

Big Ideas



Mark Morris Dance Group

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

at MoMing
October 31, November 1-3, 1985

By Molly McQuade

Mark Morris's dances are larger than life—furiously paced, emphatically rhythmic, and boldly simple and spare in their staple movements. With pell-mell attack and relatively few sidelong theatrics, dancers surge through dynamic extremes: jumping, then crashing to the ground; running fleetly, then crawling craggily; gesturing in cleanly composed unison, then bursting out of it. The dimensions of space seem to stretch and stretch again. The clarity of Morris's big, danced patterns—especially when performed by large ensembles—and his robust, persistent repetition of the patterns in unison and in canon make time expand voluptuously, even when the dancing is scrappy and staccato.

In Morris's ensemble works, so much happens so quickly that it's a challenge to see past the tumult to the pattern. The two are difficult to separate because they are of a piece. The phrases in a dance, though whole and sturdy, half abandon themselves to the forces of communal energy, which, in turn, reveal the simplicity and strength of each phrase.

Marble Halls is a dance of unstoppered symmetries. The symmetrical structure seems almost swept away by hell-bent momentum, but gradually one realizes that

it is, if anything, confirmed by the challenge. The dance, set to Bach's Concerto for Two Harpsichords in C Minor, is a suspenseful and witty spectacle. Ten dancers hurl themselves in and out of formations, which include three columns, side by side; a line of dancers downstage and a quartet upstage; and a patterned sequence of entrances and exits with dances in between.

Action alternates among the three columns of dancers, creating a madcap yet regal effect as one column swings into motion and another drops out. In the second section of the dance, the stable, rosy line of dancers performs gestures in unison and slowly melts from position to position, setting off the rambunctious quartet—and then the two groups exchange and mingle. Finally, soloists and an ensemble fly on and off the stage in hectic alternation, the leadership of the soloists just barely maintained as the ensemble hurtles in their wake. The patterns of the dancing vibrate with ruckus.

When Morris sends up courtly mannerisms in *Love, You Have Won*, he gives body to foppishness without compromising himself. The duet, danced to Vivaldi's cantata *Amor, Hai Vinto*, is funny but beautiful, too, capturing the excesses of romantic sentiments with delicious restraint, as well as by lampoon.

Morris and Guillermo Resto dance in flowing shirts, miming romantic throes with grand, courtly flourishes. Their overly dignified

bearing helps convey the self-importance of the heroes as they skip, walk, prance, pirouette, and posture. They pound the ground; they implore fate with their hands; they seek out a happy ending with a soulful gaze. Resto's phlegmatic style plays off of Morris's emotionally more indulgent one. A lovely use of canon and repetition in the dance both mocks and purifies the artifice of the courtly code.

Morris seems to ridicule the conventions of ballet in *Canonic 3/4 Studies*—but he also invigorates them with incongruous blasts of energy. When the dance is over, the pratfalls and horseplay are less memorable than the thunderously vivacious revisions Morris has suggested for classical form.

Morris takes the air out of ballet and returns it to the ground. He also removes its idealism and substitutes scapegrace humanity. Pirouettes grow shaggy and arabesques career, but by design that gives the movements new concreteness and density. As one dancer stumbles, others gather, concerned, and her big-boned bumbling comes to seem a virtue because it is individual, not correct. When two women perform a series of lifeless supported jetes with one man, they are punished by his indifference and, finally, his uncooperativeness. In another section, a man follows a woman, doing ritual *changements*—or, Morris's version of them—and their timing is comically deadpan: they keep it straight, but they couldn't care less. The message:

why dance by rote, when there is a choice? When three women perform a series of pirouettes that turn into balances in attitude, the movement is hardly honed, classically, yet the unassuming vigor of the dancers is restorative to ballet. At one point, dancers stop stock-still after performing steps, satirizing the balletic illusion of seamless

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transition between movements—but even the heavy-footed pause contributes rhythmic momentum to the dance, hitting bottom candidly before buoyantly rising again. The turns taken and tempi followed by a mincing ensemble give positive vitality to a parody of primness. The final folk-dance-like circle formed by the dancers, who gallop and roll while forming it, is an appropriate collective affirmation of play and strength in the face of extreme classical strictures.

In *The Vacant Chair*, Morris assaults the spiritless clichés of three sentimental songs, defying them in impertinent, assertive dancing. He makes a vigorous impression, though the songs don't. (In fact, they are an easy mark—

too easy.) Morris's down-to-earth integrity gives *Lovey*, a punk cavort, violent physical buoyancy despite its anomie. Whatever his subject or pretext in a dance, Morris seems to handle it honestly.

ROSALIND NEWMAN AND DANCERS

at the Columbia College Dance Center
November 1 and 2, 1985

By Dorothy Samachson

In the six years since Rosalind Newman last appeared in Chicago, her art has matured considerably. Always inventive in her use of space and reckless in her designs, she has now added a sophistication and subtle humor to her work. She also can boast of a small company that can do anything she demands—and that's a lot.

Untitled White—so called because the dancers all wore white—was a joyful group dance to Fred Frith's enchanting, insistent score. It was a study in contrasts: between tableaux and running and leaping, sudden falls and unexpected recoveries. There were hints of Latin in the dance steps, and an engaging folksiness.

Free Speech, commissioned last year by the Welsh Repertory Dance Company, was much more serious—even somber and rather obscure. It referred mysteriously to strange and sinister undercurrents in American society, a tone set by five trench-coated figures who slunk onto the performing area after a few pious, recorded words about democracy were heard from some political leader.

Were they undercover men, spying and molding opinion? When they removed their coats and danced they became a confused public—splitting into alienated individuals, then reforming into a cohesive force, but always somehow threatened.

One must admire Newman's brilliantly organized movement designs. Although a bit long, this disturbing work remained almost constantly interesting, even when one questioned her premise about a world we never made and its forces that push us around.

Heartbeat, the concluding work, was an utterly delightful suite of dances to Buddy Holly records. The period costumes by Charles Schoonmaker added to the fun, as three couples and one unhappily partnerless woman glided, strutted, and skittered. The pacing was terrific, and the feet and bodies had to be made of rubber to move so effortlessly through Newman's intricate inventions. She wove romantic relationships while dazzling with theatricality. This was a gorgeous concert by an exceptionally gifted artist, whose own dancing is on the same high level as her small troupe's.

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