



Tom Brazil

Thudding on the Unconscious

Dance

by Otis Stuart

The Mark Morris Dance Company
Dance Theater Workshop
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Last December, Arlene Croce suggested in *The New Yorker* that Seattle-based choreographer Mark Morris might easily have titled the brief season his company had just concluded at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as "The Modern Dance Until Now." The same, with special emphasis on the *now*, might easily be said about the more ambitious two-program, three-week season Morris and his company are performing at Dance Theater Workshop through December 22. This season seriously suggests a new, vital dialect of our movement vocabulary which marks Morris, as Croce precisely put it, as "the clearest illustration we have, at the moment, of the principle of succession and how it works in dance: each new master assimilates the past in all of its variety and becomes our guide to the future." Even more specifically this season, Morris is perhaps our clearest example of succession in dance as determined by its immediate creative and commercial environment. Much of the current Morris season suggests the struggle to remain alive against all odds, circa 1985, which is at least one reason why its richness and invention seem so urgent. Morris's webs are spun from the fabric of Danceville 1985, in which a choreographer will have forged, as Morris did, an apprenticeship across a sweep of modern dance companies; will have sought, as Morris did, voluntary exile to consolidate terms; and turned, as Morris most emphatically has, to his own social/cultural context for his work's perimeters. Morris, who this season dances in several works, currently sports a haircut so unmistakably up-to-the-instant that it will

probably be out of date by the season's close. In the best of his works, that same "do" acquires formal properties and becomes its own fleeting analogy.

Morris's dance vocabulary is encyclopedic. He assesses its specifics according to his own structural and narrative imperatives, takes what he needs, and chucks the rest, but without even discarding the traditions upon which they are all founded. Because Morris is—as Edwin Denby once described Jerome Robbins and Paul Taylor—a choreographer who has taken the trouble to teach himself the principles of a well-made ballet, his widely eclectic vocabulary becomes pragmatic rather than just improbable. The work can look improbable, since Morris is not only eccentric but hyperbolic about his idiosyncracies. But maybe in 1985, you have to scream to be heard. Morris can juxtapose Fokine with Taylor at lightning speed—not the visionary Fokine of *Les Sylphides* but the fulsome Fokine of *Le Spectre*, and not just the Arcadian Taylor of *Arden Court* but the gallows humor of Taylor's *Sacre* as well. The effect is suitably outsized, but real.

Also like Taylor, Morris can dissociate himself entirely from formal structures but still retain their powers of cohesion. The ecstatic *Handel Choruses* is a set of four solos. The work begins with the dancers strewn across the floor. Each rises in turn for his or her solo (men and women alternate in two of the solos) and then collapses back at its conclusion. Despite the dancers' initial and concluding immobility, the entire work looks compressed. The dancers, flat out as they were, could hardly have functioned more effectively as a unit had they tramped on holding hands. In contrast, Morris can flood himself with formal values. Courtly dances and posturing are the movement metaphors for the delirious *Love, You Have Won* duet Morris performs with Guillermo Resto. The demands are dense and very specific. Morris masters those demands through endlessly

inventive arrangements of steps and attitudes, all linked to the intrinsic, mutual theatricality of the movements. The two men partner each other without touching and we also know why.

The alternating DTW programs might be broadly delineated as one evening of solos and smaller chamber works and one evening of more overtly ensemble pieces. Both evenings begin, formally, in diminuendo, and end, formally, with the group. The first program opens with a small celebratory solo for Resto set to traditional Roumanian music, but of the jazzier sort. The program concludes with *Marble Halls*, to the Bach Concerto for Two Harpsichords, a breakneck shuffling and reshuffling of geometric perspectives. The second program opens with a round of parallel duets drawn from four dancers and music that sounds like its composer's name, Luigi Boccherini. The program concludes with *Vestige*, a tribal stomp to Shostakovich by way of a lot of Balanchine. These works are Morris at his more general and less personal, tradition-based but never tradition-bound. In *Vestige*, lateral sweeps by twin phalanxes of dancers set and reset the stage. The lines appear, intersect, and then as suddenly disappear, leaving a soloist behind at the intersection. That is right about where the Name That Choreographer Dragon usually rears its ugly (and irresistible) head. Morris keeps the beast at bay by focusing on the strict emotional theatrical values of the configuration. Its extra-performance associations are just so much dressing. Morris can get brazen about it, too. After one such clash, the soloist of the moment collapses to the floor, landing with a thud on our collective unconsciousness. We've seen that once before and that once was just fine, thank you. Morris may have stolen one of the major phenomenological moments from Balanchine's *Serenade* (a biggie), but he has replaced it in an emotionally equivalent setting—Morris's setting, which has been shaped by *Serenade*. Because the theft is not only reverential but logical, Morris puts us in a *Serenade* frame of mind.

Similarly, Morris can share a moment or idea with a bad choreographer and still make it viable. For reasons undiscernible, Maurice Bejart incorporated little rubber dolls—ugly little rubber dolls—in the apotheosis of his recent *Baiser de la Fée*. Morris uses dolls, too, in an ensemble work, *Lovey*, set to five songs by the Violent Femmes. (Curiously, Morris becomes much more linear when spoken language is involved, as in *Lovey* and in the solo *The Vacant Chair*.) *Lovey* is laden with extra-dance attitude—violent, claustrophobic, schizoid, victim to its own quest for too much knowledge. Its asylum characters know more than they want to know. They also play (sort of) with little rubber dolls. Morris gets his mitts on the same dolls Bejart raised in hosanna as synthetic symbols of hope, and we see them as accomplices in Armageddon.

Lovey is an example of the more personal swerve Morris has taken with his current programs, a shift away from the objectified, very far Eastern distance that dominated his last season in Brooklyn. In the best of these works, (*Lovey*, the *One Charming Night pas de deux* for Morris and Teri Weksler, and *The Vacant Chair*, alternately performed by Morris and Rob Bresserer), Morris makes a speciality out of the cause-and-effect aspects of the specifically human interaction. His point of view is very, very funny and very, very scary. In *Lovey*, a comic-strip saga of a psychopath father flashes the man's fate in three poses. We laugh at his unloved, unwanted daughter's death. *One Charming Night* takes the basic *spectre de la rose* set-up, but keeps the girl's eyes open. She bites him. He bites himself. They dance anyway. *The Vacant Chair* multiplies anger into infinity with two basic props (the dancer rips one apart and lurches the other off stage at his exit) and maybe a dozen major steps, most of them *pas de bourrée*. The work is set to three songs, one of them the ballad version of Joyce Kilmer's *Trees*. The choice is quite bitter. A little judicious mud flinging, as another contemporary diva has also recently reminded us, can clear things up on several levels.