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'Dancing for Life' a benefit show of superb quality

By Joseph H. Mazo
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It was breathtaking.

For once, people who paid gala prices — up to \$1,000 a ticket — got more than the chance to contribute to a good cause and to show off their latest party clothes: They got an evening of artistry and superb theater.

The event was "Dancing For Life," a unique performance staged last night at the New York State Theater to benefit organizations concerned either with research into AIDS or with caring for victims of the disease.

Thirteen major American dance companies, represented by approximately 200 performers, participated in the event. The artistic coordinator was Jerome Robbins, who deserves much of the credit for the sparkle and theatrical splendor of the evening. Fourteen pieces were presented in slightly less than three hours. The program moved briskly; no time was wasted between episodes, yet no performance was hurried or in any way constrained. The energy emanating from the stage was altogether remarkable.

The program was introduced by Mikhail Baryshnikov, who told the audience: "I applaud you for helping us and for helping everyone." The gala succeeding in raising its target sum of \$1.4 million, Baryshnikov announced, adding, "and that is very impressive."

Equally impressive was the dedication of the dancers, who took no pay for rehearsal or performance. Other dancers through-

out the country contributed a day's pay each to advancing AIDS research.

Obviously, it is impossible to capture in an ordinary review so extraordinary and diverse an event. Limitations of space alone preclude that. However, one premiere was offered in the course of the evening, and that deserves special note.

The piece was a section of "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," choreographed for American Ballet Theatre (ABT) by Mark Morris. The full work will have its premiere next spring during ABT's season at the Metropolitan Opera House, when lengthier commentary will be more appropriate.

"Drink to Me," to music by Virgil Thomson, is another of the choreographer's exercises in formalism and symmetry. Morris's strict adherence to the form of his score is tempered here by his virtuosic use of ballet technique and by his whimsical sense of humor applied to conventional classroom steps.

The segment shown employs five men and five women. Baryshnikov is the lead dancer of the male contingent; Martine van Hamel takes the principal female part.

The steps often are intricate and difficult, and their virtuosity is highlighted by the strict formal settings in which they are deployed.

A fascinating aspect of the evening was the altered appearance of several familiar works when they were shown on the stage of the

State Theater. We are accustomed to seeing the dances of Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and Eliot Feld, for example, in smaller venues. The pieces shown by these choreographers not only stood up, but gained dimensions, in the 3,000-seat house.

In the excerpts from Cunningham's "Fabrications," for example, the dancers looked like works in a sculpture garden. The elegant sculptural quality of Cunningham's choreography seldom has been seen to such advantage.

The sliding, toppling actions of the third movement of Taylor's "Esplanade," when viewed from the First Ring of the State Theater, suddenly became not only daring but remarkably funny. The final dance of Feld's new "Embraced Waltzes" seemed more spacious and overtly romantic than it had during its premiere at the Joyce last week.

The other participants in the gala were: Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians; the Joffrey Ballet; the Mark Morris Dance Group; Dance Theatre of Harlem; the Martha Graham Dance Company; the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (represented by Dudley Williams giving a glorious solo performance); Twyla Tharp Dance; the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company (represented by Sylvain Lafortune and Rick Michalek dancing the warmly beautiful duet from "Concerto Six Twenty-Two"), and the New York City Ballet (NYCB).

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