

Arts & Leisure (September 25, 2005)

Baryshnikov Takes His Building for a Test Run

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Published: NY Times September 25, 2005

IN boutique hotels and trendy restaurants, this would be the soft opening. Mikhail Baryshnikov's new Baryshnikov Arts Center will officially open in November, offering a highly equipped, multipurpose space for all kinds of artists - playwrights, multimedia creators and choreographers, students and stars - to come together to work and collaborate, or simply to hang out, exchanging thoughts and ideas.



N.Y.U. Photo Bureau

Beliz Demircioglu's troupe performs the work she made with the multimedia artist Jamie Allen.

But Mr. Baryshnikov is not waiting for the grand opening to put his concept into practice. Over the last few months, even as workmen put in floors, mirrors and equipment, the center - the three top floors of a discreetly contemporary new building at 450 West 37th Street in the garment district - has been active. "We have three or four projects under our belt already," Mr. Baryshnikov said, "and we've been speaking to the people involved about the advantages and disadvantages of the space. We have a few things to sort out, but it's really encouraging that we do seem to have the flexibility we were after."

That flexibility has been tested by the kind of artistic variety that Mr. Baryshnikov spoke of when he disbanded his modern dance company, the White Oak Dance Project, and first announced his plans for the center in 2002, naming figures like the Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar to his board in addition to dance luminaries like Merce Cunningham and William Forsythe. So far, the center has been host to an interdisciplinary project from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, dance workshops, a chamber music concert and several low-key performances.

Christopher Buckley, an owners' representative for the center (which jointly owns the building with the West 37th Group, a consortium of producers that will run three theaters on the lower floors), appeared unfazed by this profusion of events in the midst of the process he calls the "fit-out": the finish, furnishing and equipping of the interiors. "There are a lot of benefits to doing things this way," he said. "Building performance and rehearsal facilities may look easy because they are big spatial boxes, but they are actually very complicated. When you do a hard opening, you are always working through a long list of problems afterward, just as everything gets going. This way we are solving the problems while still controlling the use of the space."

On a recent weekday, a handful of administrative staff milled around barely furnished quarters while workmen and a contractor laid floors and tangled with an air-conditioning problem. Alongside, in a huge studio with 20-foot ceilings and picture windows overlooking Tenth Avenue, the Hudson River and the view south, Mr. Baryshnikov rehearsed intently with the choreographer Donna Uchizono and several dancers.

"I did not want something designed purely for dance," Mr. Baryshnikov said. "While we were planning, we went to almost every theater and studio space built in New York over the last 60 years and saw what worked and what didn't. The specifics of the spaces, the adaptable walls, the height of the ceilings, the technical possibilities all had to make opera, cabaret or plays feasible, too."

To that end, the center's four studios are equipped with lighting grids, portable sound systems, black-out shades and - on one floor - a movable acoustic wall that was specially developed for the center. "It sets a new standard," said a clearly proud Mr. Buckley. "You could have a rock concert on one side, and have no idea about it on the other."

"Well, maybe not Metallica," he added.

Almost everything besides a rock concert was tried out over the summer. A residency for the choreographer Aszure Barton was followed by the arrival of five graduate students from the Tisch School who had received Baryshnikov Arts Center

Fellowships, which allowed them to spend several weeks developing and rehearsing new works. Rachel Sheinkin, a lyricist, and Nils Olaf Dolven, a composer, worked with the choreographer Benjamin Millepied on a musical; the playwright Anton Dudley was able to bring the Colombian director Javier Gutiérrez to New York to collaborate on a theater piece; and the choreographer Beliz Demircioglu worked with the multimedia artist Jamie Allen.

"Walking into that big, open studio was like walking onto a canvas," Mr. Dudley said. "We could really play with the three-dimensional design of the play, and not just the script. And when you left the studio, there were dancers, musicians, Mischa warming up. The space feels haunted by the possibility of future creations because it's such a beehive of artistic promise."

While the artists developed their pieces, Mr. Buckley and his team helped with technical issues, which in turn helped them to determine what was required. "We actually needed a lot of technology to be bought," said Ms. Demircioglu, who, like the other participants, had a budget to work from. "And because of the way projection and cameras work, we needed stage lighting, too. To have all of that, and to be able to develop the multimedia while the dance is evolving, is very rare and rather amazing."

Several weeks later, Mr. Buckley was still tinkering with the acoustics, the most challenging technical aspect of creating a space suited to different disciplines. The air-conditioning system was still problematic. A seating system for a studio that can be transformed into a small theater was not yet resolved. Larger-than-planned air ducts were interfering with the load-in, the system for bringing scenery or equipment for a show into the building.

But Mr. Baryshnikov and his staff were mostly pleased with what they had achieved. "We did a lot of homework," he said. "We don't have yet any complaints."