

MARK MORRIS didn't call his Brooklyn Academy of Music concert "The Modern Dance Till Now," though he well might have; the three numbers on the program took us from Bennington through Judson to Morris's own era in ninety minutes (with intermission). When it was over, it seemed as if Morris, in summing up his tradition, had placed himself in charge of it and could now take it wherever he liked. 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. In dance, the present is the only known tense, so the spell cast by a Mark Morris is the illusion of a perspective—seeing the past and the future simultaneously contained within the present, seeing Then as Now, Now as Forever. And within this perspective there is the no less fascinating spectacle of Morris's own evolution. I felt that "Gloria," the earliest work on the program, was not quite the whole Morris, yet it has things—a musical score, for one, most sensitively treated—that the latest piece doesn't have. And it is a kind of modern-dance compendium in itself.

The rhetorical style of "Gloria" is

in the main a recapitulation of an early pietistic phase in modern dance which has actually persisted in the work of Alvin Ailey and some others. Set to Vivaldi's Gloria in D, the choreography is full of the sky-sweeping arms, canting torsos, and ecstatic, relevé-triggered spiralling "falls and recoveries" that were dear to the heart of old Bennington. But the piece is also a postmodern testament: there is the odd gesture, the convulsive accent, the mild strain of dissonance; one person shoves another, hands grip crotches, a whole bunch of people fall to the floor and crawl forward on their bellies. If the "uplift" movement recalls at times the puritanical fervor of Doris Humphrey (at other times the unction of Ailey), it also hints at the radical simplicity and frankness of Paul Taylor. But the breezy impenitence of it all summons up the robotic era, just past, of motiveless motion and druggy dissociative gesture typified by such choreographers as Laura Dean and Andy deGroat. These echoes appear not as a nice neat set of discrete evocations but as a scrambled-together cacophonous mass of material. Maybe to Morris the past is all one piece of goods, and it could be that what I see as a historic survey (the religiosity of the thirties generation superimposed

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Championship Form

on the ritualism of the seventies, or the other way around) is only his response as a choreographer to a certain kind of music. He danced for several seasons in the company of Hannah Kahn, who sets pleasantly anachronistic joy-of-dance movement to classical music. Like Morris's, Kahn's technique is highly kinetic, and she uses the same kind of wide stance, broad upper body, and round, full phrasing. But I find no adventure in the dances and no musical feeling to compare with his. Morris also danced with Dean, who was possibly a more potent influence. At all events, he hasn't turned out a pastiche. The fact that he has made a very successful new version of a modern-dance staple shows that an instinct for the new can coexist with a taste for the perennial. (This may seem a cliché, but count up the "new" choreographers and see how many there are to whom it actually applies.) Even if Morris was as conscious of his past in making "Gloria" as I was in watching it, I think his impulse must have been to make it as if no one had been there before him. I also suspect that, seen at an earlier stage of his development, "Gloria" (which is in fact a reworking of a 1981 piece) would have been the evening's high point—the event that revealed the Mark Morris. It wasn't this time, and not because the two newer pieces were without doubt the weirdest to be seen on any stage this season.

Behind the weirdness, Morris has a lot of common sense. The second work on the program was a twenty-minute solo that he performed himself.

Twenty minutes is a long time for a solo, but not for this tour de force. Morris had adapted to his own purposes classical Indian dance forms, which with their typically protracted time sense and repetitive structures have inspired a whole body of avant-garde music and dance in America; even as he danced, "Einstein on the Beach" was being rehearsed in another part of the building. Yet seeing Morris in the guise of an Indian classical dancer was something of a shock. He appeared in a loincloth, with his shoulder-length curls unbound, and with

his palms and the soles of his big feet anointed with red paint. These trappings were assumed quite unaffectedly; the dance turned out to be a personal variation on Indian dance themes, no more ethnological than the music of Philip Glass. Yet Morris's performance was as far from the minimalism of Glass, Steve Reich, and their attendant school of choreography as the real, rich, endlessly nuanced ancient art of India is itself. In those twenty minutes, Morris established two points of connection with the past. First, he is the link, missing until now, to the mid-seventies and the cult of Eastern music and dance which began flourishing then. Second, he transcends cultism and becomes himself a connection to the original source material—becomes, indeed, a kind of corrective to the cult. Instead of a score by Glass or Reich, Morris uses a tape of "O Rangasayee," a raga by Sri Tyagaraja. M. S. Subbulakshmi, who sings on the tape, has a soft, supple, velvety voice, and Morris produces movements that are a mirror of her inflections, even of the texture of her sound. Some of his movements—the warrior stances, the one-legged Shiva-like poses en face with cocked knees and angled arms—are traditional; others appeared to be freely invented, though close enough to the tradition to seem part of it. (If there were an indigenous modern dance in Southern India today, it might look like this.) In what he attempts here, Morris evokes another tradition—that of Ted Shawn and his dances of the Orient. Shawn, however, Westernized his models; one can't imagine him performing a twenty-minute raga or, if he ever did, observing its structural pattern. In one section of "O Rangasayee," Morris does about fifteen repeats of a passage on the diagonal, which he varies occasionally with lateral sorties at the rear of the stage. Every time—every single time—Morris repeated the diagonal sequence, it was different. He followed a basic pattern: holding himself in profile, he would back upstage in small, delicate emboîtés, then abruptly about-face and walk the rest of the way squarely erect, waggling his head. Whirling and continuing to whirl, he would come back downstage in a wide-striding crouch. The sequence was a loop, and as one watched it one saw shortened and lengthened phrases, phrases thickened or attenuated, accents shifted, attack altered. But one saw these things with one's second sight; primarily, the experience of the

passage was a purely rhythmic pleasure with incidental pleasures along the way. The head-wagging, for instance, became ever more mysterious, the emboîtés ever more delicious (Morris would vary the depth of his plié and the drumming of his feet as they travelled upstage). The catch step that resumed the emboîtés became—like the metal clasp on a necklace—a small event in itself, unwearyingly familiar, to offset new sparkles in a constantly changing configuration.

In his bearing, Morris has a relaxed and powerful physicality. He's voluptuous but not narcissistic. He gives the impression of dancing for his own pleasure, but without vanity. Not a small man, he's not all soft edges, either. Previous solos of his that I've seen have played on his androgynous quality, but "O Rangasayee" went beyond them all in its reconciliation of masculine and feminine aspects in his dancing. It excelled, too, in its labyrinthine rhythm and its dynamic use of antithetical energies (stasis-kinesis, abandon-control). Reconciliation of opposites was, in fact, the solo's poetic theme. East and West, tradition and the avant-garde as well as sexual ambiguities were brought to new harmonious resolutions, and it was done through the manipulation of abstract dance forces. In the solos in last year's New York concerts, Morris had shown himself to be a remarkable personality, with a sense of form and a flair for self-presentation. The solos were awesome, and afterward you wondered, Who is this guy? After "O Rangasayee," I still wonder at Mark Morris's mystery. But that he is one of the world's marvellous dancers I have no doubt.

Somewhere in his being, Morris is a philosophy major. Last year, he gave us a piece on the death of Socrates; this year, it's "Championship Wrestling

After Roland Barthes." The basic point Barthes makes in his amusingly pedantic essay "The World of Wrestling" is that wrestling is not a sport but a spectacle; it belongs to the theatre, and, like the theatre, it deals in "the intelligible representation of moral situations." Morris doesn't present a morality play. Since, according to Barthes, wrestling already is that, Morris focusses on the details of the way wrestlers look and act; he uses wrestling as a dance spectacle. The result is very different from Johanna Boyce or Molissa Fenley attempting to present sports as dance, and it's different from the various sports ballets, in which sports can't really exist. There is no tennis in "Jeux," no skating in "Les Patineurs." But everything about wrestling exists in "Championship Wrestling" except the actual clouting of the opponent—no one gets bruised. As a parody, the dance is practically one on one with its subject. Even point-scoring can be eliminated, because, if Barthes is right, what matters in wrestling is not the excellence of the contestants but their participation in a universal drama—"the great spectacle," as he puts it, "of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice." Wrestling (like dancing) has no hidden code of meaning; what you see is all there is to it. Ergo, on with the show.

Morris designed the piece for ten members of his company, five men and five women, and he has men fighting women as well as women fighting women and men fighting men. He doesn't try to make any of it beautiful; it's all as indefensibly stupid as it is in the arena, only—because of witty staging and impeccable comic timing—a thousand times funnier. The clinches, the body blows, the crashes to the floor are as finely engineered as the mayhem in vintage Tom and Jerry cartoons. In the most outlandish sequence, two antagonists supported by two teams are maneuvered against each other in slow motion. On contact, each delivers a blow—in slow motion. One punches the other's head precisely ten times, is punched back, and by dozens of grappling hands is turned head over heels slowly and excruciatingly, over and over and on and on. Herschel Garfein, the composer, has provided a half-documentary, half-cartoon score, filled with crowd noises and electronic whammies. The dancers, men and women alike, take their macho poses and hunker around with brute authority; they manage to look svelte and squat at the same time. As

the lights go down, they are lying all over the stage, slapping the floor with their hands in order, as Barthes says, "to make evident to all the intolerable nature of [their] situation."

The Mark Morris Dance Group ended the choreographers' series in this year's Next Wave Festival, which is how the Brooklyn Academy bills its programs of new or newish non-mainstream music and dance. Previous entrants—Meredith Monk and Ping Chong, Remy Charlip, Elisa Monte, and Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane—were presented in the Opera House; Morris was in the big cold cave on the second floor called the Lepercq Space. He not only defeated the disadvantage; he put on a show that in idiomatic range, technical command, and audacity of vision eclipsed the competition and, for the first time this season, justified the series' title.

—ARLENE CROCE