

Supporting Artists In Their Creative Endeavors

An Interview with Sonja Kostich, President and Executive Director, Baryshnikov Arts

EDITORS' NOTE Sonja Kostich brings with her both the knowledge and experience of having been a professional dancer for over two decades as well as significant business acumen derived from her business education and time working at Goldman Sachs. Through a unique and successful professional trajectory, she now merges her artistic and business experience as an arts leader. Kostich was hired by Mikhail Baryshnikov at the age of 17 to join American Ballet Theatre from The School of Classical Ballet, the training



Sonja Kostich

school for ABT created by Baryshnikov, consisting of only seven female students and five male students. She later danced with the San Francisco Ballet and the Zurich Ballet, Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project, and in multiple collaborations with opera/theater director Peter Sellars, before co-founding OtherShore, which she co-directed for six years. Her experience in ballet, contemporary, and modern dance resulted in a diverse international career that spanned across artistic disciplines. Upon retiring from dancing, Kostich returned to school, obtaining a bachelor of business administration (BBA) in accounting and business communication from Zicklin School of Business, CUNY Baruch College, where she graduated Salutatorian at the age of 42. She then began a full-time position at Goldman Sachs in the Finance Division with a focus on regulatory capital requirements. Simultaneously, she obtained an MA in arts administration, eventually returning to the dance world, first as the finance manager at Mark Morris Dance Group and then as program manager at New York City Center. From 2018 to 2022, she served as the Chief Executive and Artistic Officer at Kaatsbaan Cultural Park, a 153-acre artist sanctuary located in Tivoli, New York, where she led the successful rebrand and revitalization of the 30+ year organization, bringing it to award-winning status for its significant artistic and economic contributions to the Hudson Valley. In October 2022, Kostich joined Baryshnikov Arts as its new Executive Director. As a female Korean American, born in Seoul, Korea, and raised in Minnesota, her history, both personal and professional, lends itself to cultivating and supporting new perspectives as Baryshnikov Arts expands its capacity to create multi-platform and collaborative havens for artistic expression, innovation, and freedom, especially as the organization commits further to elevating and sharing the stories of artists of diverse cultures and histories.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The mission of Baryshnikov Arts (baryshnikovarts.org) is to inspire, incubate, nurture, and support courageous artists and adventurous audiences through residencies, community engagement, commissions, performances, production, and economic development. The organization's world-class Center in New York City provides a comprehensive arts and cultural ecosystem that is a haven for inclusiveness, innovation, artistic freedom, and beauty.

Did you know at an early age that you had a passion for the arts?

I was fortunate to have parents who understood the value of the arts, and their deep appreciation and knowledge provided me entry to this incredible world of creativity and imagination as a young child. I played the violin, piano, danced, and did theater. I came to learn that I loved existing in the arts world – it felt like “home.” Eventually dance became my primary and only focus – it captured me completely. But being exposed to multiple artistic disciplines from the beginning instilled in me a curiosity that has driven me throughout my life.

Will you provide an overview of Baryshnikov Arts and how you define its mission?

Baryshnikov Arts exists to support artists in their creative endeavors and to provide audiences with a place to experience creative adventures. It's been almost 19 years since Mikhail Baryshnikov founded this nonprofit arts organization, fulfilling a dream to provide financial, administrative, artistic, production, and physical space support to diverse artists working in multiple and intersecting artistic disciplines in both creative residencies and in performances. We are constantly revisiting what that means specifically for artists today in tandem with an ever-evolving and shifting world. Our focus is on cultivating and supporting new perspectives in order to expand our capacity to create multi-platform and collaborative havens for artistic expression, innovation, and freedom especially as the organization commits to further elevating and sharing the stories of artists of diverse cultures and histories.

Coming out of the pandemic, we are also working on new perspectives focused on how to structure our business, operations, fundraising, and partnerships to be uniquely impactful for



Baryshnikov Arts in New York City

artists and audiences alike that is also viable and translates to both artistic and business success.

Will you discuss Baryshnikov Arts' work and programs?

As both an incubator and a presenter, Baryshnikov Arts is unique in that presenting theaters doesn't necessarily also provide the resource of space to create. New York City space is extremely scarce and expensive. But Misha had the foresight to build an arts center in Hell's Kitchen, before the area became Hudson Yards and one of the most sought-after areas for real estate in NYC, to ensure that the most beautiful studios and theater are available to provide space and time for artists which is an incredible combination. Artists can come here, they can work, they can create, and then, they can also preview or premiere their work. We also commission new works as well and like to connect artists from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. We feel it's important to look at all generations, including the upcoming generation of new creators, at all stages of their careers, and provide support and a place for them to incubate, innovate, develop, and then potentially show their work without demands. We often refer to our programming as the “under construction” phase of an artist's life. That is where artistic freedom and innovation exists.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Baryshnikov Arts and made you feel it was the right fit?

Our Founder and Artistic Director is undoubtedly one of the most significant figures in not just dance, but arts and culture in general, both historically and geographically. His purpose in creating Baryshnikov Arts stems from his vision and life's work. He has been a significant force, leader, mentor, and role model for decades, and Baryshnikov Arts reflects that by working every day to be the artistic and business force with a worthy mission that uplifts and serves.

Baryshnikov Arts is more than a single “place” – it is actually an international community headquartered in New York City, one of the most artistically and economically interesting cities in the world. Coming out of the pandemic, which allowed for and even promoted new ways of thinking, means that now is the perfect time to further strengthen our brand and get the word out about our spaces, our programming, and our future vision. Alongside our current programming, which has incredible artistic integrity, we are looking to further diversify our offerings, develop more interdisciplinary collaborations, and broaden our audiences and supporters. What is so wonderful about eclectic programming is that audiences may suddenly find themselves falling in love with an art form that they had previously not been exposed to or thought they’d be interested in. For example, people may come for a music concert, but they’ll stay for a dance show or culinary event. We value the potential to bring people together in unusual ways across the dance, theater, performance art, poetry, fashion, film, food, and music worlds. This sparks new interests and relationships and I find this truly exciting.

One of the things that dancers have always regarded with such awe and respect about Misha, and has always distinguished him from other dancers, is his ability to transcend the boundaries of artistic disciplines. The fact that many types of artists and people from other industries have been interested in working with him paved the way for future dancers to do the same, which we now enthusiastically witness more broadly. I think one of the most exciting things about the programming at Baryshnikov

Arts is the emphasis placed on cross-discipline collaborations and our curiosity about bringing seemingly unlikely artists together to create something undiscovered or beautifully new. This is something that we focus on and continue to hone as a core value in 2024 and beyond. The important work that Baryshnikov Arts does, which includes meaningfully supporting artists’ most ambitious creative endeavors, fiercely protecting artistic freedom, sharing transformative experiences, and providing a sense of belonging and community, moves the world forward and changes lives. This is what we strive to facilitate, and it is an honor and joy to be part of that endeavor.

How do you approach the role of executive director of Baryshnikov Arts and what are the keys to being effective in the role?

The knowledge and experience of having been a professional dancer for over two decades, combined with my business acumen derived from a business education and time working at Goldman Sachs, has enabled me to develop a deep understanding and appreciation of both the artistic and business sides of running an arts nonprofit which is a very unique balancing act. When you look at successful for-profit companies, its leaders must know their product better than anyone else, who their current audience is and who they want their audience to be, and have unparalleled business and finance skills to lead the product from an idea and a dream to a viable, successful, and profitable existence. Those are the assumptions from which I operate.

Though running an arts organization can be challenging on many fronts, primarily in that there is always a struggle to secure financial and

human resources, I believe limitations in and of themselves can promote innovation if one is creative and this inspires me. This is not to say that I don’t spend a considerable amount of time thinking about the arts nonprofit model and how we might innovate to lessen the day-to-day struggles in order to have time to focus on actually executing the vision while simultaneously building our community to share and enjoy it all with.

You were hired by Mikhail Baryshnikov at the age of 17 to join American Ballet Theatre from The School of Classical Ballet. What has made the relationship between the two of you work so well?

On my part, I have such an incredible respect for him as an artist and person. How he has lived his life, what he has accomplished, and what he has given back to others shows me that he truly cares and believes in what we are doing. So, I can believe 100 percent in what we are doing, which I think is imperative when in the position of a leader.

How valuable is it in the role to have such an engaged and committed board?

The board is a gathering of invaluable individuals who believe in and uplift what we do. Each brings with them a wealth of experience and knowledge from their respective fields and networks.

We are a small team at Baryshnikov Arts, comprised of just 10 full-time staff members including Misha who is our Artistic Director, and we operate on a relatively small scale. We are deliberate about each individual project that gets supported and strive to discover what is most unique and promising in order to allow each artist the time and space for real creative investigation. At the forefront of our thinking is the question about what is the artistic and cultural experience that we provide our audiences and supporters. Everything we do is for them – the artists and our community.

All of which is to say that our board is imperative and deeply appreciated. The depth and breadth of their engagement and commitment reveals itself in all that we do.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

There is so much that one needs to just go through themselves to find the answers that are right for them. No life is like another, and the exploration will be and should be unique. It really depends on what you want from life, including a career. There are of course the routes that are tried and tested, but maybe you’ll discover you don’t want one of those routes, and that’s okay.

I think being curious is wonderful and lends itself to continuous development of oneself. I also think learning to persevere in the face of self-doubt or criticism from others is necessary.

No matter how challenging things can be or how discouraged you might find yourself at certain points in your life and career, I have come to learn that doing the hard work and developing real skill and mastery will ultimately provide a real sense of fulfillment, energy, and joy. ●



Sonja Kostich and Mikhail Baryshnikov