

New Stars and That Old Glow

By Deborah Jowitt

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. At Brooklyn Academy of Music's Lepercq Space, 30 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn, 636-4100 (November 28 to December 2). Premiere of *Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes*, New York premiere of *O Rangasayee*, also *Gloria*.

MARÍA BENÍTEZ SPANISH DANCE COMPANY. At the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, 242-0800 (November 28 to December 2). With guest José Greco.

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER. At City Center, 131 West 55th Street, 246-8989 (season November 28 to December 23). Premiere of Judith Jamison's *Divining*.

Among those choreographers, past and present, who can be lumped (if you ignore their screams) under the rubric of "modern dance," the creation of an individual style has been a major goal. Some, I think, have mistaken shtick for style. Mark Morris, on the other hand, is really an old-fashioned choreographer. The movement shapes and dynamic textures that he creates vary from dance to dance; about all that's consistent is a certain handling of repetition, a deliberate inattention to gender differences, and the boldness of his ideas. What might be termed eclecticism in a less gifted choreographer emerges as breadth. Had Doris Humphrey been as long-lived as her contemporary, Martha Graham, she might have been pleased to have him as a protégé.

"Old-fashioned" can hardly be applied to Morris's dances though. As his recent concerts in BAM's Lepercq Space showed, he has absorbed everything that's of use to him from the Postmodern annex, and his slant on the world is definitely of the '80s. For instance, some passages in his *Gloria*, set to Antonio Vivaldi's *Gloria in D*, show flying squads of dancers—curving their bodies sideways, 55leaping with bodies hovered over—in patterns that crisscross the stage or stipple it with small posses of twos or threes. The effect is not unlike something Humphrey might have created, or lightened-Limon. But there are other, odder sections. At the very beginning, after the audience has listened to a swatch of music, the lights (by Phil Sandström, and very fine) reveal a man and a woman advancing toward the audience—she walking stiffly, spraddle-legged, he inching along on his belly—both of them at odds with the jubilant music. Finally he rises, and, just as the lights go out, he whirls into a fall as if he'd been scythed. In the next section, all 10 dancers together pick up the awkward inching, moving from left to right across the space. Within the crawling horde, a struggling little canon of rolling develops, which gradually moves the entire line closer to the audience. Also within the horde, soloists appear with increasing frequency. One stands to perform a taut, yet flexible phrase, and as (or before) he/she falls back into the crawling, someone else has risen to embark on the same dance. The progression, the small distinctions are fascinating to watch, yet the passage has an insistent, repetitive feel that audiences of 25 years ago mightn't have had the patience to watch.

As can be guessed from the above description, Morris explores the dark side of Vivaldi's music, as well as the joyful one. Out of a harmonious dance for pairs and trios comes a splendid dark solo for Keith Sabado, set to the "Qui Tollis." One brief quartet boils with jumps, but another makes it possible to see the dancers as survivors—dancers carry each other; Teri Weksler is half-dragged, clinging to the end of the line that Guillermo Resto leads. A section in which the dancers fall into one another's arms isn't entirely blissful either, nor is a passage in which one after another they dive to the floor and slide on their bellies, only to revert to that uncomfortable inching.

There's no melodrama in *Gloria* and no frosting of piety. That, in a dance of this sort, is novel, but otherwise *Gloria* is the

least daring dance Morris showed at BAM. What do you say, for example, to a very long solo by Morris in which he looks like a cross between Dürer's Christ and the seductive female soloists of India's Orissi style? The music for *O Rangasayee* (by Sri Tyagaraja; sung by Smt. M. S. Subbulakshmi) sounds traditional in terms of instruments, vocal techniques, and harmonies, but may not be entirely so. Morris acknowledges Indian dance traditions in much subtler ways. He takes some time to rise from the floor where he has crouched, gently shaking his mop of dark curls. Once risen, he embarks on a long pattern rich with steps. The way he thrusts one hip out, falls into a wide second-position plié, curls a wrist, quivers his head, carefully lifts one knee, may suggest Indian dance,

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but no gesture is authentic, and the "Indian" look comes as much from the rhythmic texture and pattern as from the steps. Morris studs the phrase with those assertive stops peculiar to Indian dancing; he repeats his long phrase over and over before moving on to a second, to a third. Sometimes he builds to double-timing his way through, then settles juicily back to slow tempo.

His image is seductive—the curls, the big eyes, the body bare except for its bulky loincloth. He sweeps his dancing through space then lets it sink into a muscular tracery of curves. Toward the end, he begins to assume poses with distorted, horrified facial expressions. He

unlooses the formality in runs and loose springy leaps, wild, deerlike. The dance is like an agon, some exhausting private ritual that results in the freezing of the spirit. Imagine doing *that* on the Next Wave Festival.

He recoups trendiness in one fell swoop with *Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes*, although the dance is not simply an essay in chic violence. To a score by Herschel Garfein that mixes computerized music with live-from-the-ring sportstalk, the dancers proceed to brutalize each other. The women and the men are equally strong and equally savage: Rob Besserer, Scott Cunningham, Ruth Davidson, Tina Fehlandt, Penny Hutchinson, David Landis, Donald Mouton, Guillermo Resto, Jennifer Thienes, Teri Weksler. It starts out simple. Warm up the old muscles, eyeball an opponent, stalk up, hurl him/her over your shoulder, stomp the guy, walk away. The holds become more and more vicious (funny too in some hideous way,); the incessant fighting begins to acquire a surreal quality, as if the matches will go on through eternity with no clear victor.

Midway through, one group of three picks up Hutchinson, another lifts Weksler. The women fight each other slowly and horribly, like Bunraku puppets forced into battle by their puppeteers. When Weksler is sent reeling, the handlers catch her and topple her slowly over and over through the air, passing her down the line. Toward the end, the wrestlers are groggy, but still picking fights. As the lights fade, they're wrestling themselves—tripping themselves up, putting hammerlocks on their own necks, immobilized in violence.