

# A Giggle for the Postmodern Mind

75  
VOICE JANUARY 3, 1984

By Deborah Jowitt

**ZE'VA COHEN AND DANCERS.** At Theater of the Riverside Church, (November 30 to December 4). *Cohen's Ring of Silence*; *Goat Dance/Listen*; premieres of *Shifting Ground* and *Rainwood*; Susan Buirage's *In Front*.

**CINEPROBE: An Evening with Kathy Rose.** At Museum of Modern Art (November 21). *Primitive Movers* and five animated films.

**THEY WON'T SHUT UP (SCREWS LOOSE).** At Performance Space 122 (December 2 to 4). Improvisations.

**MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP.** At Dance Theater Workshop (December 8 to 18). The "Tamil Film Songs in Stereo" *Pas de Deux*; *Celestial Greetings*; *The Death of Socrates*; *Minuet and Allegro in G*; *Dad's Charts*; *Canonic ¼ Studies*.

It's usually apparent when a choreographer believes in the primacy of The Step—he or she starts with a little rope of dancing and twists and knots it into an array of patterns. You can tell, too, when a choreographer develops dancing out of static design, or out of human action or gesture.

I don't think that Ze'eva Cohen is a "step" choreographer. She seems to construct dances out of ideas like reaching, listening, folding in, testing the ground. A solo like her 1976 *Ring of Silence* is a journey, remarkable for the dramatic interplay of smooth intensity and delicate suddenness. She has a strong eye for design though: the extreme positions she passes through are several degrees removed from natural human behavior, like wood carvings of people. The hero of her *Goat Dance/Listen* is all cocky attitudes and wild, brusque exuberance—some biblical shepherd-boy hero perhaps.

In *Front*, a solo composed by Susan Buirage, performed by Cohen on her Riverside Church programs, shows off Cohen's expressive range, but in a limited way. In retrospect, it seems to portray a choreographer at work—alternating between "hey-why-don't-I-try? ..." and pensive slumps and sits. It's hard to see a progression in it, although I daresay there is one, because the woman finally decides

to leave the stage, walks slowly off, at the last minute throwing the audience an irritatingly perky glance.

For years now, Cohen has been presenting herself in solo programs of dances by herself and others; her few pieces of group choreography have been mounted for companies like the Batsheva, the Boston Ballet. I'm glad to see her assemble a little company (all women) and create in a less pressured way.

Both *Rainwood* (1977) and her new pieces, *Shifting Ground* extend her interest in human gesture to group gesture. It's the group as an organism that interests her, I think—the way it can contract or expand, the way its individual members can become more independent, or less. For instance, *Rainwood* has a long, slow, quite magical beginning in which the seven women take turns leaving the pulsing circle in which they stand—adventuring beyond the confines of their tribe, coming back to it for support. In *Shifting Ground*, six women begin in a clump, holding tightly to each other. They share the same vocabulary: the same loose jumps, the same whipping circle of arms that rounds their bodies over. They explore new territory in canon, as do the women in *Rainwood*—alike in design, separate in time. There are some duets, one extremely nice. By the end, the women are still together, but less timorous, less actively dependent on each

other; the give and take of patterns has become a metaphor for the give and take of ideas which has strengthened the group.

In both these dances, Cohen's strong sense of design inhibits her expressiveness. When the women move out in space, they almost always do so in horizontal tracks, profile to the audience. It gives

them a look that is timeless, but flat—as if they were a border design around the bottom of a vase.

●

Dancer/animation artist Kathy Rose definitely sees the world in two-dimensions. Her intriguing November program at the Museum of Modern Art offered five short films she made between 1973 and 1978 plus *Primitive Movers*, a duet between the live Rose and an animated film. Perhaps not unexpectedly, her films are dancerly while her dancing is quite static and cartoonish.

One of the characteristics of her film style is a constant, fluid transformation. Figures change shape and color and essence in smooth, exuberant curlicues. In one film, she the artist gives her characters a funny dance lesson (and herself a drawing lesson at the same time, I guess),

looks like a real person and not just the drawing-that-happens-to-breathe.

Improvised performances reveal a lot about how performers approach dancing. These people decided to get together at P.S. 122 and improvise for the public: John Bernd, Charles Dennis, Frank Conversano, Fred Holland, Yvonne Meier, Jennifer Miller, Mark Russell, Susan Seizer, Stephanie Skura. Presumably they thought they had something in common. Maybe they do: at the performance of *They Won't Shut Up (Screws Loose)* that I saw, it struck me that they're all interested in taking a basic any-old action and playing with it—walk in a circle and see what happens; take a partner and fall on top of him, now let him fall on you. Stephanie Skura is a bundle of shrugs and quirks. Yvonne Meier has a favorite at-

wearing a skirt, doing a mad dervish routine off to the side. Then the men took over. In the second half, when the women moseyed across during a men's dance, the men crunched out some mildly bantering remarks, like "look out, here they come again." A slow, tender, tumbling duet between Bernd and Seizer was the only bit of noncompetitive male-female dancing all evening. Skura imitated Conversano rather mockingly, while claiming seriously, to be trying to "be" him. Later she got her skirt over Dennis's head and kept him there thrashing around, while the two of them rolled over and over.

It was an interesting evening, watching the messages roll out from under the messages—the dissimilarities and competitions poking through the our-gang surface.

●

Mark Morris, a very very talented fellow, is certainly a man for steps—all kinds of steps. He's got a connoisseur's eye for them and a postmodernist's assimilative mind. But human attitudes play a big role too. For instance, the opening number on his second DTW program, *The "Tamil Film Songs in Stereo" Pas de Deux* sends up just about every Modern Dance choreographer of note in the format of a rehearsal between a choreographer (Morris) and an eager dancer (Nora Reynolds). Her straining to copy his extravagances dovetails absurdly with the recorded chanting lesson between an adamant guru and an increasingly tearful pupil. In his *Canonic ¼ Studies*, Morris creates some superbly stylish—and hilarious—dances to a medley of the kind of waltzes that ballet class accompanists love. It's the usually astute way Morris manipulates a select number of moves that creates the joke. For instance, in one dance, Erin Matthiessen is the accommodating porteur for two women (Teri Weksler and Penny Hutchinson:) he lifts one past him in a leap; as she runs around behind him,

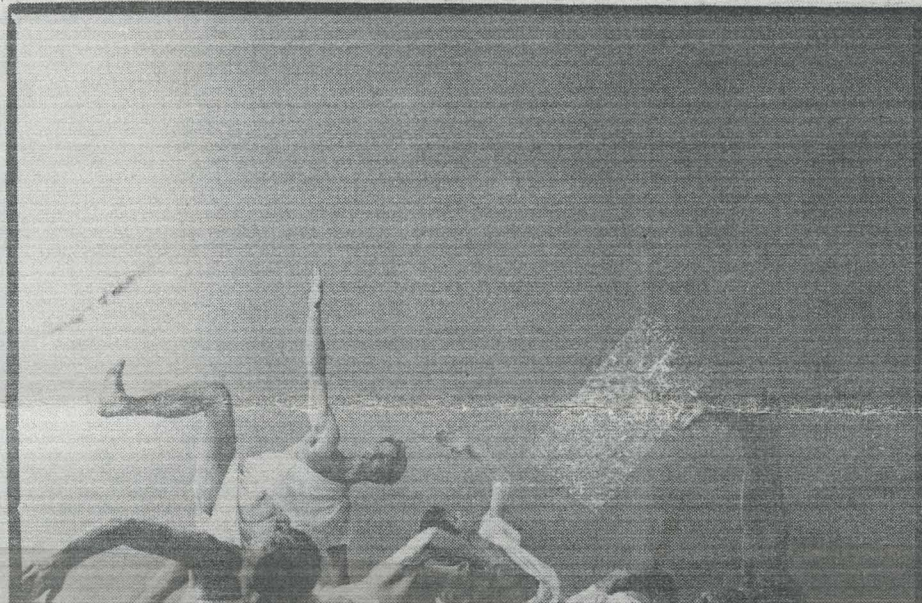
he turns to do the same for the other. And so on and on, until he starts grabbing one and putting her back where she came from, sort of snatching her out of the air, without a break in the soupy, sweet-tempered rhythm.

He turns Beethoven's *Minuet and Allegro in G* into an intricate chase for two busy dancers (Tina Fehlandt and Jennifer Thienes), the one circling on the outside track keeps falling behind. But it's a real dance, not just a gag. His own solo, *Dad's Charts*, presents him as a stumbly everyman, who is, in fact, doing a kind of striptease—not shedding all his clothes, although he does drop an overcoat, hat, and many sundry articles along the way, but caught up in some dreadful high-kicking show stuff. It's as if he were trying to get down a street and this dance kept half taking over his body. Morris, with his rich, loose body, rumpled curls, big downturned eyes and little downturned mouth, is very good at looking aghast baffled and thrilled at the same time.

Not all Morris's dances are funny. *Celestial Greetings* is a light, very formal little dance for six women to popular Thai music—its little run-and-embrace motifs turning into three attractive repetitive running dances, postmodern Virginia reels. And *The Death of Socrates* is elegaic and quite beautiful. To Satie's limpid *Socrates*, six men in Greek tunics enter one by one, each fitting into what

seems like a long canon, but isn't. As the stage gradually fills, then empties until only Rob Besserer is left, we see the simple grave gestures echo around the space—the way ideas of a master might appear in the discourse of a disciple. The men are are Besserer, Matthiessen, David Landis, Jon Mensinger, Donald Mouton, Guillermo Resto.

## DANCE



LOIS GREENFIELD

Mark Morris's *The Death of Socrates*

and in the bizarre calisthenic sequence, they obediently loop their necks and put their heads through their bodies and out the other side.

In *Primitive Movers*, her principal image is one of dancers in a kind of modernist chorus line—women in tube dresses, with chopped-off hair, bending their bodies into improbable geometrics. Often, the effect is art-deco Egyptian. Rose, confined to the area in front of or just beside the screen, can seem like a leader or like a follower. She can remove parts of her severely elegant costume, but her drawings can change costume at a second's notice. They can take their arms off where she can only circle hers. Sometimes she is in counterpoint to their mechanical unison: sometimes her shadow blots out their antics.

It's curious. The idea is immensely

clever and beguiling, but it seems still at the gimmick stage. The live woman looks just as two-dimensional as the drawn ones gyrating rhythmically, their rhythms and hers determined by a truly numbing mechanical blooming. For me, the most wonderful moment is one in which Rose balances on one leg shakily, while behind her a landscape tilts and swings. Suddenly she

backfalling, so adventurous and careless of each other that it almost wasn't fun to watch.

I don't know why the evening turned into a curious, rather uncomfortable show about gender. I don't think this was determined by the bits of paper each person drew from a hat. The women started, mostly working in pairs, with Russell,

backfalling, so adventurous and careless of each other that it almost wasn't fun to watch.

●