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ON THE



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TOTAL SURPRISE

The Choreography of Mark Morris

BY CHARLES SIEBERT

A guy sits alone onstage in a spotlit chair, tells you his life story, then flicks his hands a couple of times to let you know it's a dance." That's how twenty-nine-year-old choreographer Mark Morris describes what's wrong with a lot of current modern dance. "Mark Morris," meanwhile, is how the major dance critics are describing what's right with it.

In red sweats and a T-shirt, Morris is lounging over two folding chairs in the raised bleachers of his modest rehearsal and performance space. It's located on the top floor of an ancient two-story brick building in central Seattle's skid-row district. The ground floor is occupied by the Most Wishful Sons of Haiti, a messianic order whose members—in this case a group of old black Seattle men—follow the credo "Sex and power through brotherhood." Morris is watching intently from the outskirts of his own creation: ten dancers, to the notes of Bach's Concerto for Two Harpsichords, rushing by in diagonals that cross—nearly crash—at center stage and then soften into arm-swirling circles. In one hand Morris is holding a clove cigarette and in the other a beer—taller than a tall-boy and all silver like a cannon shell. There are two more ready in a paper bag by his chair. He doesn't look much like your average dancer, more big-boned and outsize than willow and long, and the dark shoulder length curls that he once tossed about his sharp features and dark eyes in performances are gone. "One and two and three and..." Morris shouts over the Bach, which is blasting from a tinny, paint-covered music box, trying to keep everyone moving with the measure of the music, within his choreographic design. Were it on film, he'd be twisting a focus knob rather than his insides to synchronize the dancers to his mind's picture of the

dance. In two days the group will open the first of five nightly performances, the only ones Morris will do all year before his hometown crowd.

Last year Morris and the group of dancers he first assembled under his name in 1980 performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's NEXT WAVE Festival. With his daring choreography set to Vivaldi's *Gloria in D*, an unheard-of twenty-minute solo to an Indian vocal score by Sri Tyagaraja—which Morris performed dressed only in a loincloth—and a landmark piece based on an essay by Roland Barthes about championship wrestling, Morris absolutely stole the show and left critics clamoring to proclaim his talents. Tobi Tobias in *New York* magazine called him "just what a young choreographer should be: original, energetic, and unpretentious." Jennifer Dunning wrote in *The New York Times* that Morris "is now considered one of the most gifted choreographers of his era." And Arlene Croce of *The New Yorker* claimed, "He's the clearest illustration we have, at the moment, of the principle of succession and how it works in dance: each new master assimilates the past in all its variety and becomes our guide to the future." Morris has been called everything from a classicist to a postmodernist, from a strict formalist to a freewheeling iconoclast. But what seems clear is that modern dance, a kingdom habitually depicted as being caught in perpetual twilight with few stars in its firmament, now has a new crown prince, and he doesn't even live in New York City.

Morris moved back to Seattle from New York City more than a year ago because he prefers the slower pace and feels he can concentrate better on his choreography. He was also getting a bit flustered by the attention his dances had begun to attract, although he'd already made plans to leave when all the hoopla started. "I did a show at the Dance Theater Workshop," he explains. "Eight performances, a two-

week run, and it was completely sold out, every second. That's when I got the offer to do the Brooklyn Academy show the next year. Suddenly everyone who's a dancer in New York knows who I am, and that's kind of weird. The first *New Yorker* review by Arlene Croce came out the day I got on the plane back to Seattle. I was really surprised, because she will very often take three or four choreographers of one period and say that they do shit. So I thought I'd be in with some others and she'd say it was cute but forget about it. Then I read this whole article about me, and it makes me sit back and say, 'Hmmm, she only writes about Balanchine. I don't feel any brighter.'"

Aside from the practical inconveniences—one third of his troupe still live in New York and must shuttle back and forth at their own expense and crash on friends' floors for performances that pay next to nothing—Morris's move may seem particularly backward to those who, like himself, grew up outside New York and spent years trying to dance their way in. But his varied background makes him less particular about the proximity of his peers. In 1976, at age nineteen, Morris himself made the pilgrimage to New York, and he spent years very much immersed in the dance scene, working with such prominent choreographers as Eliot Feld, Twyla Tharp, Lar Lubovitch, and Hannah Kahn. But it seems that the liveliness and originality he now brings to the dance world is the result of his experiences outside of it, with the world's dance: the flamenco and Balkan folk dancing he studied along with Hawaiian, Tahitian, and tap from the age of nine in Seattle, and more recently, his experience with Indian dance while touring with the Laura Dean Company. "The dance world is pretty inflated," says Morris. "People can't believe that I moved out in the blossom of my career, just as I was happening, like that's weird or suicidal, but I don't see

it that way. I just moved. I'm not thumbing my nose at New York or anybody. I certainly don't like the politics of the "dance club" there, but at least there's work going on and people are serious about it. In Seattle I'm isolated with my work. The dance audience here is more naive, and I don't have much to do with my choreographic peers, but then I didn't in New York either."

As the wishful sons sit downstairs in the TV room watching an afternoon baseball game, Morris's dancers stand in a starrish configuration, bouncing up and down on one leg, their arms raised. Then with the music's mincing measures they collapse toward the center, their torsos dipping in and out, passing, it seems, right through one another like the colors of a kaleidoscope. The dance has a kind of folkloric frenzy. It's as though you're watching some foreign culture's secret ritual, the gathering emotion rescued from chaos by Morris's designs. Now the dancers race through the final crossing at the concerto's last flourish of notes and fall breathless to the floor. "Not bad!" Morris shouts in his friendly, high pitched voice, amused by the mass of heaving bodies strewn before him.

"I finish a rehearsal," he says later, "and think I'm giving a really good compliment when I say 'Not bad,' or 'There were some good parts that time,' because this Bach piece is an absolute dance. First of all, there are too many dances done to Bach and they're almost all happy. I think very few choreographers can hear music. There are these vague emotive response to it, like baroque—happy, Bach—you dance happy. That's a joke. I'm just trying to do what Bach did. He takes a very small amount of material and goes crazy with it, rips it apart and sews it back together. I really figure it was already choreographed. All I did was excavate the dance, and assign movements to the musical themes. But it's so hard for the dancers, because it's an almost perfect system. It could be done better by people who aren't humans, but that's not what I want"—he takes a deep swig of beer and smiles mischievously—"I don't think."

Morris first set the Bach piece, called *Marble Halls*, in Tel Aviv for the Bat-sheva Dance Company, whose members, all men just out of the Israeli army, had not even started dancing until they were twenty-one or older. "They all spoke English," explains Morris, "but not the kind I speak

when I'm running through rehearsals and talk fast and loud. We started the whole thing over about twenty times. At the first crossing somebody would crash, *smack!*"—Morris claps his hands—"and fall to the floor. 'Okay, try it again.' *Smack!* 'Okay, again.' *Smack!* It was wild," he says gleefully. "Finally one guy blew up in the middle of rehearsal and shouted: 'We are not machines. We are men. We are men!' 'Yeah, okay,' I said, 'you're right. I forgot.'" Morris is grinning like a little kid. "I don't make people dance the same way, but they have to be hearing the music the same way. It's like jumping in a double Dutch. Once you miss your cross, you're gone. The dance is no good. I definitely do get things down to the hemidemisemi-quaver."

The best and perhaps the most significant aspect of Morris's dances—particularly those involving many dancers, such as *Marble Halls*, or *Vestige*, the other piece in the Seattle show that is set to a classical score—is that they're just plain fun to watch. They relieve you of the burden that modern dance, with its sometimes hermetic system of movements and signs, can place on you to "get it." For all their musical meticulousness and complexity of design, Morris's dances have a roughhewn, free-flowing quality that conveys his own delight in and understanding of movement as a universal mode of expression. His dancers often appear to be off in their own satellites of activity and emotion, which makes their very coherent responses to one another's movements that much more surprising and gives life to the negative spaces between them. "I've got to move those around too," says Morris. "When I was thirteen I joined a semiprofessional group in Seattle called Koleda. We did Bulgarian and Yugoslavian dances, which have a lot of hard rhythms and movements, which I try to use in my dances. There were about twenty dancers and ten musicians, and we just danced and sang for hours. It was great. It's not a performance medium or theater dancing, but that's where dance comes from. They're just basic human movements, which I like to incorporate into my choreography. People like to see other people run around with each other and imagine they could do it."

"What I love more than anything is people running around real fast, but I always remind my dancers that it's not decorative; it's functional. I've designed what's supposed to happen so the movement has to be running, instead of fake modern-dance run-

ning, which drives me crazy—you know, like there's something over here you're afraid of so run over there and look back at it. There's a lot of that kind of bullshit. Much of modern dance has become incestuous or autoreferential, like all the images are in-jokes only other dancers can understand. There's so much really bad autobiographical performance art happening, where you talk about how you felt when your brother died in Vietnam or something. It's stuff I'm sure the artist is very interested in and concerned about, but it doesn't matter. It's really not enough to dance around for twenty minutes and expect someone to watch it. There's a responsibility to the art form. You have to build something; it has to be structured and thought out, and it has to be interesting to watch."

At a point midway through *Vestige*, the dimly lit stage empties but for the sad, somehow skeletal strains of Shostakovich's Sonata for Cello and Piano in D. Then, from the left, far upstage, the dancers, all in black, arrive again in the equivalent dark, the composite of their exposed faces, arms, and lower legs the only visible references. They arrive as though from miles away in broken-down troika-like assemblages—the first dancer pushed forward stiff and bowlegged by the hand of a second who's being painfully weighed down by a third hanging from her waist, and that dancer's limp legs held in turn by a fourth who pushes along the floor on her back with her legs, perhaps propelling the whole group, perhaps not. Behind them follows another bedraggled assortment in a different but equally pathetic configuration. Once arrived, they all collapse into themselves, rise in sequence from left to right, their backs hunched against the audience, and then turn in unison to face us. As the piano isolates the first few notes of the sonata's haunting theme they start forward, like sonic ghoulish chorus line, arms straight down at their sides, all of them in that same stiff, bowlegged stance, as though they're sitting in chairs and pulling themselves along by the front legs. And just as your eyes settle across this strange assemblage, it's reassembling again, becoming now a swaying row of windswept branches and now, with all of them bunched on the floor, a string felled buds that turn over and suddenly open out as in time-lapse photography.

The whole stunning sequence (Mor-

ris calls it the Night of the Living Dead Section) elapses in less than two minutes, recapitulating earlier movements and musical themes, establishing new ones, and portending the piece's conclusion. The dance is never an imposition on the music but rather a compelling exposition of it, a whole new construct made of sound and motion. In *Vestige*, as in other Morris pieces, it appears that the dance is designed to be slightly outsize for the performance space: as you're watching the dancers before you, you're aware, too, of those who have just disappeared, still spinning in place just offstage. And at a few select junctures in the dance all the various freewheeling satellites of motion are gathered from senseless severance into a human chain that whips across the stage as though pulled off by the hand of the choreographer until, finally, in a far corner, it snaps away and one dancer, like the tangible shape of the whip's cracking sound, is left, spinning, the vestige from which whole new sequences of movements will build. If Morris's dances rescue you from the ponderous "What's that supposed to mean?" mood that a modern dance can sometimes put you in, it's because there are more interesting things going on. They engage you in so many different ways simultaneously: the purely visual surprises, like fireworks, that Morris constantly occupies space with; the very clear correlations between the dancers' changing movements and those of the music; and the occasionally literal associations you find yourself making between a particular pose or sequence of poses and a personal memory or emotion.

Vestige was built around one gesture that Morris carried in his head for some time, what he calls the Fascist Wave, a kind of mechanical head-and-torso tilt with both arms raised wide above the head. Music, which Morris says taught him how to choreograph, just naturally gives rise to shapes and motions in his mind, and he's constantly scribbling them down on napkins or trying them out on his dancers in rehearsals. He doesn't use a set system of dance notation and analysis, and he gets particularly uneasy in the period between first teaching his dances and his dancers' actualizing them, as though the steps might dissipate before they get them down. "I can't stand it for a while," says Morris. "I make up the steps and then they're all in the dancers' heads. They're the archives, in a sense. There are certain pieces that I have no idea how I made up anymore. I just know what they're

supposed to look like."

His dances are not pretty in the traditional sense. There's a lot of squatting and sliding around on the floor, a feeling of oppressive gravity and purposeful awkwardness, of trying to take off into something balletic, but failing. His choreography rarely gives rise to the soloist flourish, but occupies all the dancer equally. "I try to get rid of the swoon in the dancer, because all you see is the swoon rather than the focus of the action," he says. He has that mischievous smile on his face again. "I don't give people strokes by giving them a big solo part. I mean, I'll take it into consideration if their mother's going to be in the audience. But I think the virtuosity in my dancers—and there's a lot of it—is their ability to change dynamics and speeds and directions fast and completely, and that's a virtuosity I like to watch instead of standing on one leg for a long time or jumping up and down. I try to design moves that have to be re-created every time to maintain some kind of freshness or a rough edge, so it can't be anticipated. That's what drives me crazy the most. It's telegraphing the moves so you can see what's going to happen next. I want every dance to be a total surprise whenever it shifts gears."

While Morris may have very set ideas about what makes a good dance, it's anybody's guess, including his own, as to where the ideas for dances might come from. Along with his pieces to Vivaldi and Bach, he has set dances to the country gospel songs of the Louvin Brothers and, recently, to four songs by the Violent Femmes in which his dancers do illicit things with naked baby dolls. His work displays what might be called a healthy eclecticism. Both Balanchine and Busby Berkeley are acknowledged influences. For all his obeisance to the modern dance masters, such as Paul Taylor, whose choreography he praises for "being so well constructed it resolves every second," or to the early moderns such as Doris Humphrey and Mary Wigman, he'll also talk to you for hours about the most avant-garde, postmodern, minimalist experiments of contemporaries such as Merce Cunningham, Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, and Kenneth King. For him, it's all part of a tradition, a vocabulary of dance from which he can draw freely for his own work. "There's a great Deborah Hay piece I've only seen photographs of," says Morris, "where there are four women lying on the floor with harnesses on and the dance was some-

body else on the other side of the room pulling them across by a rope. I think that's great. I love that stuff. But that's now a historical period, and I use that stuff freely because I'm interested in it the same way I am in ethnic dances or street activity. It might not be a dance, but it's the element of a dance."

Morris will also tell you that while the complex constructs of classical music inform his choreography, so do the cartoons of Hanna-Barbera and Walt Disney. In *Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes*, Morris essentially borrows the gestures and the garb of wrestling to create his own black comedy of senseless repeated pounding and tumbling in a void. In one sequence, which Morris calls The Bitch Fight, two female dancers, each held aloft by three other dancers, are brought face to face for a battle. It's done in painfully drawn-out slow motion, each blow sending the victims with the support of their carriers into stage-long, midair tumbles or rubberball bounce. "It's just like in cartoons," he says excitedly, "where you get hit in the face and you go up in the air and then waft to the ground like a leaf. That kind of thing is what I love to watch. It's so satisfying to see somebody get punched, go around the world, and come back covered with stickers from all the different countries."

As someone preoccupied with ways of moving through space, Morris is particularly fascinated by stories of people falling down. Not long ago, after talking with a woman about her new baby and the unique way babies fall—a kind of sudden, boneless collapse to another level—Morris had his dancers try that very thing in his Violent Femmes dance. They were sore for a week. To this day, he claims his biggest epiphany, outside of the ones music inspires, is based on the sight of someone falling. Morris was just out of high school, traveling in Madrid. A woman carrying two large grocery bags was trying to cross a traffic circle. She got halfway across and for a moment stood alone on the center island. When all was clear, she stepped off the curb. "She fell flat on her face," Morris recalls. "Her shoes came off and she slid forward from them, and then the bags slid out in front of her and the groceries forward from the bags, flat out, pssssshhh, completely horizontal. She wore glasses, and they went the farthest. It was incredible. She was deconstructed. Somehow that image still occurs in different ways in my dance."

Morris figures he's got a lot of dances in him, a dance a day, one every five minutes if pressed. He wants to choreograph some of Devo's music and more Louvin Brothers songs, one in particular called "A Shut-in's Prayer at Christmas," about an old invalid who says a prayer that his grandchildren traveling in a snow-storm to see him will arrive safely. "And they visit him," says Morris, "and he can't get out side, so he looks out the window and watches them playing, and it's Christmas Day. It's so depressing." Morris is also choreographing a vampire dance partly inspired by *Interview with a Vampire*, a book he likes, and he wouldn't mind at all someday doing choreography for rock videos, Broadway shows, movies, or whatever. He just wants to keep making dances. "I want to do this for a long time," he says matter-of-factly, because I'm that interested in it, and it's the only thing I feel I do well. I'm in terror otherwise. But it's not like I got an injury and couldn't dance anymore so I decided to become a choreographer. My mother took me to see the Jose Limon Company in Seattle when I was nine, and I knew, I actually knew, that I had to make dances. I didn't do all of this to become a world-famous, iconoclastic choreographer. I just started making up dances, and then suddenly it's not just friends of the dancers who are coming to see them."

The second night's performance above the Most Wishful Sons of Haiti hall has just ended, and a full crowd awaits Mark Morris's entrance and bows. By now, it seems, most of Seattle knows of their native son's return. The remaining shows are all sold out, and the local papers have been profiling and interviewing him all week long. On opening night the Kings County Arts Commission filled the front row center of the balcony and beamed. One guy, who must have been at least six feet six inches tall and had to sit sideways in one of the cramped performing space's folding chairs, had driven two and a half hours south from Vancouver just for the show. And everyone's been treated to vintage Morris. There were the two pieces set to classical scores, *Vestige* and *Marble Halls*, and a piece called *Songs That Tell a Story*, choreographed to the Louvin Brothers—a dance given to a more literal miming of the lyrics and to slapstick displays that seem at once out of place and welcome at a modern-dance performance. Seattle has also seen its own Mark Morris

appear in his underwear with a paper bag over his head to dance a solo to three turn-of-the century "parlor songs" that sound like they're being sung by Dudley Doornight. The first is about the Unknown Soldier, the second is about a tree—not just any, but the one we'll never see a poem as lovely as—and the last describes the end of a perfect day, during which Morris flops and flays awkwardly about the stage as though he's been pent up with perfection a little too long. While it's a funny dance—especially when Morris, midway through the song, dashes off, clamors around back stage, and reappears on the other side like a noisy sunset—it's also somewhat pathetic and sad.

Seattleites aren't quite sure what to make of Morris. Proud that he's famous and from there, they remain a bit wary of his penchant for the peculiar. Many seem content just to house a celebrity without having to get involved with the particulars of what he does. The afternoon before the second night's performance, Morris had stopped into—more like swirled through—a popular local seafood restaurant at the height of the lunch hour. Wearing gold-and-black paisley pants, a gold-and-black triangle-pattern shirt, a bright-green sport coat, sunglasses, sandals, and white socks, he sent the place in to table-long whippers and double takes. When everything settled down, a woman seated near Morris leaned away from her lunch to ask if he wasn't, in fact, himself, and he smiled and said, yes, he was, and she, in a motherly manner, expressed how nice it was to have him home and then went back to her meal. Morris, feeling a bit stranded, asked her if she was aware that his group was currently performing in town. "Oh, no, I didn't know that," she said. "That's nice." And that ended that. Morris is not insensitive to the more provincial attitudes of his hometown. He just delights occasionally in upsetting them, which he calls his reaction to reactionaryism. There was, for example, the debut of that "other dance" in the Seattle show, the one called *Lovey*, with the naked baby dolls and the *Violent Femmes* songs, songs that dwell on rather depraved emotional states, one a dark parody of country-song tragedy in which a cabin-fevered father tosses his daughter down a well, and the others about soured and sordid love relationships. The arts commission stiffened a bit in their seats and went visibly white when the dancers did their nasty duets with the dolls. A local dance critic accused Morris of setting the

anti-child-pornography movement back ten years.

Morris seemed encouraged both by the strength and the inaccuracy of the responses. "One woman who works with children told me, 'It's a really important issue and I'm so glad you dealt with it,'" says Morris. "Well, I'm not necessarily dealing with it just because they're dolls. I use them in different ways in the dance. Basically they're the only refuge—the dancers hardly ever deal with each other, only with their dolls. Also, I see so many dances that are kind of about people 'doing it,' and I'd rather see them do it for once instead of longing for each other all the time. I get tired of that kind of nonspecific longing—modern-dance longing. The piece is called *Lovey*, because that's the name of my niece's doll, which she carried around forever. When she got in trouble, it was the only thing she went to for comfort, like only *Lovey* understands—this little stupid doll that's so ugly and has no hair and everybody hates. She had these radical changes with it, like it's the only thing she loved and the only thing she could punish when she got punished, the only thing she had power over. It's not pretty, so I wanted to make the dance real ugly. It doesn't make you happy to watch, and that's fine; that's my decision. I don't just want to give people a nice date."

Now Morris, in the same green sport coat, paisley pants, sandals, and white socks, dashes out before the Friday-night crowd. Garish but graceful, he waves his arms, smiling; everything about him says he's happy to be back home, and Seattle, applauding, is happy to have him. They think.

Charles Siebert is a poet and freelance journalist living in New York. This essay originally appeared in the December 1985 issue of *Esquire*.