

## Dance

# Hello, Dollies

by Matthew Stadler

*Lovey*  
Mark Morris Dance Company  
P.S. 1  
June 1, 2, 8, and 9

Two men (one in gym shorts, the other in gym shorts and a trenchcoat) and two women (one in a worn slip, the other in a purple jumper) stand facing each other in a small circle. Nearer to the audience, four plastic baby dolls sit in a similar formation, facing outward. The droning chorus of "I Hear the Rain," a polyrhythmic chant by the Violent Femmes, sets the four dancers into jerking, contorted, rhythmic motion. The dolls in this new dance, *Lovey* by Mark Morris, are helpless and blankfaced, the kind of dolls you'd find at Lamston's. They sit plain and naked on the wooden floor, passive objects to be lunged at, cradled, clutched, manipulated, kissed, and made love to by the four dancers. With the second song, "Blister in the Sun," also by the Violent Femmes, a bouncy pop lament about frustrated sexual longing, the four dancers advance forward, three of them shoulder to shoulder, clutching dolls, the fourth by herself, obsessively cupping her breasts.

The dolls are alternately pressed against the dancers' faces, clutched to their breasts, pushed into their crotches, and walked along the floor like little babies. The dolls are sexualized and innocent, cared for and exploited. They are children. They are objects. The dancers may also be children. They look like kids playing dress up. They're playing at being adults. One man wears heavy lipstick; the trenchcoat is oversized; the woman's slip looks borrowed, taken from an older sister. Perhaps they are adolescents. Their big bodies and obsessive sexuality make it clear they could not choose to be just children again.

The dancers stand four in a line, their backs to us. With each heavy doublebeat, they find themselves grabbing furtively at the other dancers. Just as quickly as they see their arms move, they pull them back. They fall to the ground spread-eagle over the prone dolls. Or they lay on their backs, the helpless dolls on their stomachs, soon engulfed in a contorted and overwhelming embrace.

The dancers seem bewildered by the lunging, grabbing, and caressing that has taken over their bodies. Each movement is driven and sudden. Its strength takes them by surprise. The relation of the dancers to the dolls is multifarious, suggesting all at once a longing that is sexual, maternal, possessive, unreciprocated, and driven.

Most of *Lovey* operates in this methodical, repetitive, almost ritualistic style, the dancers moving through gestures that are abstracted from, not translations of, the songs. But right in the center of *Lovey* is a short narrative dance playing out the story in "Country Death Song," a demonic country tale also by the Violent Femmes, about a man who drowns his daughter and then hangs himself. The dancers act out a fairly direct translation of the events of that tale, using melodramatic and sexualized gestures that seem to echo everything from silent films to drawing-room dramas to Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring*. Through the whole tale, acted by one man and two women, the fourth dancer lies on his stomach in the trenchcoat, the four dolls gathered around him. He rises with the loud jangle of the



Mark Morris Dance Company performs *Lovey*, "ambiguous distinctions between child and adult, between the different kinds of longing, between love and abuse."

song's crazed instrumental break and dances a satanic jig that seems to quite directly represent the murderer's breaking mind.

Enclosed within the methodical and abstracted explorations Morris uses through most of *Lovey*, "Country Death Song" stood out, perhaps as a particular episode which involved the tensions of longing and child/adult/identity/sexuality/loving/need/nurturing/use/abuse that the larger work deals with. *Lovey* is most evocative when Morris does not nail down the "story line," as he had to with "Country Death Song." Nevertheless, this short tale is riveting and memorable.

Two more songs by the Violent Femmes, "Kiss Off" and "I Know It's True But I'm Sorry to Say," close out *Lovey*. "Kiss Off" maintains the quick, tight rhythms of the first section. Dancers now lunge toward prone dolls and cradle them and lay contorted above them.

The dance's strongest images are offered with the dreamy lilting lament of "I Know It's True." The dancers begin moving incongruously at double speed, a tense and driving motion that underscores the irresistibility of the forces that move them. The lunges begin again, rotating in a circle as first one, then another, then a third dancer lunges outward from the center toward a sitting doll. The woman in the beige slip runs around the wide circle, quickly moving the little dolls as the lunging dancer slides close and embraces the air where the baby had been. And around and around.

Finally she can't keep up and each dancer lands home with a caress and their lips to the doll, and around she still runs, now picking up each doll as it is released by the other dancers. With the last chords drifting, the woman in the slip cradles all four dolls, kissing and rocking on her feet, the other three dancers seated, legs out as the dolls had first sat. She dips slightly and on the last beat lets the dolls fly up and out into air, seemingly still for a moment, and then down.

The dancers were uniformly excellent. Ruth Davidson, Susan Hadley, Donald Mouten, and Keith Sabado all appeared in Morris's Company at last year's Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Their acting is as strong, and as important to the piece, as their dancing.

Morris has tapped a rich source of tension—the ambiguous distinctions between child and adult, between the different kinds of longing, between love and abuse. And he has done it without proselytizing or delivering a false conclusion. These are issues

which seem to rise naturally out of Morris's obvious concern with gender and sexuality. As the question of what it means to be male or female yields more ambiguous conclusions, so the issue of what it means to become an adult, to become a man or woman, no longer a child, will be clouded and unclear. *Lovey* leaves these ambiguities fluid and tense. It presents evocative images without suggesting a rigid interpretation. I'll never be able to hear these songs, particularly "I Know It's True," without thinking of the gestures and images Morris presents and the critical issues they suggest. ■

## Elements of Style

by Allan Grey

*Liebeslieder Waltzer*  
Choreography by George Balanchine  
Music by Johannes Brahms  
New York City Ballet  
New York State Theater

*Balletfore*  
Riverside Dance Festival  
Theater of the Riverside Church  
June 6, 8, and 9  
Chamber Ballet U.S.A.  
Symphony Space  
June 5-9  
Rockville Dance Company  
Theater of the Open Eye  
June 7-9

George Balanchine created his ballet to Brahms's two *Liebeslieder Waltzer* songbooks in 1960. Eight dancers—four couples occasionally shifting alignment—share the stage with four singers and two pianists. Everyone is costumed in late 19th-century evening dress, silver and mauve, and the set is a crystalline ballroom based upon a room in the Amalieburg Pavilion in Munich. The dancers perform the first book of songs in full ballroom dress; for the second book, the costumes evolve into their ballet epitomizations, pointe shoes included. *Liebeslieder Waltzer*, as the ballet is titled, lasts nearly an hour and, during the recent spring season of the New York City Ballet, was performed to capacity houses held breathless in reverence.

*Liebeslieder* resists anatomization in the same way that a synapse resists definition, except as the place where negative becomes positive. *Liebeslieder*, in fact, has its own synaptic quality. The ballet is based on the waltz and the *pas de deux*. *Liebeslieder* does not have one entirely solo dance. (In her essay on *Liebeslieder*, Arlene Croce characterizes it as Balanchine's "complete anatomization of three-quarter time" and "the grand apotheosis of the Balanchine *pas de deux*.") Waltz time, however, is not defined by either the downbeat or the upbeat, but by the transition from one to another. It is intrinsically active, as is the *pas de deux*, which is also a dance defined (which is not to say dominated) by neither partner. Waltzing is *pas de deux* and, in *Liebeslieder*, *pas de deux* becomes waltzing, because it is in the music. The circle is nearly completed, the twin poles of the synapse placed face to face. Balanchine, through Brahms, activates the charges through emotional reference tangential to theatrical conventions. The synaptic poles fire and, suddenly, an hour has passed. For the final song, to Goethe, Balanchine, with stylistically consistent chivalry, allows Brahms to take the last bow. The dancers return to the stage in couples, clothed in their initial evening dress. They listen and then softly applaud the musicians' performance. The curtain descends.

This minor theatrical miracle is relative to the larger miracle in *Liebeslieder*—that the purity of its emotion transcends the sheer enormity of its theatrical invention. In fact, the purity of that technique is what assures that *Liebeslieder* remain an emotional experience, despite the fact that Balanchine draws no emotional conclusions. Mutability, the great Romantic prerequisite, fosters melancholy, the great Romantic inevitability. Neither characters nor conflicts are uniformly defined. When characters speak individually, they do so through a single broad movement held against the pulse of the waltzing. At one point, a woman finishes a lightning supported pirouette by clutching her partner in an embrace. The flash finish freezes the last gesture. Elsewhere, a man shields his face with a gloved hand. In relief against continuous movement, his gesture, like the desperately frozen pirouette, becomes a character choice. He is momentarily identified. His partner, like the man at whom the ballerina grasps for support, also assumes a character life. But, as soon as the emotional cues have been fired, the gesture is absorbed. The hand reaches out for its partner,