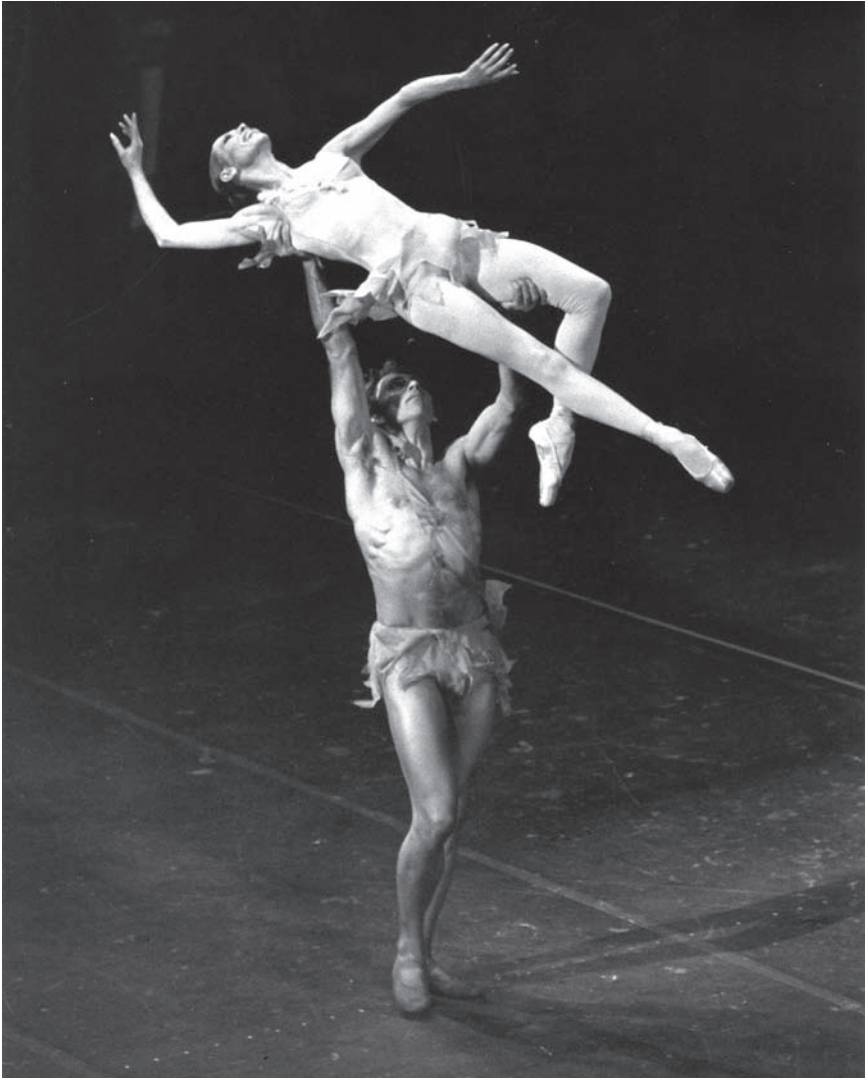


FIGURE 140 *Natalia Makarova and Ivan Nagy in Spring Waters with American Ballet Theatre for the 35th Anniversary Gala, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. 1975.*
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN

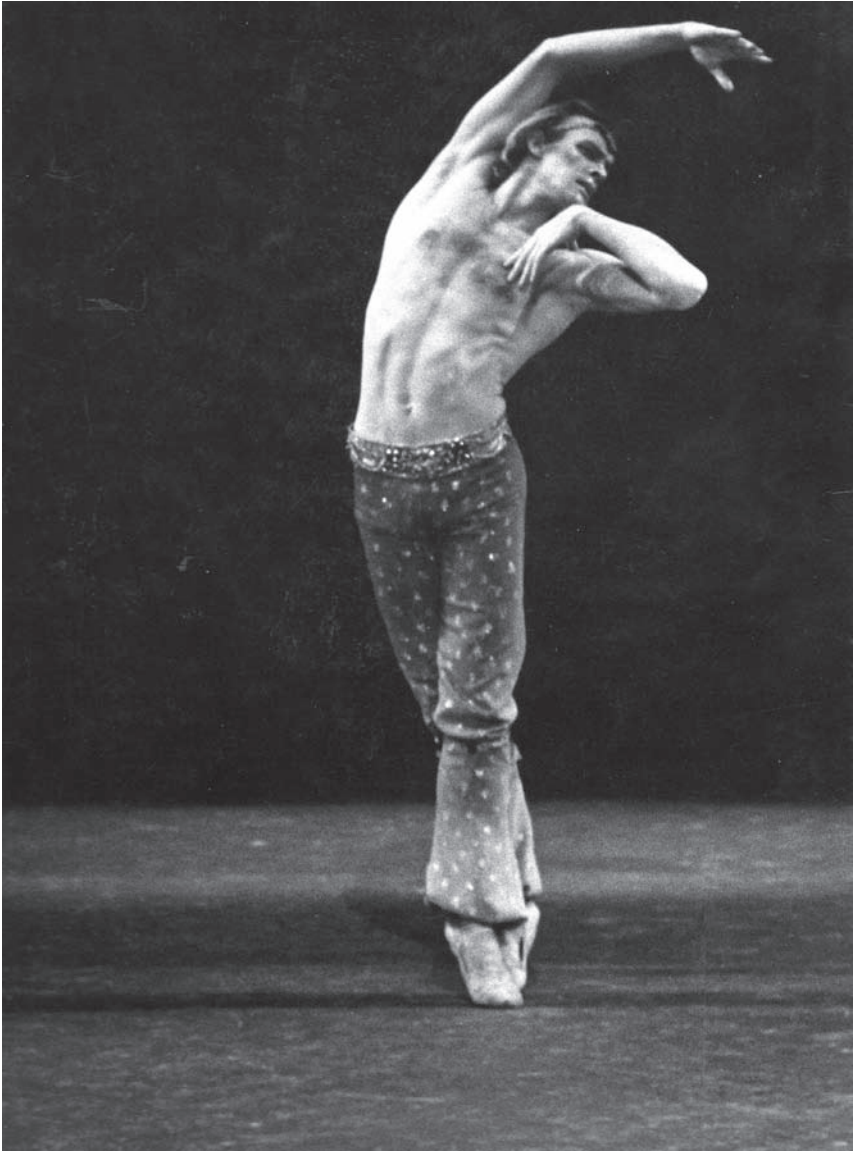


FIGURE 141 *Alexander Godunov in the pas de deux from Le Corsaire with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1981.*
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN



FIGURE 142 *Alexander Godunov in Swan Lake with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1980.*

PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN



FIGURE 143 *Natalia Makarova and Anthony Dowell in Giselle with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1977.*
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN

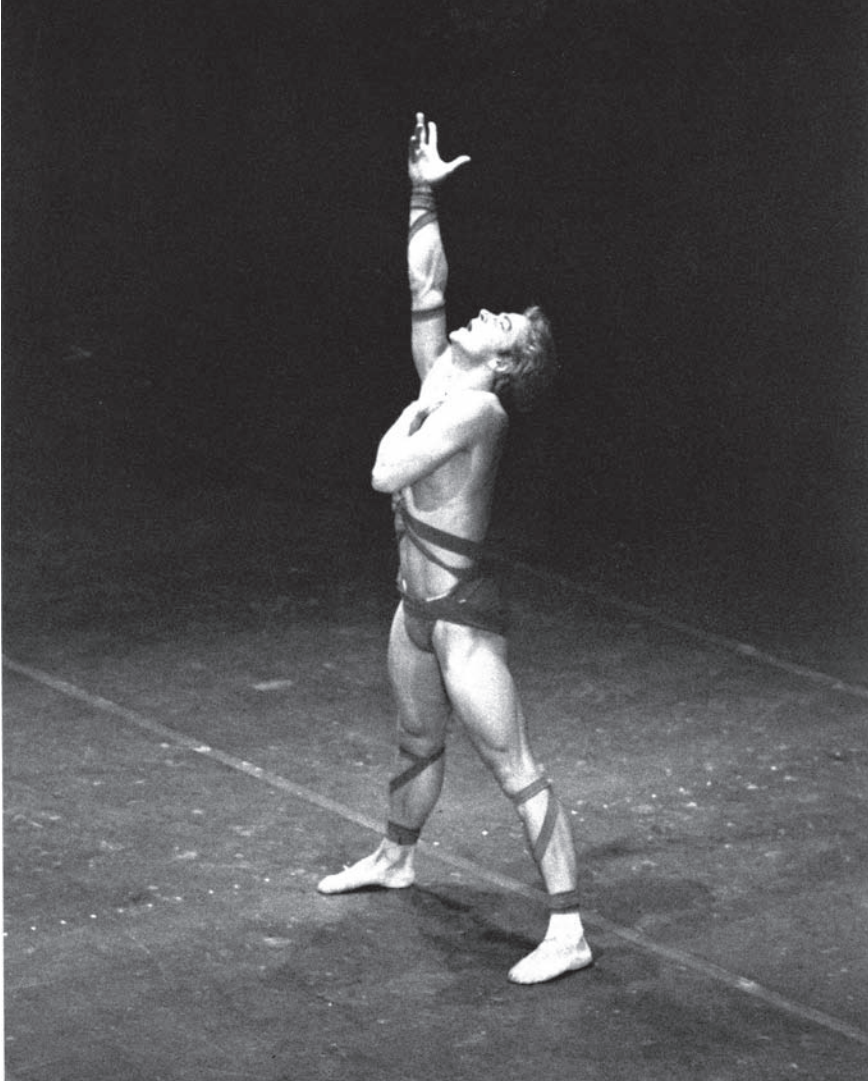


FIGURE 144 *Mikhail Baryshnikov in Medea with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1977.*

PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN



FIGURE 145 *Mikhail Baryshnikov and Marcia Haydée in Medea with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1977.*
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN



FIGURE 146 *Mikhail Baryshnikov and Gelsey Kirkland in Don Quixote with American Ballet Theatre, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 1976.*
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN

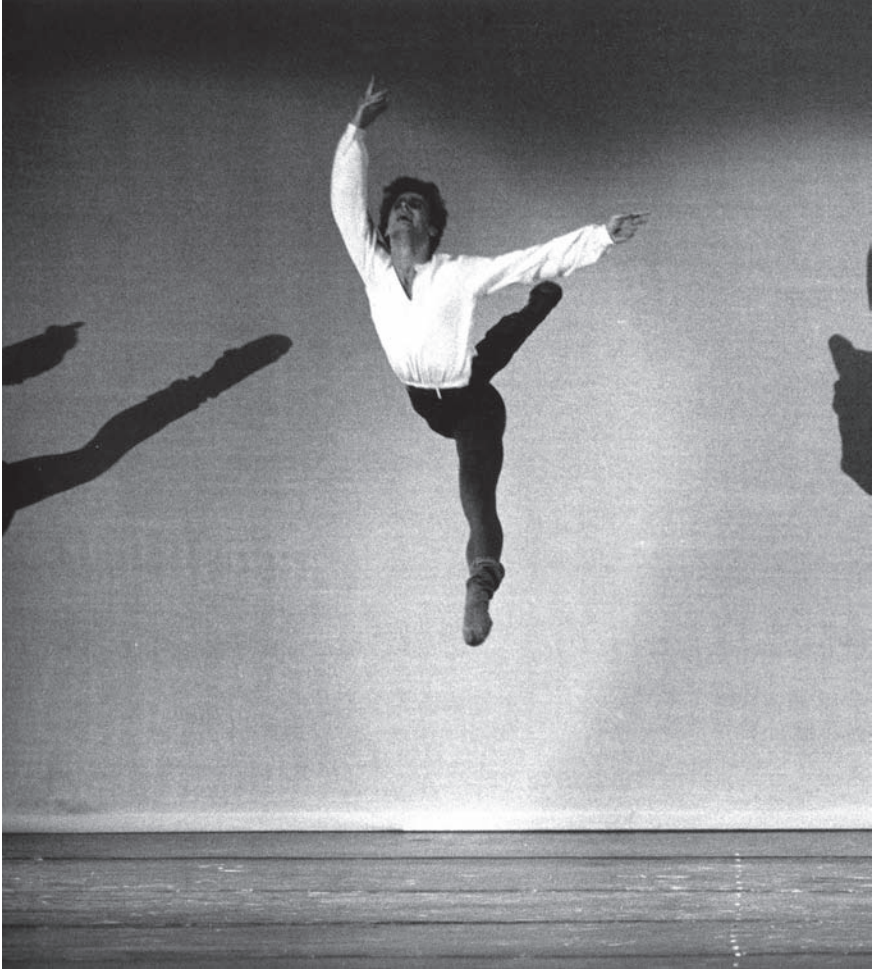


FIGURE 147 *Mikhail Baryshnikov in Dances at a Gathering for a Gala Benefit Concert with the New York City Ballet, Hollywood Bowl, 1979.*
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN

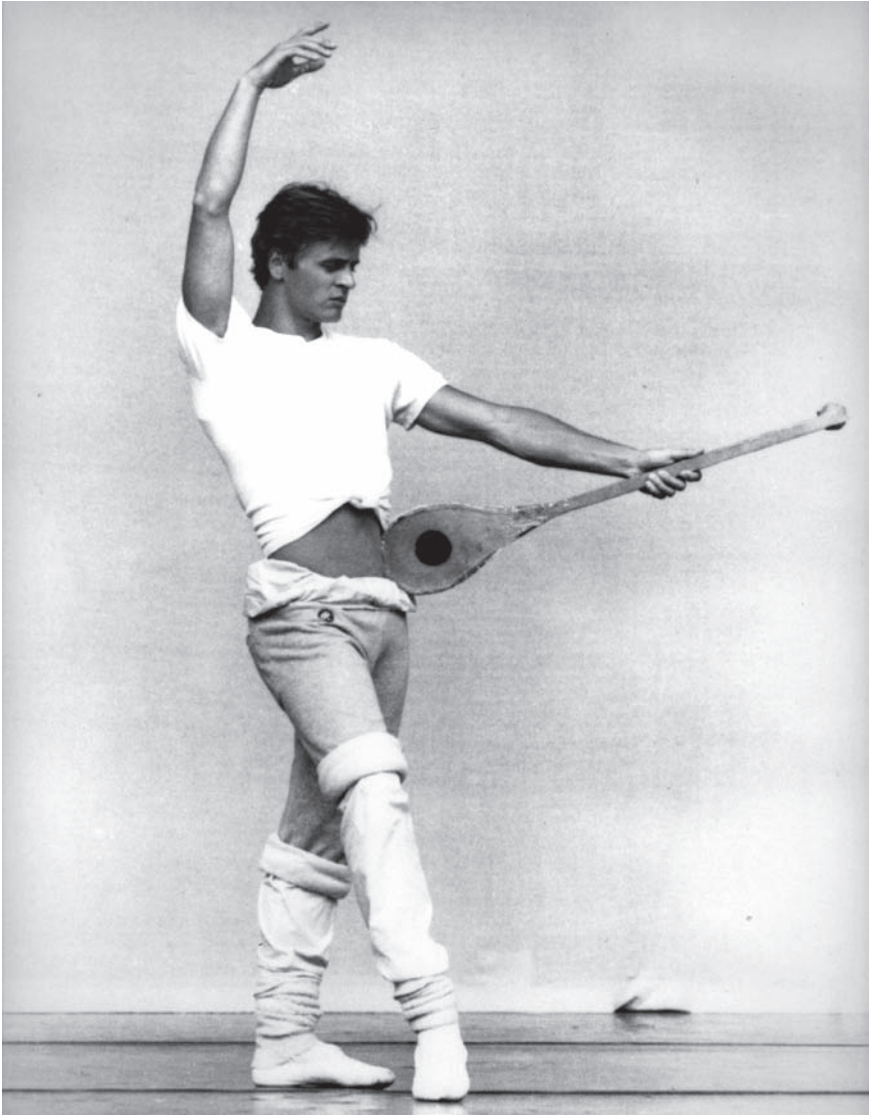


FIGURE 148 *Mikhail Baryshnikov rehearsing Apollo for a Gala Benefit Concert with the New York City Ballet, Hollywood Bowl, 1979.*
PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN.



FIGURE 149 *Mikhail Baryshnikov resting between rehearsals for a Gala Benefit Concert with the New York City Ballet, Hollywood Bowl, 1979.*

PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF DONALD BRADBURN