

The New York Native

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by Marcia Pally

Split Stream

Mark Morris Dance Group
at Dance Theater Workshop
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I would like to begin with the seemingly obvious statement that Mark Morris makes dances that move, and I suppose, since dance is usually considered a kinetic art, that doesn't seem like much of a statement, let alone a compliment. But Morris's talent for keeping his pieces going is exceptional. As a matter of fact, his choreographic abilities on the whole are pretty impressive. He understands the particular uses of both complicated and simple staging. He strikes a balance between providing a variety of movement and fully developing a single phrase; his spatial design is sophisticated and graceful, and the pacing is fast enough to be a step ahead of the audience without the dance ever looking busy or rushed.

As if this weren't enough, in "I Love You Dearly" (to traditional Rumanian music) and "Castor and Pollux" (music by Harry Partch), Morris succeeds in the nearly impossible task of combining gestures from ethnic sources with current dance vocabulary. The link between these two usually incompatible forms is the music. Like Lar Lubovitch (in whose company Morris danced), Morris doesn't so much dance to the music as allow it to generate (inspire?) his movement motifs. The sound gives the dance its themes, coherence, and unity, and if this relationship between music and movement isn't

the most avant-garde, it certainly gives Morris's work its warmhearted tone. In short, Morris's work is like a good Haydn concerto: extraordinarily skillful and enormously satisfying.

Haydn, of course, lived in the eighteenth century and so you may think that Morris's dances are a bit out of date. Not so. While there's little angst, trauma, or other modern merriments in Morris's concert, there is some delightful satire and a frank gay sensibility.

In "10 Suggestions" (music by Tcherpnin) Morris appears in mauve, Pierrot pajamas and, by mimicking the music with comic precision and exaggerating his gestures ever so slightly, he parodies the dance, theater, art, and affectations of the '30s. His satire is swift, subtle, and never belabors the point.

Much of the material from the '30s that Morris chose took its punch even then from sex-role reversal—daintily hiking up one's pajama legs and mincing around on half-toe isn't funny unless the mincer is male, and a man going through the motions of the hunt isn't comical unless his arms are a bit too limp and the motions a shade too fey. In using these touches for his comedy, Morris spoofs not only Art Deco sensibility but traditional masculine and feminine mannerisms. "10 Suggestions" is an elegantly danced drag show.

Elegant and *danced* are key words here, because, though Morris performs the work with just the right campy nuances, he never relies on mugging or playing to the audience. He makes "10 Suggestions" as fine a dance as all his others.

If Morris had just his craft, he might become the next Paul Taylor, and while that's no insult, I'm not sure we really need another Paul Taylor. What we really need is skills like Morris's put to the service of social comment and satire.