

# The Inkbrush Workout

By Burt Supree

**DANCING INK II.** At Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, 288-6400 (November 15 and 16). A collaboration with calligraphy and photography by Wang Fang-yu, choreography and direction by Ohad Naharin.

The flow and thrust of the brushstroke in Chinese calligraphy would be a natural invitation to the dancer/choreographer in search of a score. The disposition of the figures on the paper, the flair and complexity of the individual ideograms, the zigzags and curls and blots, the varying calligraphic styles could be translated into the arrangements of dancers in the space and the shapes their bodies might take, and suggest the qualities of energy that might spur their movement. Also, there's the poetic content of the source—in the case of *Dancing Ink II*, the evocative nature-poetry of the eighth century poet Wang Wei—to further inspire the live event.

For all those reasons, *Dancing Ink II* is one of those ideas that sounds sensible, almost inevitable; yet the elements somehow resist incorporation. In Ohad Naharin and Wang Fang-yu's collaboration (with rather trivial travelogue music by

Robert Ruggieri), the choreographic and visual elements are displayed together, but they don't fuse or give each other a lift. It's pleasing when you see the connection, say, in a dancer's folding body and the whiplash of a brushstroke character, but it's muddling, then, when you don't. This makes the program ticklish—a little like some kind of aptitude test.

The vivid calligraphy of Wang's high-contrast slides fades into silvery reverse, changes size, gets variously, and sometimes humorously juxtaposed, but the projections are always removed from the dancing, always a reference, something to compare to the dancing. Perhaps if the screen on which they are rear-projected were the full size of the rear wall instead of movie-screen size, if the slides filled the space behind the dancers instead of hanging above them, it all might read differently. But meanwhile, either the dancing reads like subtitles for the calligraphy, or vice versa. And both are diminished by the comparison.

Naharin comments in the program on Wang's "quick, effortless brushstrokes," and how they made him want to dance that way. But on the whole, the dancing

is muted and studied. Maybe it's excess of respect that makes the program logy. Like the way a bespectacled chanter in a long coat (Parker Po-fei Huang) is twice integrated into the choreography in a dutiful, pro forma way. On the other hand, repetitions, duplications, and formal arrangements are among the pleasures of the evening.

The dancers are reticent too. Mari Kajiwara sometimes conveys a languorous opulence; the others—Kenneth Bowman, Irene Ouzounoglou, and the eloquent Iris Hoffman—are sharper, resolute, more nearly abstract. Except Naharin himself: as alert as a cougar, if he looks anywhere, it's for a reason. Without seeking to dramatize, he is dramatic. Unusually supple, articulate, sensual, he has the knack of shaping every phrase in a suspenseful way.

I was intrigued by the pushy, weighted quality of some of the partnering, like a duet between Naharin and Ouzounoglou where they keep shoving away and irresistibly falling and resting on each other. I liked the rare, one-shot contrasts, like Hoffman and Ouzounoglou racing circles around Kajiwara as she slowly promenades, or Naharin breaking out of a duet with Bowman by diving away and sliding halfway across the stage on his belly.

A sharp wit sometimes informs Naharin's calligraphic parallels. My favorite

was one surprise, punchline finish when Naharin threw Kajiwara into Bowman's arms and the moment of the catch—with Bowman bowed over his human bundle—matched the left-side figure of the calligraphy. Another was satisfying partly because you could watch it brewing. Two dancers, and a third holding a red scarf, appear. You know they'll match the calligraphy because the scarf has got to be the equivalent of the artist's red stamp. Two bend slightly, but remain reasonably erect, the third slides out along the floor, like the lazily curling black stroke on the screen, and drops the scarf like a small puddle of red paint. ■

## JOWITT

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were we supposed to imagine that nun in El Salvador? The confusion grows. And in this scene, the performances seem clumsy, the staging underworked.

Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table*, which is often construed as an antiwar statement, is a masterpiece for many reasons, but one is that it doesn't deliver messages about war and death, it allows us to discover our own feelings by watching emotionally vivid gestures and patterns. Perhaps the reason Cummings's nun seems out of place is that she's the only one presented as a complex character. ■

## LEGWORK

### He's So Unusual

By Lois Draegin

"It's not real important for me to be the Keith Haring of choreographers," says choreographer Mark Morris with a toss of his Prince Charming curls. "To have that sort of celebrity or fashion. People like my dances because they like my dances—not because I'm climbing the ladder to stardom as a choreographer." Which, nevertheless, he is: in under four years the 28-year-old Morris has sailed along a path that most young choreographers can only eye with longing and calculation, from performing in the Lower Manhattan showcases that matter to a spot on the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave series November 28 to December 2. All this despite an almost perverse disregard for what usually passes for How-Things-Are-Done. He doesn't have a company—just a cluster of friends who sort of get together when available, when needed; no manager or press agent. He's not incorporated either. "I'm working on it," he says, "but it's very sudden and I have no business sense at all. I'm an idiot. I can't even balance my checkbook. I'm probably going to go to prison." Offered the chance to choreograph a Broadway-bound production of *South Pacific*, he turned it down because he was committed to BAM. To top it off, this year he did the unthinkable for a choreographer who wants to make it—he left New York and moved to Seattle.

But then Mark Morris is, well, unusual. To put it more bluntly, he's the picture of outrageousness. With his tangled mass of shoulder-length brown curls, saucers of blues eyes, two gold hoops in one ear, and ample body, he comes across like an overgrown cherub—one who's been around. Invariably there's a bottle of beer in one hand, a clove cigarette in the other. And his clothes—just to give an example of a typical Morris ensemble: when he bounded to the stage to receive one of the first New York Dance and Performance Awards for choreography in September he sported a navy blue shirt patterned with heavy gold Oriental designs worn over bright aqua pants, lime green socks, and sandals. Add to this visual flamboyance a loud unpredictability, an infectious energy, and a pliable face that may pucker in mock disdain one moment, or recoil in mock horror the next. "Weird? Yeah, I guess people

think I'm weird," he sweetly observes. Some people have called him difficult, irreverent, comments he tosses off with a shrug. "I'm honest," he says. "I may be sarcastic or cynical or spiritually oriented—depend-ing on what's happening. But I don't lie. And that's a difficult thing for some people to accept."

No one can argue with his dancing and choreography. Almost from the moment he stepped off the plane from Seattle at 19 he began performing with the companies of Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean, and Hannah Kahn. He's been choreographing since he was 14, his first efforts—"wild chaotic dances"—presented in a hometown recital, shared the stage with "babies in strawberry costumes." Now, he ingenuously notes, "I'm just making up these dances. I figured I'd probably have a career at it, but this career is like mistletoe—suddenly people know who I am and I'm supposed to be careful about what I say. And I'm not. I don't do cocktail parties or things like that. I do cocktails."

For all his eccentricity, when it comes to his dances—intelligent, deeply felt, wittily original settings of movement to music—he's picked a more conventional route, which makes him even more of an anomaly among the ranks of young choreographers. "I feel I have very little to do with my peers," the popular East Village "dance club" as he calls it. He's right too. His musical choices run more to elegiac Satie vocal pieces or delicately rhythmic Thai music than to any of the new music that comes out of the Manhattan performance scene. His movement, taken from his own raw body, draws on a background in ethnic dance for shapes, rhythmic complexity, and a feeling of community; on ballet for a technical base; on modern and postmodern dance for context. But even more: while many fledgling choreographers often seem to be trying to figure out how to be musical, how to be different, how to make a theatrical statement, Morris is a natural. In his dances musicality and meaning are instinctively part of the movement—and that's an awesome and rare talent.

Where he really parts ways with his peers, where he's downright unfashionable, is in his fervor for meaning in dance. "All dancing means something,"



Mark Morris

he says—he's passionate on the subject. "I want people to watch my dance and be surprised and laugh maybe. Or gasp. Or see something different not because it's so innovative and original but because it's a possibility that hasn't been thought of, that therefore can allow a tiny opening in set minds. As far as changing the human situation, this is my chosen method."

The critical and popular raves that greeted Morris's last New York season practically hailed him as dance's Great New Hope. That's when, in typically independent form, he picked up and left New York for Seattle. That plan had been in the offing for several years. "I'll still perform in New York," he explains, "but I don't like living there. I find it demeaning. Dehumanizing. I want a life. I don't just want to be a fabulous artist. I think you can only be a fabulous artist—with a capital F—if

there's something to draw from. And that means dealing with 16-year-olds and having neighbors." Now he and his lover are settled close to his family in a tiny house near a lake, thrift store furnished in red, with a big backyard and cozy kitchen. Friends drop by, hang out. "It's normal—whatever that is—and it's very comfortable."

Morris will be too busy to spend a lot of time there this year. He's booked through June. "I've never had to think that far ahead before," he marvels. Someday he'd like to do Broadway shows, operas, movies, videos, whatever—this fall he choreographed a new fruit drink commercial. He doesn't care. He just wants to keep on making up dances. "I would like to do a Christmas pageant at some point," he says. "I like spectacles. Of course," he adds, with a wicked grin, "in my version Jesus would have to be a black lesbian mother." ■