

PROFESSIONAL PROMISCUITY

Rob Besserer Loves Dancing With Different Companies—the More the Merrier

by Charles Barber

Rob Besserer's disarming self-effacement immediately negates the traditional image of the male dancer as self-obsessed egotist. A soft Southern drawl masks the wry irony with which Besserer dismisses himself as another in "the large pool of big blonds" in the New York dance world. Anyone who has seen Besserer's musical and exact dancing, most recently in New York with the Lar Lubovitch and Mark Morris companies, knows otherwise. This quarterback-sized *dieu blond* led Anna Kisselgoff of the *New York Times* to observe, "Rob Besserer, huge and tall, dances with a powerful grace that always astonishes. No movement seems too small for his huge frame; there is no awkwardness in his fluidity, which always projects volume as well as line. Dance shapes flow out of his body with a naturalness that is rare among any kind of dancer."

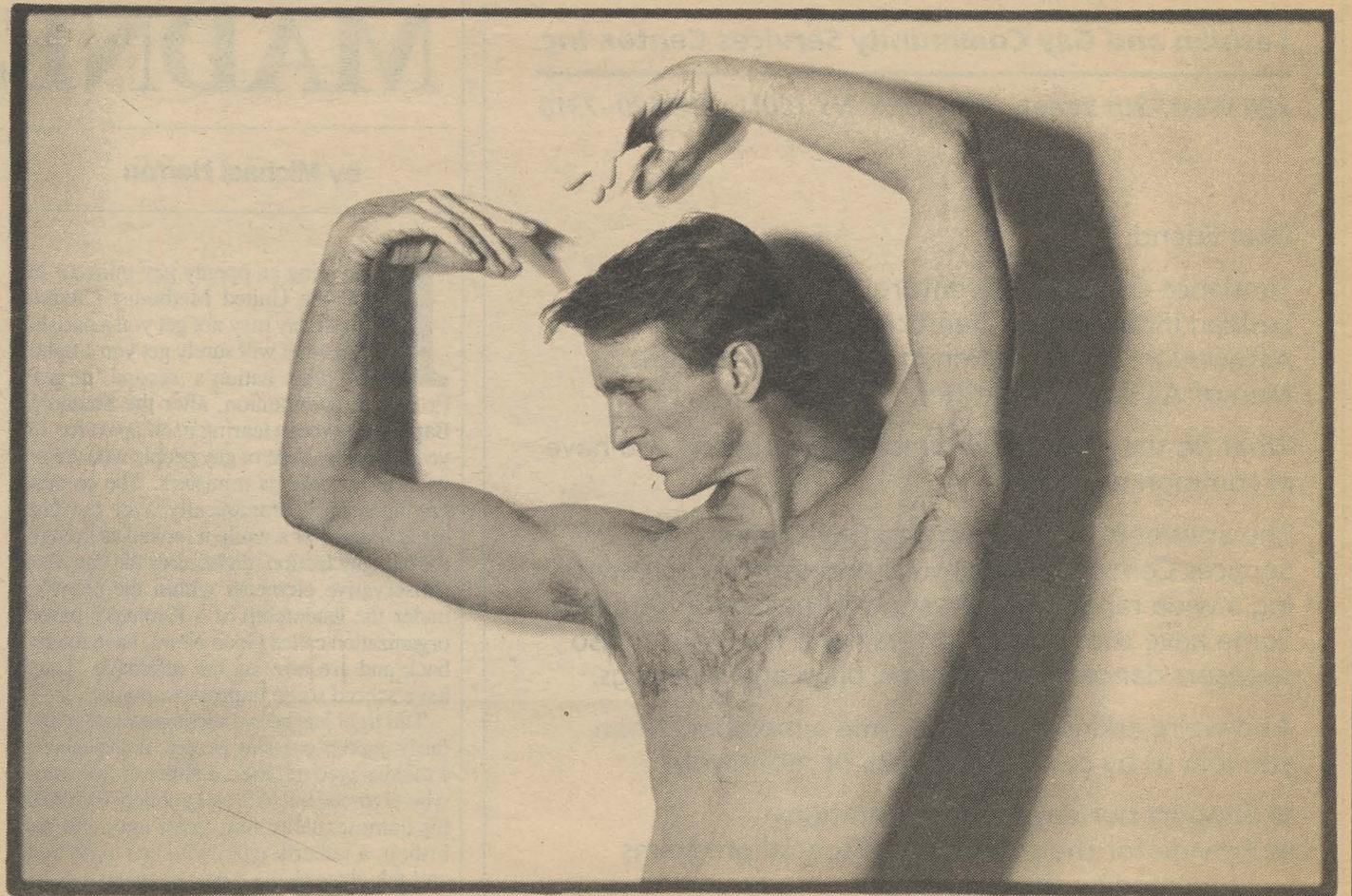
Besserer was born in Winter Haven, Florida, on April 27, 1950, and grew up in Florida, Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina, "always on a lake" or available to a swimming pool. "I used to take a big double sheet in the water when my parents weren't home and put on goggles and watch it swirl around. I learned everything I know about dancing from swimming," he says today. He began as Lit major ("I loved reading and didn't know what else to do") at the University of Southern Florida, where he was a member of the track team as well as a swimmer. He walked by a jazz class one day, tried out a few steps in the hallway, and was converted. Although the track world lost a runner, the swimmer remains. The dance world gained a maverick.

To look at Besserer, one would not think "dancer." No waddling along the pavement, feet turned out as he walks. No unhappy pouts and cigarette binges when his morning *cabrioles* don't pass muster. No dance bag overflowing with leg warmers. Instead, a small brown paper bag the size of a yogurt container holds a single pair of tights and a dance belt. Besserer is your basic, no frills, ordinary kind of star.

His size is deceptive as well. How can anyone so solid, so massive, *move*? And move quickly, cleanly? Modern dance has its share of tiny virtuosos, but giants are rare. Paul Taylor. Judith Jamison. Rob Besserer.

Besserer began his training at USF under two New York dancers, Chase Robinson and Lavinia Hovinga, who taught Limon technique and combined Cunningham technique and repertory. Guest teachers included Carolyn Brown, Deborah Hay, and Rudy Perez. Besserer lived "in a little tin shack in the woods for \$20 a month" and danced around the clock. Even his parents approved. "I was really excited about it and they'd never seen me excited in 21 years. Dance was the first thing I was head over heels in love with."

Oleg Briansky and Kirelle Briane saw Besserer dancing in Tampa and, after college, invited him to their school in Saratoga, New York, where he took class and went to every performance of City Ballet. In 1973, he came to New York and landed his first professional job, in the Jose Limon Company. After a year, the impetuous 23-year-old left the Limon company. "I felt like I wasn't getting enough, which was ridiculous. I wish I'd stayed and done a few more things." An apprentice choreographer named Lar Lubovitch had spotted Besserer in a class a few years earlier at USF, and, in 1974, invited him to join the fledgling



Tom Brazil

Besserer is your basic, no frills, ordinary kind of star. No waddling along the pavement, feet turned out. No unhappy pouts and cigarette binges when morning cabrioles don't pass muster. No dance bag overflowing with leg warmers. A small paper bag holds a single pair of tights and a dance belt.

Lubovitch Company. Besserer signed on, and not only within the four walls of the studio—he and Lubovitch have lived and worked together for 11 years now.

Looking back, Besserer says, "I was completely swept away." In those 11 years, Besserer has garnered rave reviews for his Lubovitch repertory. Within the same span, he danced for Pearl Lang, replacing William Carter, out with a broken leg, on a tour of Italy, Jim Self, Bill T. Jones, Karole Armitage, and Mark Morris.

This "professional promiscuity" delights Besserer. "Oh, I'm a dance whore," he says cheerfully. "All those choreographers—it's like a giant repertory company. That's how I've always approached it. I've always wanted to do that. I need that, and I love that. Sometimes I work with three different choreographers in one day. I feel like the Rebecca Harkness of post-modernism."

Asked to describe the varying working methods of these choreographers, Besserer says, "Jim [Self] has a very slow, methodical way of putting things together, almost like a slow-motion cartoon. Mark [Morris] comes in knowing exactly what he wants. He's made all the movements on himself, so the wonderful challenge for you is to figure out how to do it yourself. Lar, on the other hand, invites a lot of experimentation that you do yourself. Sometimes you create your own movements and he orchestrates them."

"I especially love the *Brahms Symphony* piece. It's a synthesis of a lot of Lar's work in the past ten years and a real mastery of his movement. His movement sometimes glosses over the nuts-and-bolts craft underneath and makes it look slick. The critics sometimes see only that, and it's a real shame."

"Both Mark and Lar work very specifically with music. They listen to it endlessly

and know every sound in it. They choose very different music, but they're both musicians. Lar goes more for a feeling that he carries throughout; most of his ballets go through a general ecstatic sort of feeling. The choreography happens underneath that."

In December 1984, choreographer and theater director Martha Clarke premiered a work in New York called *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, based on the painting by Hieronymus Bosch. This fall, when recasting the piece for a national tour, Clarke called up Besserer to see if he was free and asked him to join the company.

"I was drawn to Martha Clarke's work because her pieces are much more about theater. She's worked a lot with actors." Besserer will be appearing in Clarke's new work, *Vienna*, at St. Clement's Church starting April 8, 1986. (Typically, the two days before that opening will be spent with the Lubovitch Company in two programs at Carnegie Hall.) Besserer performed in Robert Wilson's *The Civil War(s)* in Rome, and hopes to do that work again next year in Texas. He'd even love to work with Pina Bausch, but, "I can't imagine living anywhere else but in America."

Does all this theater work mean Besserer is thinking about an acting career?

"I'm experimenting with it. My body hurts. All over. I've never felt better, but the physical demands of dancing are just too much."

Besserer reluctantly fesses up. He's being flown to California in January for a screen test for a Warner Brothers pilot. Good-bye post-modern, hello Hollywood?

"No. I feel very fortunate to have my career. And I want to be around dancers. They're the greatest people on earth."

And, he believes, not valued highly enough. "Sarah Rudner! She's a real artist, with no recognition, except from Deborah Jowitz and a couple of other people in a few sentences."

Who are his favorite male dancers?

"Mark [Morris]. Jim [Self], one of the great unheralded dancers. Lucas Hoving. Paul Taylor. My all-time hero is Bart Cook—a great *modern* dancer, too—a totally well-rounded dancer."

Besserer won a "Bessie" award in 1984, the New York Dance and Performance Awards named after Bessie Schonberg.

"When David White called me—I had never received an invitation—and said, 'Are you coming to the Bessies?', I said, 'To the what?' He said, 'We're having an awards ceremony,' and I said, 'Well, I don't often go to awards ceremonies.' I thought it was going to be a small gathering of Dance Theater Workshop people, sort of light-hearted, but it turned out to be very heartfelt. It was touching. I wasn't prepared to take it seriously, but now I do."

Besserer is currently in rehearsal with the Mark Morris Dance Group, preparing for their season at DTW, December 6-22. Morris is presenting new work not seen at his triumphant Brooklyn Academy of Music season last year. Besserer is featured in *My Party, Lovey*, and a new untitled work set to Handel. He will also share the performance of a solo called *The Vacant Chair* with Morris. In the meantime, the Lubovitch/Besserer studio is noisily and happily bursting with Mark Morris and his dancers rehearsing. Morris, a resident of Seattle, is Lubovitch's and Besserer's house guest as well. "I love that part," whispers Besserer. "It's like having your own pet minotaur." ■