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## Men Dancing Supplement

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Mark Morris





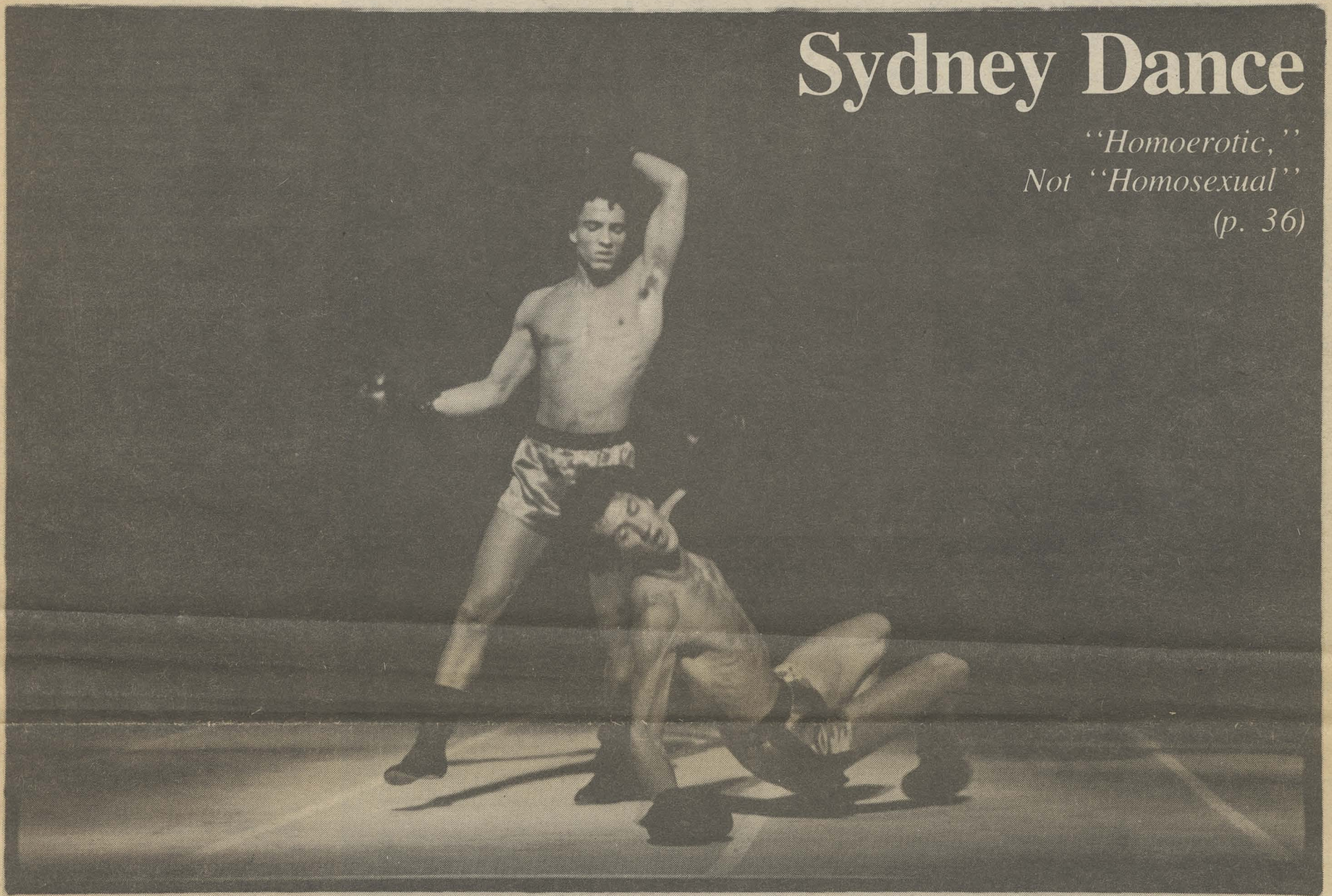
# Men Dancing

Coordinated by Charles Barber; photos by Tom Brazil

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## Choreography With a Capital "K"

Mark Morris Talks About His Life and Work

by Matthew Stadler

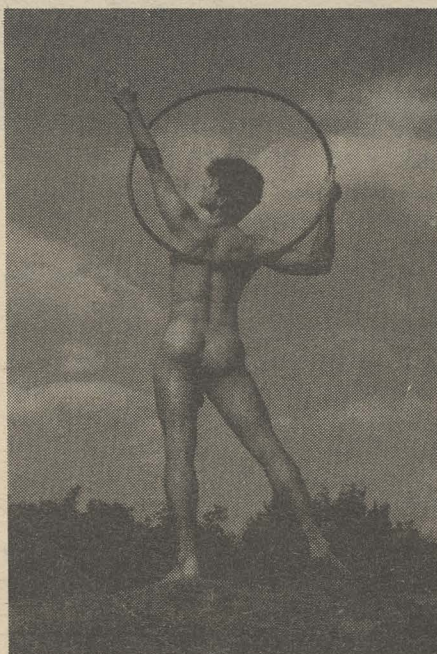
**A**rlene Croce called him a "symbol of his times." Jennifer Dunning says he's "the most promising heir to the mantle of the modern dance greats." Sheila Feeny tells me he was one of the nicest, weirdest guys at John Muir Elementary School in Seattle, "real eccentric, even then."

Mark Morris is an impressive person. His choreography has received unqualified acclaim through four years of steady growth as an artist in New York City. From programs at the Merce Cunningham Studio in 1980 and the Dance Theater Workshop in 1981 to his sold-out series at Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival last year, critics have praised the intelligence, flamboyance, and self-assurance of Morris's talent as a dancer and choreographer. "I've been making up dances," Morris said last fall. "But now it seems I'm a choreographer. My job

is choreography with a capital 'K'."

With critical acclaim has come celebrity—something for which Morris is well suited. "I need a manager in a raccoon coat," he joked last fall. Reports in the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and *Dance Magazine* have focused on Morris's quirky wit, his impressive self-assurance, and his unusual decision to leave New York last year and move back home to Seattle. "I learned a few years ago that pieces I worked on in Seattle—doing a concert or a showcase there and revising or not revising, depending on how it went—that when I took those pieces to New York they were always the ones which were best received. I didn't notice the pattern until recently, but I think it has a lot to do with my moving back. And," he added, "if I couldn't see water from my kitchen window, I'd die." What the press has not focused on (except in the fine profile in *Dance Magazine*) is the fact that Morris is, as he puts it, a "homo."

Morris's sexuality, together with his feminism, has done much to inform his



Mark Morris

Stephan Driscoll

choreography. Morris consistently plays with the relative strengths and positions of men and women in his dances, both in group figurations and in the nuances of his solo work. In the 20-odd-minute solo dance *O Rangasayee*, Morris, clad only in a bulky diaper, his palms and feet red (in the Indian tradition), moves (at first) serenely through a series of held poses reminiscent of a statue of the god Shiva. As the vocal raga to which he dances gathers density, Morris moves more rapidly, in spins and wide crouches, coming down with his full weight on solid feet, and does a catch step into a series of frail *embôités*. The delicacy of this heavy body moving serenely through so much space like a dervish, and then slowly, his soft head wagging, creates an image that transcends the mere combining of male and female gestures. In *O Rangasayee*, Morris exhibits a quality that is truly androgynous, a coexistence of the many possibilities we falsely divide into "male" and "female," a single and unified potential.

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**Mark Morris performs *Deck of Cards*.**

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In group work, Morris communicates the same complex identity. He does not simply trade off male and female roles. Nor does he limit his pairings by sex. Men and men, women and men, women and women, all find themselves in pairings of tension, affection, dependence, and support. Morris's gayness finds a full and unmannered expression in the generous vision of human interrelation evoked by his group work.

In person, Morris is just as generous and intelligent about sharing his views on sexuality. "Lately, because of my relative celebrity, I sort of feel as if I've come out again. I now have a certain voice." He uses that voice to describe his own identity as a gay man/choreographer/teacher/student/-water lover/lover/dancer/drinker/goofball/-

human being in a way that puts sexuality in an affirming context—one of many wonderful things.

I talked to Mark Morris by phone from his home in Seattle in March. He was putting together a program of dances that will tour through parts of the United States this spring and summer, arriving in New York in July. Included will be a piece for 12 dancers and, he confided to me, if he had a 200-member marching band to work with, he'd gladly arrange a spectacle.

**Matthew Stadler:** *I understand you had a traumatic time as a youngster at John Muir Elementary School.*

**Mark Morris:** No, no, not at all. Some kids called me "Dumbo" because of my big ears, but that was about it.

*Were you dancing back then?*

Oh sure, I started at age nine. I was one of the few dancers around. I liked John Muir okay. School didn't turn to shit until seventh grade.

*What happened then?*

Oh, you know, puberty I guess. It just got ugly.

*Did being a dancer make it any uglier for you?*

No, it was pretty well respected, actually. I was pretty eccentric for an eighth grader.

*Did your family like the fact that you danced?*

They were supportive, very much so. I mean, at one point my father suggested I learn something to fall back on; but it wasn't like that generally.

*Did you have a stage mother?*

No, not at all. I used to joke with her about it. It was great. If you're a boy dancer and a teenager, you don't need a stage mother. There aren't any other boy dancers, so you get free classes and you do a lot of stuff before you're ready to.

*Did you choreograph for other kids?*

Yeah, when I was 15. My first pieces were for people in the classes I took.

*Were most of your friends dancers?*

My friends were a sort of strange group of people. We were musicians and a couple of dancers and the oddballs, drug addicts. Most of them were pretty smart.

*Did you have any heroes when you were growing up?*

Well, Harry Partch is one of mine, and Conrad Nancarro. They were big heroes of mine.

*Have you choreographed to their music?*

Yes, both of them. One of my first dances was to Harry Partch. I had personal heroes too, a few people who weren't famous or anything, just people who were really straight, no pun intended. And they were all grownups and I wasn't, so of course that made them automatically infinitely smarter than I was. These people weren't even necessarily gay. I thought my case was unique.

*Was there any place you found, growing up, that was accepting about your being gay?*

Well, one good thing was the Kaleda Dancers [a Balkan folk dance ensemble], which was a very familial sort of thing. Everybody was pretty cool and older. There were a lot of gay men who were older than I was. I spent a lot of time with them. We were good friends, everybody. The people I dealt with in Kaleda were like really wild people, families, some with kids. It was a pretty intense group and being gay was perfectly acceptable, even encouraged. I spent so much time with them, we'd rehearse a lot and have parties all the time. It was great.

*Were you at all afraid those men were on the make?*

Afraid, are you kidding? At 16, that was flattering. I liked it.

*Did you have any boyfriends there?*

Periodically, and just brief things—maybe sleeping next to somebody after a big party, that kind of thing.

*How long were you with Kaleda?*

I was with them for about three years, from 14 to 17.

*Were there other young people in the troupe?*

Not quite as young as I was. There was sort of a junior company after a while, but I was probably one of the two or three youngest.

*Was there a particular age where you dealt with sexuality, came to terms with it?*

No, not really. I wasn't sure what to do about it. I realized I was gay when I was about 14, probably. I spent a year traveling in Europe, during my last year of high school. The last six months of that were spent in Madrid learning Flamenco and that's when I sort of officially "came out," in letters and stuff.

*Was your family supportive of your being gay?*

Oh yeah, sure. I told them after the "Spanish incident." I just wrote letters, saying, "I'm really in love with this man and I'm a homo." I had been seeing men for a long time, but it was top secret. I knew it and my friends knew it, but my family didn't. But Madrid was really sort of the final thing. I got lovely letters back from my mother and sisters, saying, "We love you, you're gay, big deal." I think my mother knew ten years before I did that I was gay. I see some 13-year-olds now and I think I could save them a lot of time if I just send them a letter. But I don't.

*I think that's wise. Do you think teenagers today are dealing with the same problems you did?*

I think it's still a big deal to admit that you're gay, to admit that you have "those feelings," but I think it's less of an issue to



actually be gay. It's not as big a deal. Everybody has gay friends, even in high school. I was just reading about a case where two high school lesbians were suing the school board because the principal forbade them from, like, hugging and kissing in the halls. At 16 I thought it was great. I'm really happy with what teenagers are doing as homos.

*Do you work with young people now?*

Just in my teaching, or sometimes for a commission, I'll work with 16- to 23-year-olds. Then I'm in a big responsible position, teaching and choreographing. But in my own group, most of them are older than I am.

*Do you like being a teacher?*

Yeah, I do a lot.

*Does it ever get complicated?*

It's complicated dealing with boys in particular, who are in the dance world and surrounded by gay men for the first time in their lives and they don't know what to do. They're drawn to me somehow because I'm not on the make and because I'm openly gay. So they're attracted to me as a sort of counselor type—both gay and straight boys. I'm older than they are (which I never thought would happen, God knows), so I end up as a counselor of sorts. In dance, of course, you're dealing with homos all the time.

*Do you think that gay presence in dance has found healthy expression through gay choreographers?*

Well, there's a whole school of thought in the East Village, among choreographers and performance artists who are openly gay and are part of that whole "scene." I find it admirable that they are vocal and out publicly, but I don't like that being the entire aesthetic of their work, to say how gay they are. That's not really too interesting.

The really offensive thing is the ballet scene. I understand it stylistically and aesthetically. I think it's important. I'm not offended by City Ballet. But when people are doing so-called modern ballet, or whatever that kind of stuff is—you know, most of them are gay—and they do "hypergay" work that has such a stilted and mannered sexuality it's worse than a lie, worse than doing straight work and being gay. I don't do hypergay work. It just doesn't interest me. I think it's offensive.

*How do you avoid that?*

I don't "avoid" it. I'm gay and I make up dances. It's certainly in there, in my work, but it's not the point of what I'm doing.

*Are there any gay choreographers whose work deals with sexuality gracefully?*

How do I answer this without hanging myself? I guess I don't know.

*Was any of your work with larger companies especially gratifying?*

I had a really good experience dancing with Hannah Kahn. We would work really hard for two or three hours, then we would make dinner and we were all friends. And the work stops then, so it was social.

*Did that experience influence the way you work with your own company?*

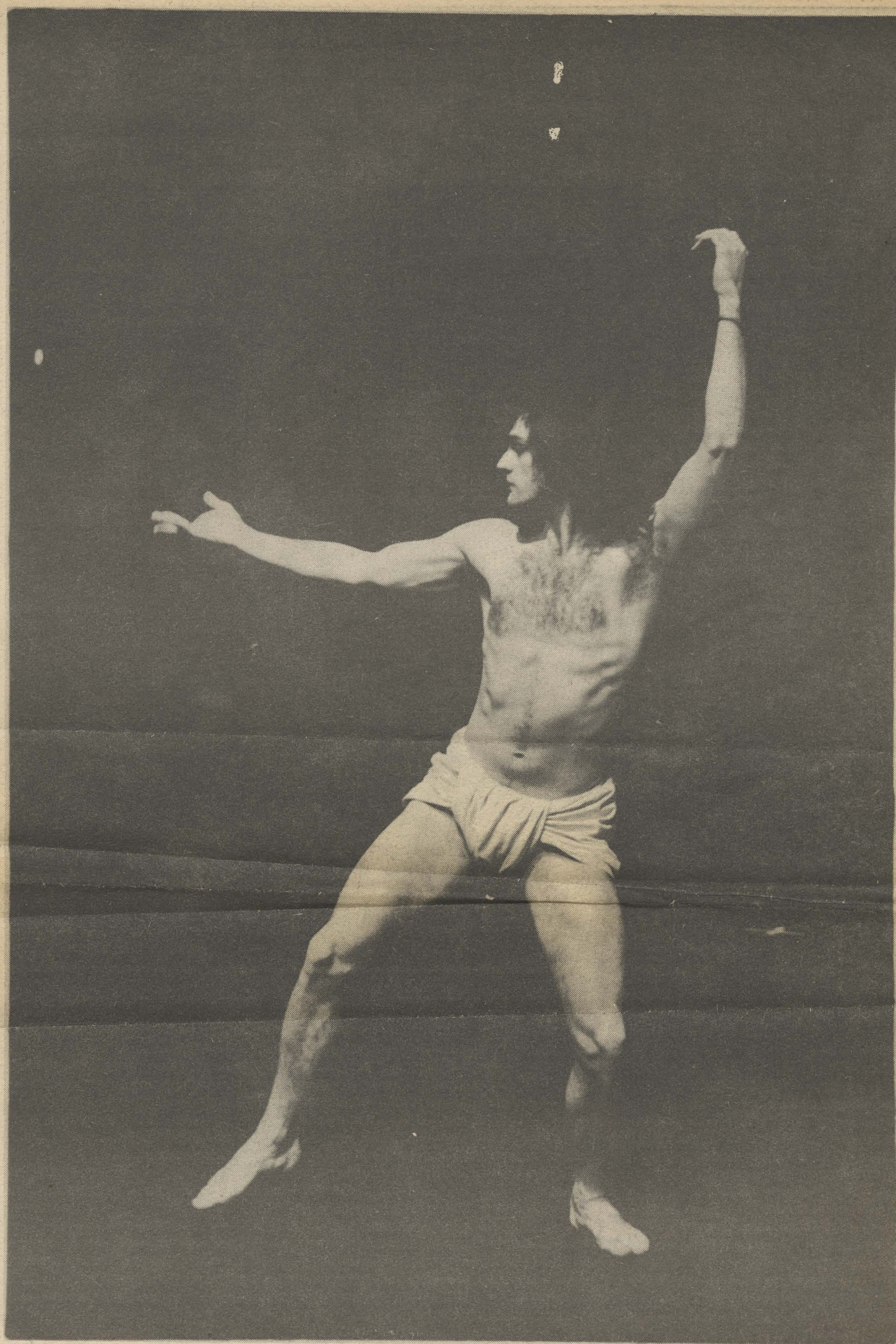
Yeah. I run my group in a pretty unorthodox way. We're almost all pretty good friends and we hang out. I'm very demanding of them in my choreography, but we all get along and it's neat. Of course, a lot of that came from my experience with Kaleda. I thought we were great. I look back on that as one of the best dance experiences of my life.

*Kaleda influenced your own work?*

Definitely. It's informed my work probably more than any other experience. It has quite a bit to do with making gravity and "group" work. I used to do a lot more obviously ethnic-based work, and I don't have to now; but it's still a source for my work. Also, just the ambiance, which I have never experienced with another company.

*Any other important lessons?*

I learned how to drink there and I haven't forgotten. It also showed me how important hard work and clear direction are. In my company, I'm definitely in charge. They're definitely my dancers. I tell people what to



Mark Morris performing *O Rangasayee* at BAM, December 1984.

do and I tell them to shut up. And they in turn tell me when I'm getting too crazy. But it's not democracy in action. Kaleda worked the same way. The man who directed it worked us really hard and drilled things. We practiced; that's why we were good.

*Have you found any alternative to hard work and training?*

A lot of the "alternative" methods of training I think are just bullshit. In the Northwest, where I am at this moment, there's a big Contact-Improvisation school of thought. It's all about being extremely philosophical as an artist, generating everything from the inside out. By the time you watch it, it's worthless. I'm sure they benefit greatly from it, but I don't.

*Is being in the Northwest a source of inspiration for you?*

Definitely. I don't go hiking and camping and skiing and boating every day, like most people do out here, but I have to be able to look out my window at the water. I'll almost get in car wrecks looking at the mountains from the Freeway Bridge. I have to have it or I'll go crazy. And I have some very, very close friends, so I like my home.

*What else do you find inspiring, at this moment?*

Handel. I haven't read a book for a while. I used to do all my reading on the subway, but now I have a car. I listen to music more than anything and that really gets me. I much prefer music to anything. I really like some of the new popular music—the Smiths, Bronski Beat, that stuff.

*Is Seattle a permanent home now?*

Yes, definitely. I still have a family here.

And I'm working out some sort of relationship with the University of Washington where I will work periodically. I'm trying to space my rehearsal time around that.

*Was your time in New York valuable?*

Sure. I had to be in New York. I certainly wouldn't be doing what I do today if I hadn't been there for four or five years. Now I feel like I don't need to dance with another company. I've been on tour all over. I miss having good classical ballet classes, but that's about it.

*Do you ever regret having launched into dance so early and completely?*

No, not at all. A couple of times I thought I was deprived by not having a real-life job, like waiting tables or stuff like that. But I never have. I mean, I can't fix my car, but so what? Somebody else can.