

MINDY ALOFF

Mark Morris Dance Group

Mark Morris, a 28-year-old dancer from Seattle, is turning out choreography so eclectic and smart that he makes one feel rejuvenated. Just when many dancegoers were resigned to experiencing the twilight of modern dance, this freshness is a tremendous achievement, a function of inventiveness, musicality, clarity, giddy wit and a cultivated naïveté. Morris's influences, which he readily acknowledges in interviews, include Balkan folk dancing, flamenco and early modern dance; his musical taste encompasses several centuries and more than one continent. Last year at Dance Theater Workshop, his company, the Mark Morris Dance Group, performed a work in which several women hopped about in fastidious patterns to Thai restaurant Muzak, and another in which, as a homage to Socrates, several half-naked men trailed across the floor to Satie. This past November, as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, Morris delivered an allegory of the American rat race, set to Herschel Garfein's collage of crowd sounds and electronically "realized" instrumental passages. The title, *Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes*, alludes to the essay that inspired both the structure and tone of the dance. Vivaldi's *Gloria in D* was

the background for *Gloria*, whose motifs were a stiff-kneed zombie walk and a lizardlike swish on the belly. And the pièce de résistance, *O Rangasayee*, consisted of a twenty-odd-minute solo to Indian vocal music, performed by Morris himself, in a Gandhi diaper, his palms and the edges of his feet painted crimson, his dark mass of tousled curls tossing flirtatiously against his muscular arms or braced thighs.

All of these were deft and carefully performed dance entertainments. Morris has already learned that any gesture—any subject matter—can work to any music, as long as the rhythmic context seems right. *O Rangasayee*, for example, is built up serially in two dimensions—pattern and emotion. Each verse of the song is a bit more ornamented than the previous one, and following the changes gives intellectual pleasure. Meanwhile the larger dynamic is from calm to frenzy. As with much of his work, Morris begins by setting out the basic movements of the piece, in this case poses that evoke both ancient Indian sculpture and famous dance photographs from the early part of this century. Many of the poses could, in another context, be coarse or erotic—a glance over a cocked shoulder, a wagging head and so forth—but here they are clearly to be seen as part of a larger process and so the lack of emphasis on any individual moment endows them all with innocence. When, at last, Morris lies on his back, sweating and spent, and rubs the blush on his hands along his naked stomach, the moment is as shameless as if the dancer were a child or an animal. I know of no other male dancer who could bring off this exact primeval tone.

In the *Roland Barthes* piece, Morris attempts to plunge us into violent action and to withdraw us stainlessly. The conceit is a bout of professional wrestling where, as in a superhero TV show, he uses slow motion to indicate heroic effort. (Barthes called such effort "emotional magniloquence.") At one point, one wrestler slugs another, and the victim, manipulated by her team, is converted on the recoil from a loser into an acrobat of God: the punch drives her into breathtaking lifts and a long somersault, thanks to her supporters, who become anonymous, machinelike as they act, in the manner of Japanese stagehands. The physical beauty of the sequence seems to serve a moral point about violence and delight, namely that

they can be successfully linked only in a comic world. *Roland Barthes* is a kind of retort to Twyla Tharp's *Fait Accompli*, with its boxing imagery and dark romanticism.

Indeed, its occasionally flagrant camp notwithstanding, Morris's work is less likely to err in the direction of sensual display than that of didacticism. Every so often, one glimpses the moralist behind the dance ("See, men can be lyric and vulnerable, women can be bellicose and unforgiving") and it's as if someone spiked an eggnog with cod-liver oil. I do understand that controlled doses of principle help to establish a point of view. In interviews, Morris has stated his desire to be "a master"—but he also specifies terms. After years in New York City trying to make ends meet as a performer (with Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn) and then as a choreographer, he moved back to Seattle; now he makes only occasional ventures to New York. He has also emphasized, both in his choreography and his public remarks, that he's gay and a feminist. There's no reason that Morris's convictions should be of less help to him than, say, cynicism is to Tharp or nihilism is to Paul Taylor. They just shouldn't get in the way of his dances.