

CEO to CEO: Bridging Performance, Business, and Innovation with Sonja Kostich of Baryshnikov Arts

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Sonja Kostich's career bridges the worlds of dance and finance in a way few can claim.

Hired by Mikhail Baryshnikov at just 17 to join American Ballet Theatre, she went on to perform with San Francisco Ballet, Zurich Ballet, and Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project before co-founding her own company. After retiring from performing, she pursued a business degree, worked at Goldman Sachs, and later returned to the arts as an executive leader.

Now, as Executive Director of [Baryshnikov Arts](#), she brings both artistic insight and financial acumen to an organization dedicated to fostering bold, interdisciplinary work.

As the company celebrates its 20th anniversary, Kostich reflects on its mission, its evolving audience, and the challenges of sustaining a creative sanctuary in today's landscape.

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Tell me about yourself and your relationship to Baryshnikov Arts.

I'm coming up on three years as the executive director at Baryshnikov Arts. I've known Misha [Baryshnikov] for a very long time. I was his student when I was a ballet dancer. I was in his school for a year and then he invited me to join American Ballet Theater when he was artistic director.

We are celebrating our 20th anniversary this year, which is a big milestone for the company. The prime focus of our mission is to allow artists to come and create uninhibitedly, without fear, without any restrictions. And then we have the other part of our mission, which is to present performances.

One of the misconceptions, because Misha is the founder and artistic director, is that either we are a ballet company or that we only focus on ballet and dance programs. Much like Misha himself and his professional trajectory, we cover all arts. He is known for being one of the greatest ballet dancers in history, but he's also known for being an actor and a pianist and a photographer. He embodies so many artistic disciplines and that is a reflection of the company.

Can you talk about how your model is different from other companies?

We let our mission drive us, and that mission is to support artists in creative endeavors without the obligation or expectation of commercial success. As a business, of course, that's challenging. Trying to find the balance between being viable and being a place for artists to feel that they can try things out and dig deeper within themselves without commercial expectation is not necessarily easy. But 20 years on, we're still here, so something's being done right.

We will never be a big Broadway house and we don't try to be. We take smaller projects; we take on things that are more unique and fit our venue. We have the 238-seat Jerome Robbins Theater, and it's beautiful and intimate. You're at an arm's length from the performers. You're not in a 2,500-seat theater with binoculars. It's going to feel almost like you're in your living room.

When an artist comes in, do you give them a certain period of time? Do they have to win your trust and earn the space?

One of our primary programs is our residency program, which is an open application. We launch that every fall and Misha and the program team sort through 300 applications, and we select generally 10 for the spring and 10 for the fall. We provide one to two weeks of a residency period, it comes with a stipend and administrative support, all of that. That's the first step through our doors, and oftentimes those residency artists will have an informal showing.

Misha is very much a part of this. He does take on that mentor responsibility, and what every often starts as a residency can gradually develop into something more.

In our original residency program, there's no requirement for an end product. They can do whatever they want in those two weeks. This year, we launched a new residency program that's a little bit more in depth because so many of these projects need further support. This program is called Artist Lab, and we give space, further financial resources, and marketing because there is a defined end goal. The third step is if Misha sees something that he really feels is ready, we will then either commission or present performances.



How many performances do productions receive?

It fluctuates a little bit. Our historical template is anywhere between one to four. For [A Mother](#), Jessica Hecht and [Neena Beber](#)'s project, we're doing 17 shows, which is different for us. We're figuring out how that works for us. We are flexible. We try to have as much set in place as we can, because to run an organization, you need a timeline, a structure, you need to understand what your calendar is for marketing and development and finances. But we try to allow flexibility, because artists have different requirements, and we're small enough that we are able to be a little bit more nimble than a large organization.

How do you go about developing an audience for a such a wide variety of programming?

It is challenging, that's the bottom line. Our strongest audience is dance enthusiasts. Any time we have a dance show, that sells out fastest. *A Mother* is very different for us. We are having to find a new audience. You tap into Jessica and Neena's network, that sort of thing. But doing programs like *A Mother* is nice, though, because we are trying to grow beyond just the dance audience, which we hold near and dear to our heart, but we do want to build up an audience that appreciates theater or film or music.

Of course, I think all theaters have a challenge with ticket sales and building audiences. But you slowly build it up, even if it's just a handful of people. They come, they see something, they like it, maybe they come back for something different. Our audiences always say they love coming here because you never know what you're gonna get. We like to support adventurous artists, and we hope that brings adventurous audiences. We exist in New York City where there are adventurous people.

Based on what you've seen, is the current audience for Baryshnikov Arts different than it was before Covid?

I think it's very different. People learned how to live differently during the pandemic. People don't plan anymore. I do think there is a certain level of wanting to go out and socialize, but there's also an element of "Well, I just don't know."

In terms of ticket sales, everything is last minute now, which is very stressful for companies because you have to strategize and you're working off unpredictable behavior. That's the general feel for all theaters and shows. You can no longer depend on the models that existed for decades, so how much do you invest in something without knowing what the outcome is going to be? I don't think we're ever going back to pre-pandemic.

What would you tell someone who's thinking about coming to see a show at Baryshnikov Arts?

The primary line of consistency is that you're going to see something that's great. Whoever the artist is, or whatever the work is, it's going to be excellent and unusual. It's not going to be what you can see on every other block. We try to aim for things that are multidisciplinary. If you're coming to see a dance show, that dance show probably also has music or theater.

For example, *A Mother* is a play, but there's dancing and singing. [Sissy](#), which is by Celia Rowson-Hall is primarily dance, but you're going to have music and theater, and Marisa Tomei is in it. One of the things that we pride ourselves on is that we've got artists from different backgrounds coming together and creating something new.

