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Dancing for life — and against AIDS

New York State Theater benefit raises \$1.4 million — and counting

DANCE review

DISEASE is no respecter of persons, and artists must take their turn with the rest of us. But in the fall of an artist there is an added tragedy in the loss of the unborn work he or she might have given to the world.

Also when disease attacks the young and superfit — such as dancers or athletes — its ravages seem to take on added poignancy. Thus it is that the scourge of AIDS is a pestilence of particular horror to the dance world.

Last night at the New York State Theater the New York dance world, acting with marvelous unanimity, took the first major step toward helping itself in the fight against AIDS — it organized a gala concert, called appropriately, "Dancing for Life."

Before it started Mikhail Baryshnikov, who was introducing the proceedings, was able to announce that it had already raised \$1.4 million in ticket sales alone, and there were other monies — such as the proceeds of autographed limited edition posters from Robert Rauschenberg, and dancers from 57 companies across the country volunteering to donate their yesterday's salary to the cause — still to be counted.

The purpose was first to raise money — the money goes to the American Foundation for AIDS Research, Gay Men's Health Crisis, National AIDS Network, and 15 other additional beneficiaries — but also to raise consciousness in the community.

All this has been happily achieved, and the organizers — Robert Yesselman is the president of the Dancing for Life board of directors — can congratulate themselves on a job wonderfully well-done.

But the program, under the artistic coordination of Jerome Robbins had a quite unexpected bonus.



BY
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Not only was it a wonderful evening of dance, but Robbins, with unerring taste and judgment, had contrived to make it into a profound artistic accounting of the condition of American dance in general, and New York dance in particular.

It was here that Robbins must have made some very tough decisions. He obviously first ruled out the common or garden "party pieces" — those assorted *pas de deux* and other balletic bon-bons — you expect to encounter in this kind of program.

Then he obviously batted on to the concept of "Dancing for Life" — for the program was continuous dancing, no mime, no drama, nothing at all but dancing. The entire evening was a series of excerpts from some very dancing ballets — the only exception was to permit Dudley Williams to perform a solo on behalf of the Alvin Ailey company, as the company itself is performing overseas.

It was terrific demonstration of the strength of New York dance — if anyone had any doubt that New York was still the capital of the dance world, this remarkable program of creativity was here to evidence it.

The oldest company on view — the young and lithe Martha Graham Company — is just 60-years-old, so in a sense this program was a celebration of life for the diamond jubilee of American dance.

And what a celebration it was. As company after company came on stage to show off its wares — Robbins had adroitly linked some of the companies in two sections "Dancing to Bach" and "Dancing to Mozart" — the evening took on the air of a grand march past, with the dance audience reviewing, from a privileged position in the stands, the parading troops.

Four things struck me — one

was the preview of a premiere, another was a cooperative ballet, the others were two items of seemingly unusual audience popularity.

The premiere was parts of a work in progress by Mark Morris, to music by Virgil Thomson, for American Ballet Theater. Called "Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes," it will be premiered at the Met next summer.

Meanwhile let it be said it was a cheerful little piece, full of imagination, and showed Baryshnikov, dancing with his usual explosive elegance, appearing in New York for the first time in nearly 18 months. Welcome back.

The cooperation (the special cooperation that is, for the whole night was an exercise, and apparently even a learning experience, in good neighborliness) came in the finale — the last movement of Balanchine's "Symphony in C."

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where the ensemble was provided, naturally enough, by City Ballet, but the four pairs of soloists came from Ballet Theater, the Joffrey Ballet, City Ballet and the Dance Theater of Harlem, respectively.

And the special applause? Ah, this was for the Paul Taylor company romping their way to Bach and back through the finale to "Esplanade," where the audience discovered, rather nervously, that sometimes dance could be laughed at.

But — rather interesting this — the biggest hit of the evening was the graceful and charming homoeotic duet for two men, deftly danced here by Sylvain LaFortune and Rick Michalek, which Lar Lubovitch had choreographed for his company's ballet, "Concerto Six Twenty-Two," to Mozart's Clarinet Concerto.