

From Segregation to Androgyny

by Barry Laine

Mark Morris
Dance Theater Workshop
Dec. 8 - Dec. 18

If Jones's and Monte's dances are self-referential—that is, the same-sex worlds they evoke exist independently of another gender—Mark Morris has created some all-male and all-female dances that synthesize, rather than distill, identity.

By way of prologue, Morris must be acknowledged as a rising choreographer of expansive talent, both prolific and ingenious. Many of his dances are parodic in genre, but his conceptual rather than literal approach—Morris satirizes ideas rather than simply steps—gives the work subtlety and depth. And when Morris frees himself from gimmick or satire, he is capable of works of great beauty and understanding, such as *New Love Song Waltzes* or the recent, all-male, *The Death of Socrates*.

In *The Death of Socrates* (to Satie's vocal score), Morris's sense of masculinity transcends convention. Each of the six barefoot dancers is costumed in a simple white tunic, cinched over one shoulder and at the waist. Fey little dresses after all, these pleated tunics fall with grace even as they ride the muscular thighs of the tightly built male bodies. The choreography is often angular—sharp and posed—but softened by fluttering gestures.

Socrates evokes images of Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a Faun* and Balanchine's *Apollo*, and along with them, the artistry of Greek vase painting. Those fragile renderings of virile men are suggested not only in visual tableaux, but by the deliberate, careful pacing of the dance. Six men enter one by one, dance separately but simultaneously, and then in unison; the dance deconstructs in symmetrical fashion, building a sense of accumulated loss as the performers exit in turn. *Socrates* is work of rare restraint, reigning in the natural strength of its male dancers in exquisite delicacy.

Morris's approach may be deemed androgynous, but in a same-sex context for either men or women, it is the broad range of possibility, rather than equality of gender, that is highlighted. His *Celestial Greetings*, an all-female dance for six to popular Thai music, presented women as naturally athletic as the men were graceful. A reference to *Swan Lake's* pas de quatre (here in trio) only helped remind us of their anything-but-classical activity.

These were practical women, dressed in decoratively colored, but eminently functional, pants and blouse outfits. The choreography alluded to sports, perhaps, with movements seemingly borrowed from track and field and wrestling. The women also lifted and supported each other, matter-of-factly and with ease. On the whole, they danced in a broad, friendly, but business-like manner—in striking comparison to the precious detailing of the male ensemble in *Socrates*.

Liberation—on or off-stage—comes in many guises. Sometimes it's learning to reach beyond others' (and your own) conventions and expectations; sometimes it's simply learning to celebrate who and what you already are. +