

Style

One Small Step ...

In N.Y., a Dance Benefit for AIDS Research

By Paula Span
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NEW YORK—"We have raised one million point four dollars this evening," announced Mikhail Baryshnikov, his syntax unorthodox but his pride evident.

At the New York State Theater in Lincoln Center, a full house cheered. "Dancing for Life" had successfully assembled 13 top New York City dance companies for a three-hour extravaganza Monday night to benefit AIDS research and care. Their performance, coordinated by Jerome Robbins, represented an unprecedented collaboration.

"Dance companies tour as a way of life," said Robert Yesselman, chairman of the Dancing for Life board, explaining the nearly two years it had taken to produce the gala. It was onerous "to find a time when a theater was free and when 13 dance companies were in New York at the same time."

Attracting corporate support also proved difficult, "a hard sell," said Yesselman, who is executive director of the Paul Taylor Dance Company. "Consciousness about AIDS has not yet reached the upper levels of corporations." AT&T came forward first to underwrite the event, followed by Philip Morris and the New York Marriott Marquis hotel.

What was not a problem was finding performers (more than 40 New York companies wanted to dance) or securing cooperation among those selected. "No one caused any problems over placement on the program, who took precedence over whom," Yesselman reported. "With artists, you would expect a little of that, quite frankly."

Choreographers are sort of lions; they need a certain area that's theirs," agreed Elliot Feld, founder and artistic director of the Feld Ballet. "To have all of them give up their territory, sidle up to one another, I found it quite touching. We

have coexisted in a way that's usually unfamiliar to us."

The dance world has recently lost a number of its own to AIDS. Broadway choreographer and director Michael Bennett died in July at age 44; in August, dancer and choreographer Jorge Samaniego died in Los Angeles at 40. Last month T. Michael Reed, a Broadway dancer and dance supervisor who'd worked with Bennett, died of AIDS at 42. Dance writer and editor Barry Laine, 36, died a few days later. Dancers and dance administrators in the audience said they had lost friends and troupe mates.

Yet wary of the implication that the toll taken by AIDS in the arts might connote a disproportionate gay presence, many pointed out that the disease threatens every profession and community.

"My experience with AIDS goes beyond dance," said Sam Miller, managing director of the Jacob's Pillow Festival, who helped plan the "Dancing for Life" gala. "I've had friends in the theater and friends in investment banking and we've all had conversations about it."

Feld objected to the notion that it's "a disease that we care about because of how it affects us personally. The reality is that it's much more devastating to minorities in this city than to whites in the arts."

"That's avoiding a big, important issue," argued choreographer Mark Morris, whose suit jacket bore a purple lapel pin that read "Faggot." AIDS, he said, "is everywhere, and of course it's worse here . . . There's a higher ratio of gay to straight in the arts, in general." Morris, who counts many friends among the dying and the dead, didn't quarrel with his colleagues' more universalist comments, however. "It allows people to give money who normally wouldn't," he said. "And that's fine, if it works."

Gay Men's Health Crisis, New York's leading organization in AIDS education and patient support, will receive 25 percent of the \$1.4 million raised. So will the National AIDS Network, which links 300 AIDS service providers, and the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR). "It's very important," said Dr. Mathilde Krim, president of AmFAR. "Four hundred fifty thousand dollars is about nine or 10 research grants or fellowships and one never knows where some important information will come from."

The program itself varied widely, from a Gerald Arpino pas de deux from "Kettentanz," danced to a Strauss waltz by Dawn Caccamo



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Jerome Robbins, center, with dancers after the finale of "Dancing for Life" in New York.

and Glenn Edgerton of the Joffrey Ballet, to the 1985 first envisioned a multicompany dance benefit to fight AIDS.

Three companies—the Mark Morris Dance Group, Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Paul Taylor Dance Company—danced to Bach concerti. The Feld Ballet performed, to a Chopin piano solo, an excerpt from a new work called "Embraced Waltzes." Feld chose it, he said, because "the emotion seemed appropriate . . . it has a romantic feeling about it. It seemed life-affirming."

Baryshnikov and members of American Ballet Theatre previewed a Mark Morris work, "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," which will have its premiere next year. And the finale, from Balanchine's "Symphony in C," featured dancers from four companies: ABT, New York City Ballet, Joffrey Ballet and Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Also dancing were the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the Martha Graham Dance Company, Twyla Tharp Dance and the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company. It was Lar Lubovitch who in

Afterward, as the 200 dancers made their way through a buffet that featured fruit and lots of carbohydrates, an eclectic group that had bought \$1,000-and-up tickets was dining on veal with lemon sauce on the promenade. Among them were Nancy Kissinger, Calvin Klein, Estee Lauder, Michael Douglas, Suzanne Farrell, Joseph Papp, Arnold Scaasi, Jerome Robbins, Kurt Vonnegut and Dr. Ruth Westheimer.

The evening, Lar Lubovitch said, beaming, "was everything we hoped for."