

SPOTLIGHT ON

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

"HE'S AN INNOVATOR AND A TRADITIONALIST, A SATIRIST AND A ROMANTIC." - *The New York Times*



Artistic Director
Mark Morris
Photo by Marc Royce

This article is taken
from *PillowNotes* By
Suzanne Carbonneau

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comprised of essays
commissioned from
Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival
Scholars in Residence to
provide audiences with a
broader context for
viewing dance.*

The American attitude toward dance has always been conflicted: even as we are seduced by its undeniable powers, still we are convinced in the murky depths of our vestigial Puritanism that an enterprise centered in the body cannot speak to the soul. All too often, dance is viewed as attractive but lightweight. An artistic activity, maybe—but one singularly lacking in profundity.

An instant antidote to this point of view exists in the choreography of Mark Morris which, in its richness, depth, inventiveness, complexity, and insight, convincingly persuades us that dance is important. Not decorative, not diversionary. But truly momentous. Life-giving, life-affirming, life-changing.

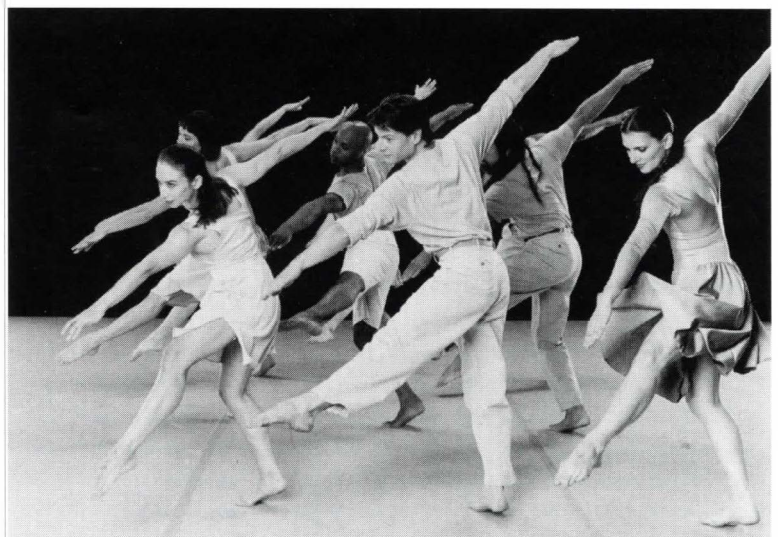
Morris's dances are essential additions to the corpus of artworks that we consider crucial in coming to an understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe. They are, at once, philosophical treatises on the human condition; music made corporeal; vehicles for the creation of community; essays in classical form and structure; commentary on other art forms, art works, artists, and cultures; arguments for an expanded and diversified humanism; celebrations of kinetic pleasures. The British painter Howard Hodgkin, who created the décor for Morris's new work *Kolam*, was stunned when he first saw Morris's 1988 masterwork, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, declaring it "infinitely more classical" than he could have imagined. "I think he is great," Hodgkin said, "and I don't say that easily." Similar testimony has been pronounced over and over again by those who are converts to dance on the basis of acquaintance with the Morris repertory.

That dance is of consequence is a conviction that Morris has carried with him since he began choreographing, and it is an idea that suffuses his works, providing them with their resonance, power, scope, and sweep. Morris himself discovered the significance of dance when he was just fourteen, and a member of the Seattle-based Balkan dance ensemble Koleda. While the classical Western tradition has sought to

remove dance from contact with the earth, from the natural physique, and from community concerns, Morris's Koleda experience revealed dance as the most humanistic and germane of enterprises. The values he discovered in Koleda's dancing—an affinity for gravity and close relationship to the earth, extraordinarily complex rhythms, and a feeling of community—he recognized as entrée to membership in the human family. Morris has cherished these concerns ever since, reinventing notions of classicism to include them, and positing them as central in his own choreography.

Morris provides an architecture of classical structures—which he has extended more inventively than any living choreographer—as scaffolding for movement that is angelic and ungainly, lived-in and screwball, homely and elegant. The dancing possesses extraordinary conviction. There seems never a false moment. We are always aware that these are real people creating this sensorily-rich choreographic world. It is dancing in which we are cognizant of skin, of bones, of sinew, of musculature, of weight. We are attuned to lungs filling with air, blood coursing through veins, hearts beating within rib cages. Always, Morris's abstractions, metaphors, images, and ideas are grounded in palpable flesh.

And Morris makes a convincing case that, far from separating us from heaven, it is the flesh that links us with the angels. He knows what Renaissance astronomers drew from theology: that the order of the heavens can best be understood as dance patterns, that the music of the spheres joins heaven and earth. In grounding his artistic endeavors in the body, Morris makes us understand that our conception of what is godlike actually reflects what is most human in us. The phrase from Milton that recurs in *L'Allegro*, "the hidden soul of harmony," is what Morris seeks to excavate in his dances. Through the classical ideals of harmony, order, symmetry, balance, and grace, Morris uses the human body, linked in community with other bodies, to search out the mysteries of existence, the elusive possibility of the



Mark Morris Dance Group in *Gloria*. Photo by Marc Royce.



Mark Morris Dance Group in *Resurrection*. Photo by Bruce Feeley

"YOU WATCH MORRIS' DANCES,

and finally – though everything about his work is accessible – you are encompassed by mystery. How does he make his modern visions so musically satisfying? How does he make his men and women, with their different builds and colors and hairstyles, into an utterly harmonious view of the world? How does he catch an audience so frequently between laughter and seriousness, between bright and dark emotion? The mystery, and the pleasure, grows with every performance of his work I see."

- Alastair Macaulay,
Financial Times (U.K.)

perfectibility of human beings. Morris employs an extraordinary understanding of spatial relationships and design to create his own music of the spheres, making the case for geometric form as a means to utopia. Spatial design becomes an essay in morality; within the heady climes of abstraction, we can find guidelines for living our lives. Geometry becomes akin to theology.

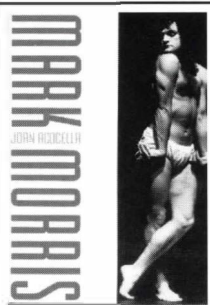
Always, Morris's consummate craftsmanship is at the service of emotional acumen. His dances plumb the soul, seeking out both the limits and terrors of human existence. They are a complex layering of image, metaphor, feeling, spatial design, group relationships, and dialogue with art history. Known for the transcendent musicality of his works which are grounded in his deep and imaginative understanding of musical structure, Morris has choreographed to seemingly every kind of music. Always there is a feeling of inevitability to his handling of the score. In addition to his choreography for the Mark Morris Dance Group and other dance companies, Morris has also directed and choreographed operas (Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Rameau's *Platée*, and Virgil Thompson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*) and musical theater.

A true original, Morris is impossible to categorize. Like that of the best artists, his work is instantly recognizable and impossible to replicate. He is classical and irreverent, audaciously theatrical and austere, outrageously witty and deadly serious, slyly knowing and utterly sincere. And often, all of these things at once. Proudly wearing his influences—George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Paul Taylor, the pioneering modern dance choreographers—Morris builds on what he has learned from them to create a thoroughly idiosyncratic vision that is, at the same time, of universal appeal. Morris's psychological insights, abstract designs, and deeply-felt humanism, seem instantly recognizable across individuals, genders, generations, cultures.

Morris's subjects are the Big Ones: life, death, love, faith, fellowship, solitude, grace, despair, joy, indominability. Morris trusts that dance has something important to tell us about how we make our way through the world with kindness and comradeship. But Morris is no bowdlerizer: he does not flinch at showing us the obstacles to perfection. He has portrayed incest (*Lovey*), vampirism (*One Charming*

Night), cataclysm (*Grand Duo*), jealousy (*Jealousy*), mourning (*Medium*), betrayal (*Dido and Aeneas*), utter desolation (*Stabat Mater*)—even the tragedies of the quotidian (*Mythologies*). Moreover, in his happiest works, there is the acknowledgment of pain: lurking in the background are the outsider (*Going Away Party*), death (*Love Song Waltzes*), disappointment (*The "Tamil Film Songs in Stereo" Pas de Deux*), anger (*The Argument*), adversity (*V*). But again, we can turn to his masterwork *L'Allegro* for resolution. Certainly, what drew Morris to the Handel work were the opportunities it afforded to alternately portray both joy (*"l'Allegro"*) and suffering (*"il Penseroso"*), with the added bonus of the palliative offered by librettist Charles Jennens in *"il Moderato."* And, of course, it is important to Morris that, at the end of this huge and complex argument, *"l'Allegro"* is given the last word: "Mirth, with thee we mean to live." In the pleasures they offer, Morris's dances do indeed allow us to find a home there.

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FOR FURTHER READING Mark Morris by Joan Acocella

Joan Acocella's probing portrait is the first book on this brilliant and controversial artist. Written with Morris's cooperation,

part biography, part critical study, it describes how he has lived and how he turns life - and music and narrative - into dance. It also covers Morris's three years as director of dance at the Royal Opera House in Brussels, where the classical aesthetic and sexual boldness of his dances precipitated an international scandal. Including seventy-eight photographs covering the entire corpus of Morris's work to date, *Mark Morris* provides an ideal introduction to the life and work of America's leading young choreographer.

PROGRAM

Saturday,
November 2, 8pm



Mark Morris Dance Group in "V." Photo by Robbie Jack.

Resurrection (2002)

Premiering at the American Dance Festival this past summer, *Resurrection* is a sleek retooling of the American gangster movie. "With his fine ear for tone, Morris has married movie-musical excess with postmodernist cool."

— *The New York Times*

Going Away Party (1990)

A bounding, high-kicking, hip-swishing, shoulder-shaking good-humored romp to the songs of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys.

Foursome (2002)

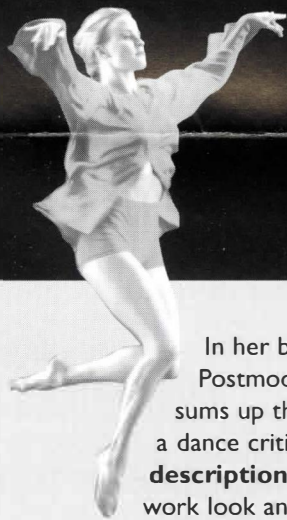
Performed by Mark Morris and three male dancers to the music of Eric Satie, this suite of short dances has been described by *The New York Times* "as distinctive as facets on innumerable small jewels."

"V" (2001)

This life-affirming new dance — dedicated to the city of New York — keeps bringing audiences to their feet with every performance. Set to music by Schumann, "V" is a soaring fusion of movement and music called "not only one of his best pieces...but also one of the few great works that modern dance has produced in a decade." — *The New York Times*

WRITING AND TALKING DANCE

It's been said that dance communicates emotions that can't be conveyed through words...so, how then do we discuss or write about it?



In her book "Writing Dance in the Age of Postmodernism" (1994), critic Sally Banes sums up the different, often complex ways for a dance critic to talk about dance. These are: **description** (what the dancers did - what does the work look and feel like); **interpretation** (what they communicated — what does the dance mean?);

evaluation (how remarkable it was — is the work good); and **contextual explanation** (where does the work come from aesthetically and/or historically?).

As you discuss a performance with friends or family, try to keep these four points in mind. They can serve as a road map for dance beyond the immediate experience. Here are a few examples of these points put into words in dance reviews of the Mark Morris Dance Group:

Description

"The joy [of "V"] was infectious. The feeling of community in the last two movements was as unmistakable as it was beautiful. As the company walked downstage and seemed on the verge of embracing everyone in the theater, the dance seemed drenched in optimism, and the optimism was triumphant."

— *The San Francisco Chronicle*

Interpretation

"Morris' choreography...can be spiritually elevated in one number and unashamedly down and dirty in the next: classical in one sequence and utterly demonic in another. It offers without embarrassment or underlining a pan-sexual universe of shared feelings. It is both sophisticated in its sensibility and almost pagan in its visceral impact." — *San Francisco Examiner*

Evaluation

"Morris is our Mozart of modern dance. There is that same sense of easy fecundity, his air of an aging, congenial *enfant terrible*, the sheer brilliance and wealth of this choreographic invention." — *The Washington Post*

Context

"His eclectic dance training, combined with a fascination for American Television and oriental theatre, allows him to draw on a remarkable range of styles and traditions. His dance is of infinite variety — sometimes lyrical, sometimes primitively powerful, sometimes dark and insinuating. So many choreographers today don't know how to let dance grow out of music: Morris does." — *The Mail on Sunday (U.K.)*

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Mark Morris Dance Group in "V". Photo by Robbie Jack.

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Mark Morris Dance Group in Grand Duo. Photo by Marc Royce.