



NEXT WAVE FESTIVAL

OCTOBER DECEMBER 1984

BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC



FESTIVAL

1984

THE GAMES
October 9–14

REMY CHARLIP
October 17–21

TIM MILLER
October 24–28

THE DESERT MUSIC
October 25–27

ELISA MONTE DANCE COMPANY
November 1–4

RICHARD LANDRY
November 10

SECRET PASTURES
November 15–18

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP
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PENGUIN CAFE ORCHESTRA
December 8–9

EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH
December 11–23

The Rediscovery of Narrative: Dance in the 1980s

by Marcia Pally

Shortly before the opening of *Seeing Red*, filmmaker Julia Reichert told me, "In 1982, I realized the sixties were over." She was talking about communal living, organizing The People, and baking bread; you can only say her realization was late in coming. But had she been musing on dance, her comment would have been more on the mark. In that year, the minimalist explorations of the avant-garde that began with Merce Cunningham and the Judson Church group in the early sixties seemed to have finally played themselves out: good God, narrative was making a reappearance. (In art, too, as the new figurative painting; and in music, as the return to melody.) Whereas "the diagonal" could suffice for content in 1965 (or '75), the early eighties saw glimmerings of character and plot flickering across the cushions on the floors of lofts.

In 1981, Judy Padow, after spending fifteen years walking around studios investigating direction, choreographed *Complex Desires*, whose traffic patterns create innuendos of temptation and suppressed passion worthy of a Henry James novel. It may be intrigue by geometry but it's intrigue nevertheless. In 1982, Johanna Boyce, who'd been employing

parade formations (curiously reminiscent of both Busby Berkeley and George Balanchine) for her comedies of the absurd, made *Incidents (in Coming of Age)*—a story of American girlhood, complete with family photos and letters her brother had sent from Vietnam. And, later that spring, adding imprimatur to an inclination, the Studies Project of the School for Movement Research held its annual performance/discussion series where the conversation turned to pinning down just what this "story" business was all about. The effect spreads: even Alvin Ailey, whose work has always employed mood and indicative characters (*Mother, Lover*), went a step or two more literal in last summer's premiere, *Precipice*, giving us what is unmistakably a fully developed plot.

The revival of narrative can be chalked up to the normal swings of the artistic pendulum—plot and high drama in the thirties-fifties; formalism in the sixties and seventies; and back to some species of storytelling in the eighties. But the pendulum doesn't return to exactly the same spot. With the intercession of the styles and techniques of the last twenty years, our current notions of content are bound to differ from that of



Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane performing in *Valley Cottage*. Photo by Paula Court.



earlier choreography—so full of justice and injustice and great ardor, its emotions more akin to the *sturm und drang* of *Fidelio* or *La Bohème* than to what we usually consider modernist.

For my money, the biggest difference is in scope. The subjects of dances forty or fifty years ago tended to be generic (Joy, Revolt), and when they were based on literary sources, those were often epics or myths. Today's work, on the other hand, is specific and rather personal. Where Martha Graham or José Limon (or even Paul Taylor) would do Grief, Boyce does my-grief-when-my-brother-went-to-Vietnam; while Graham explored the female psyche in the characters of Medea, Clytemnestra, or Judith, Boyce tried to remember how she and her girlfriends played with dolls and toy teacups. And in an almost direct contrast, Kurt Jooss vented his hate for the Third Reich in *The Green Table* (with its Politicians, Soldiers, Widows, and, overseer of them all, Death) while Arnie Zane (in the NEXT WAVE Festival with Bill T. Jones) and Boyce dealt with that era by pondering the impact of World War Two on their parents (in *Garden*). Theirs is the novelist's instinct: detail a few lives, a few incidents, and if the work succeeds, microcosms become universal.

Yet, there is deeper introspection here: much of this new narrative seems not only novelistic but autobiographical. (Another departure from the past; Graham would never tell all.) Many of the Jones-Zane collaborations, for example, are studded with their past and present lives, with being black or white, tall or short, with the way they can or can't touch,

can or can't betray each other, can or can't be angry. For one thing, Jones says, "I tend to reduce things to what I know from experience; I understand the world that way." For another, their technical skills weren't strong when they first started out so the syntax and situation had to be as compelling as the actual steps. Making a virtue of necessity, to be sure; but if they hadn't wanted to make this sort of personal work they'd have chosen a field where expertise allowed them to step discreetly behind form—which Zane sometimes prefers. As it is, they argue about the private material to include, and inevitably even this contest works its way into their dances.

Tim Miller, like many performance artists ("It's in the contract: I'm not a choreographer and this isn't a dance"), also grounds his work in his life, commenting on American consumerism, for instance, with a scene set in his parents' back yard. But the new narrative isn't *only* autobiographical. You can't expect artists, ever fiddling with their styles, to content themselves with one genre—even one so inherently fascinating to the author. Jones, Zane, and Miller are now pushing the edges of their storytelling: Miller going from autobiography to biography, Jones and Zane from autobiography to fiction. For the videotaped section of *Democracy in America* (to be presented at BAM October 24-28), Miller spoke with 150 people in 15 states to find out what that lofty term meant to them; for the staged sections, he's asked his performers to enact scenes from their family histories. Jones and Zane have taken to just plain



(Above) Elisa Monte and David Brown in *Treading*. Photo by Johan Elbers.

(Left) Tim Miller (center) and company in *Democracy in America* as presented as a work in progress at P.S. 1 in May, 1984. Photo by Dona McAdams.

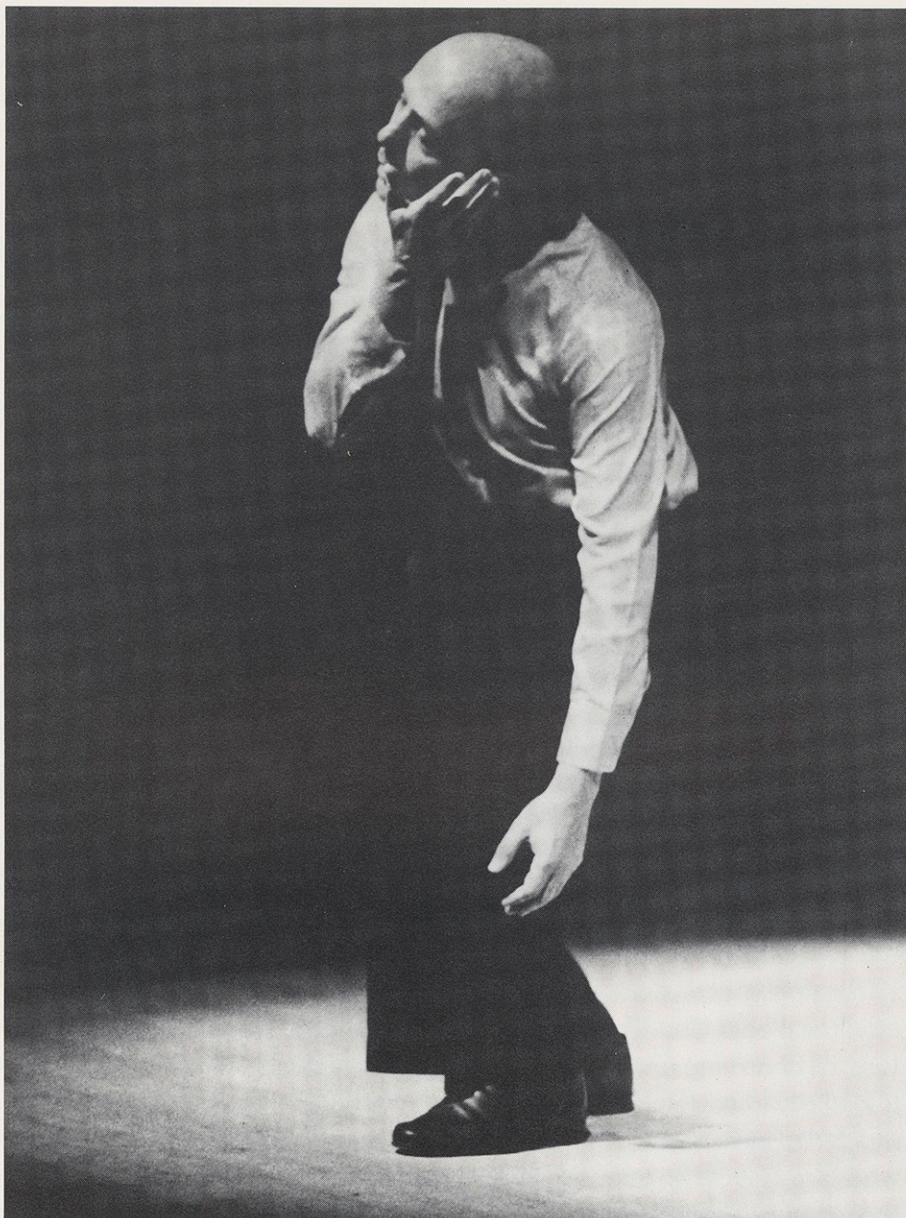
making things up. The working structure for *Secret Pastures* is a "quasi-narrative; the images in each section are more important than the logic of the plot" where a geologist, biologist, socialite, athlete, and "fabricated man" discover a Pacific Isle. (Did you use *Candide* as a model? No, *Gilligan's Island*.) And though Zane predictably warns that "as the piece is completed, the formal considerations may become more important than the story," they're setting out to create their own mix of movement and make-believe.

In moving away from autobiography, neither Miller nor Jones and Zane appear to be drifting towards Emotion or Epic; they're sticking to their more grounded forms of narrative, and these seem central to the style and view of the world each of these young artists is developing. Somewhat unexpectedly, a similar mode of storytelling pervades the work of Remy Charlip, who chronologically falls in the previous generation, somewhere between Cunningham and Lucinda Childs. *Ten Men*, his premiere for this season, includes a biographical solo for Lucas Hoving ("about his performance career from ages 3-72"), an autobiographical solo about taking care of himself, and chamber-piece-like dances for groups of men.

It appears Charlip encompassed in one lifetime what usually takes two. As a young man, Charlip danced with Cunningham but early on came to a personal and artistic crisis. "I was demolished by the time I left Merce. I didn't dance for three years—I just left class one day in the middle of *batterments* to the side. I thought I had to dance the way other people wanted me to and it didn't feel like it did when I was doing it around the living room as a kid. I had to find out how I wanted to do it." That sixties sentiment amounted to a revolt against the cool formalism of the day: the pieces Charlip wanted to do turned out to be personal and miniature, as charming and self-contained as a short story or one-act play. (Charlip has written and illustrated over twenty children's books with much the same feel to them.) He went on performing his intimate work while the rest of the avant-garde was busy with "the diagonal," and now the kids who were in diapers when he was with Merce are rehearsing—albeit unawares—his pilgrim's progress.

Not all the kids, however. The sixties rejection of narrative and the eighties rejection of sixties formalism were the occupations of the "downtown" set. Other, more mainstream dancers were interested in carrying on the conventions put forth by Graham, Doris Humphrey, or Limon, augmenting and modifying them gradually, in the evolutionary way that later artists always build on earlier ones. To them, the brave new world of self-referential minimalism must have seemed beside the point. Elisa Monte and Mark Morris (completing the dance section—Miller notwithstanding—of the NEXT WAVE Festival) come from this tradition, and as their mentors were not committed to abstract art, they feel no great compulsion to react with refurbished narrative.

Trained in the traditional schools of Western dance (both studied ballet; Monte performed with Graham, Pilobolus, and Lar Lubovitch, Morris also with Lubovitch, as well as with Eliot Feld, Hannah Kahn, and



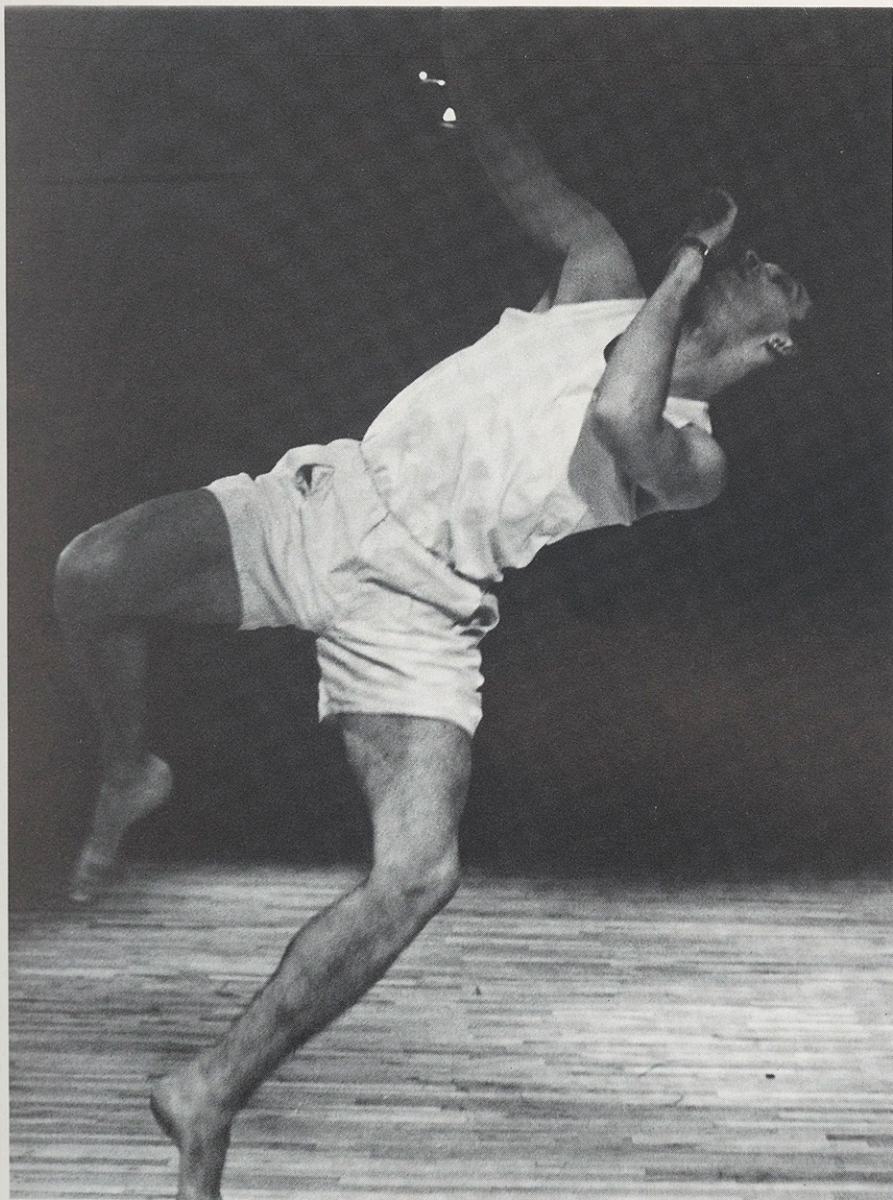
Remy Charlip in *Meditation*. Photo by Anthony Crickmay.

Laura Dean), they go for the essence or spirit of a piece rather than for the specifics of character or setting. If Miller, Jones, Zane, and Charlip work from the novelist's urge, Monte and Morris work from the poet's. In other words, they're more likely to do Grief than describe a brother's stint in Saigon.

Even when, as Morris put it, "there are a lot of references to Dean and Childs in my work, a lot of concern with structure and the math to calculate traffic patterns," the "math" isn't the point. On this series, Morris will do a new work; his *Gloria*, which he describes as "devotional, not an adoration of Jesus, like the text—more a humanist celebration"; and *Rangasayee*, a solo to south Indian raga, which "is a gift, a garland, to the music and to India." A far cry from the island crew in Jones's and Zane's *Secret Pastures*. Monte's pieces "are never about anything other than a psychological state... I don't deal with issues but with elemental things, information in our bodies or even genes that may have taken years to evolve." *Treading*, for example, concerns "sexuality, the urge the body carries to pass on our knowledge about the world." *Pigs and Fishes* is "a celebration of new life. I just had a baby; I'm tuned into this stuff. But there are no names, no places in these dances, and it doesn't matter if the audience's interpretation of the specifics—like birth—is different from mine."

This would never do for Charlip, who "loves details" not only in the movement but in the drawings or music that inspire it, in the costumes and props that not so much accompany his dances as shape them. And it would never do for Miller, whose project is social critique as much as it is performance. Narrative isn't the only thing in revival; political art is on the upswing as well. And they abet each other: if a specific "message" is what's wanted, a form that lends itself to concrete references comes in handy.

It did in the thirties, which saw the creation of the Workers' Dance League, the Red Dancers, and the New Dance Group, to name a few of the larger organizations, and the performance of such dances as *Red Army March*, *Van der Lubbe's Head*, and *On the Barricades*. Not to mention the start of the American Negro Ballet, which was political by its very existence. It did over the last few years, with the stream of events sponsored by Dancers for Disarmament, performances "in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua" (or El Salvador), Dance Theatre Workshop's *Manifesto!* series, and P.S. 1's Frontline series of political productions. And it does for Miller, who uses the current, intimate form of storytelling precisely because its specificity allows for the nuances of his positions. "A natural marriage," he calls it. "It's dangerous to abdicate being an American, to let the right call the best parts of our country their own—like the way the Moral Majority has manipulated the Founding Fathers. Many of them were deists or atheists or Masons: men of the Enlightenment. This country wasn't founded by men like Jerry Falwell. But on the left there's a temptation to forget the positive things in our historical makeup. My greatest fear is naming the evil and then becoming it." You can see why anyone attempting to put forth a leftist critique while supporting "the



Mark Morris in *O Rangasayee*. Photo by J.P. Roy.

good things" that are usually considered staples of the right would appreciate the precision of narrative.

Without a literal "script," political dance may be effective, but its target will be less obvious (often an advantage), its mark on the world sometimes less immediate, always more mediated. While the happenings of the sixties, for example, sported a politics from anarchy, their power lay in enthusiasm rather than in accuracy or analysis. That decade's dance avant-garde—from which you'd expect a little activism—also had its political moments. Iconoclastic and rebellious, it challenged the assumptions that had governed modern dance since its inception. Yet by and large, its heresies were formal and self-referential, often without explicit critique of the world beyond the *plié*. (Black choreographers like Ailey or Donald McKayle were the exception, "making a statement" by their very introduction of black experience into dance.) Today, some of the best work done by the Wallflower Order (one of the longest-standing political dance groups) is quite lyrical and unprogrammatic. But fine as such choreography may be, its message reduces to: dictators are awful, the poor are oppressed. And to sharpen its aim, the dancers are forced to burden audiences with didactic program notes that have the emotional and entertainment value of the Leningrad phone book.

While, for clarity's sake, politics may ask for some expression in character and plot, not everyone into anecdotes feels impelled to overt social criticism. It would be tidy if novelistic choreographers were more political and poetic choreographers were less so, but it just doesn't line up that way. Jones and Zane used to comment openly about racism and gender; their treatment of the issues these days is more implicit. "I believe what I believe," says Zane, "and it comes out in the dances. I don't have to make a point of it." That's just about how Morris feels. Except for *Junior High*, a satire on adolescent masculinity, he'll tackle sexism or homophobia, for instance, just the way Jones and Zane now do: by inventing movements where women lift men, or where men lift each other. Monte believes her work is political simply by dint of its attention to human relations. "If each person finds a way to solve the dilemmas in his life, we'll have a solution for society," and Charlip, in an eerie echo, told me "By changing yourself, you begin to change the world."

Though Charlip finds practical application for his axiom (he never liked being "bossed around" by choreographers, so now he tries "to let go of control and listen to the dancers"), it's a long way from what Dancers for Disarmament, Wallflower, or Miller mean by politics. Of course, they face the ubiquitous, much discussed, and all too ensnaring traps of agit-prop—death to the subtlety that gives performance grace and the powers of seduction. It's a no-win situation. Fortunately, there's no race.

Marcia Pally is a contributing writer for the *Village Voice* and *Film Comment*. She writes frequently about dance, film, and other subjects for New York City and national publications.

Festival Events

THE GAMES

REMY CHARLIP

TIM MILLER

THE DESERT MUSIC

ELISA MONTE
DANCE COMPANY

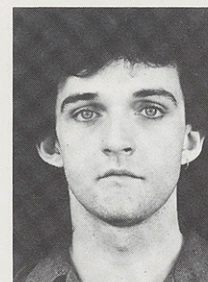
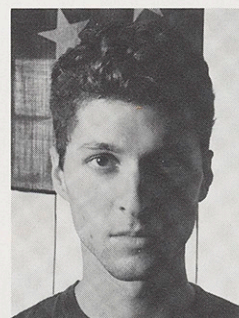
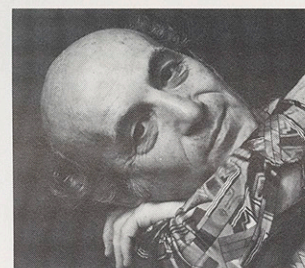
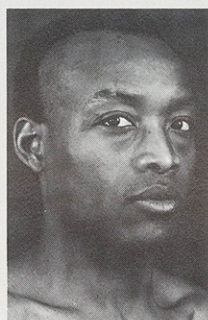
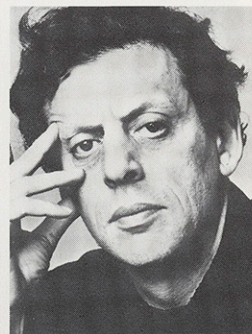
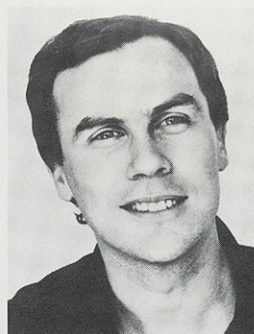
RICHARD LANDRY

SECRET PASTURES

MARK MORRIS
DANCE GROUP

PENGUIN CAFE
ORCHESTRA

EINSTEIN
ON THE BEACH



MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

GLORIA (1981)

Choreography by Mark Morris; music, *Gloria in D*, by Antonio Vivaldi.

O RANGASAYEE (1984)

Choreography by Mark Morris; music by Sri Tyagaraja.

NEW WORK World Premiere

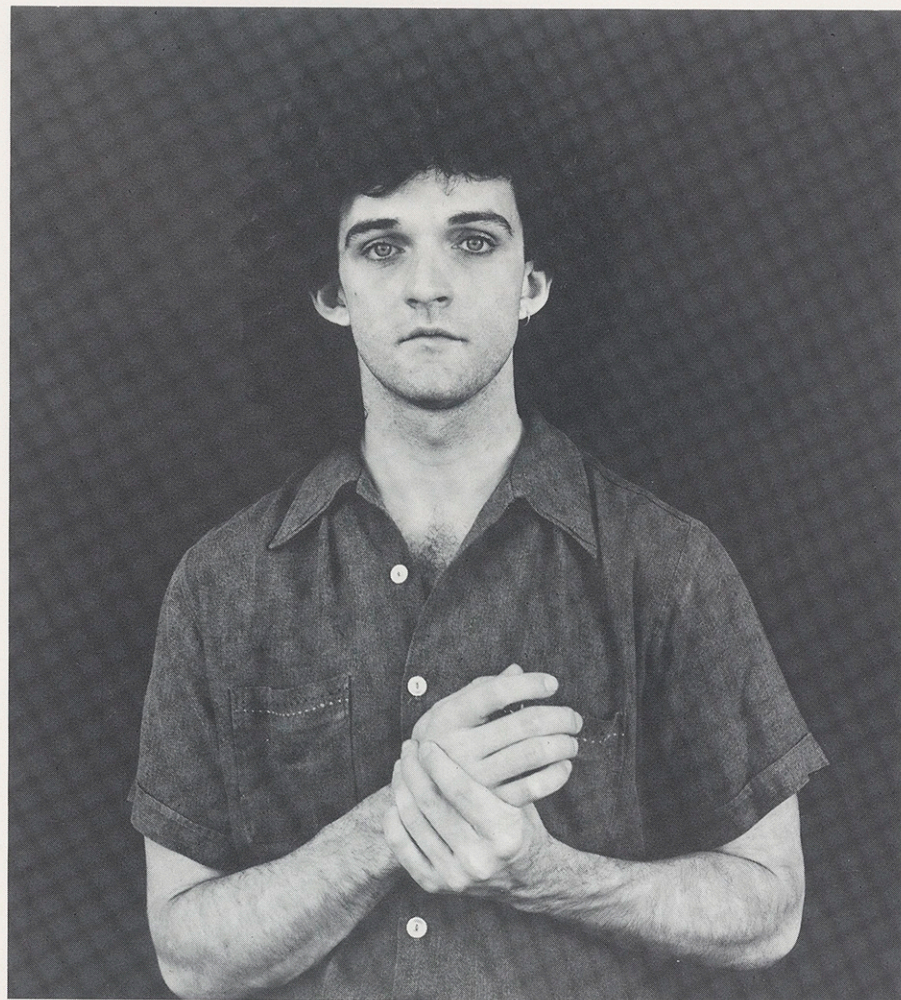
Choreography by Mark Morris; music by Herschel Garfein.

November 28–December 2, Lepercq Space.

After a period when many young choreographers found music unnecessary or at least peripheral to the movement they were creating, a new generation of dancer-choreographers seems to be reasserting the traditional link between music and dance. In the five years that Mark Morris has been presenting his dances in New York, he has choreographed his works to a wide range of music, including but not limited to classical composers from Vivaldi to Beethoven, Brahms, Satie and Shostakovich; American experimental composers like Harry Partch and Conran Nan-carrow; popular Thai and Indian and traditional Tahitian and Romanian music; and contemporary popular composers like Jimmy Driftwood and Yoko Ono. Mr. Morris's sensitivity to music has been noted by many dance critics, including Jennifer Dunning of the *New York Times*, who calls him "outstandingly musical and certainly original."

In addition to its musicality, Mark Morris's choreography is also characterized by his rich and varied use of humor. Sometimes the comedy takes the form of mime pieces to pop music, like Mr. Morris performing in drag to Tammy Wynette's "Stand by your Man." Other times the humor is in the pure incongruity of the movement and music, or in the situation, like the takeoff on a choreographer working with a dancer in the "*Tamil Film Songs in Stereo*" *Pas de Deux*. The freshness of Mr. Morris's choreographic visions has moved *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce to say, "The Mark Morris experience is like nothing else in dance but quite like a lot of things outside of it—especially in the streets and shops of lower Manhattan. I imagine that the younger you are the more of these things you recognize. For me, Mark Morris is a dancemaker and a spellbinder. That is enough to make him transparently a symbol of his times."

Although in the last year he has returned to his hometown of Seattle, where he has been teaching at the University of Washington, Mr. Morris is in demand as a dancer and choreographer throughout the country. Prior to his appearances as part of the 1984 NEXT WAVE Festival he was in residence at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina, and Jacob's Pillow in Lee, Massachusetts. His program at the Brooklyn Academy of Music will include *Gloria*, a company piece to Antonio Vivaldi's *Gloria in D*; *O Rangasayee*, a solo for Mr. Morris to music by Sri Tyagaraja; and a new work, with music by Herschel Garfein, being given its world premiere.



Mark Morris. Photo copyright © by Peggy Jarrell Kaplan, 1984.