

people's choreography, the dance equivalent of the generic products sold in supermarkets. There seems, in fact, to be good reason to hope that Morris may be the real thing — specifically, that he may turn out to be a real *ballet* choreographer. —D.V.

JACOB'S PILLOW,
MASSACHUSETTS

BALLET REVIEW: In 1980, you seemed to explode onto the scene from nowhere.

MARK MORRIS: I grew up in Seattle and moved to New York at nineteen.

BR: Who did you study with in Seattle?

MORRIS: This great woman named Verla Flowers started me off. I studied Spanish dancing with her, mostly, and some ballet, just sort of a general melange. Later, I got my ballet training from Perry Brunson. I never really had a course of study in modern dance, just a smattering of Graham and some Limón, little bits of things. I did a lot of folk dancing.

BR: One reads that your parents were always very supportive. Do they still live in Seattle?

MORRIS: My father died when I was fifteen, but I had already been dancing for a long time by then. My mother still lives there. I'm going out next week to visit. I love that place.

BR: Did you have formal music training?

MORRIS: My father played keyboard — let's put it that way. He played some piano and we always had an organ around. He was always playing something, the standards that he loved. I learned how to read music from him and very basic stuff. I had music theory in high school, and a couple of months of piano technique. I have no technique at all. I can read scores pretty well. If I have an hour to read through something that's before me, I can do it.

BR: When we first saw you in 1980 in Hannah Kahn's group, her work really showed that she had found out what sort of dancer you were.

MORRIS: Oh, definitely. Teri Weksler and Ruth Davidson and Keith Sabado did all that dynamic stuff, too, there.

BR: And they're now in your group. Are we correct in saying that music is the source of your work?

MORRIS: Yes.

BR: You seem to have a tremendous knowledge of musical structure. Did you ever take a Louis Horst course?

MORRIS: No, but I've read some bits of it, though.

BR: A lot of your work would please Horst.

MORRIS: Yes? Oh, good.

BR: Because Horst's dance composition course was absolutely based on the idea of musical form and musical structure. Does the content of your pieces come out of the musical structure? In *Mort subite* the form and content are absolutely indivisible, as they should be in dance. Which came first in that, the chicken or the egg?

✶

INTERVIEW
Vaughan
MORRIS

MORRIS: What came first was listening to that Poulenc organ concerto for ten years. I'd wanted to choreograph it for a long time, but I didn't want to perform it to tape. So when I got to choose something that could be played huge, I knew exactly what piece to do. In Boston it was live. That was good and bad, but I wanted it to be a big show, a big number. I didn't want it to be soloists versus corps, like the lead couple, or anything. Because the music doesn't seem to be that way. It's sort of episodic, and you can't remember what happened a while back. It's a pretty weird piece of music. I knew what I wanted to feel like in the work. I cast it and then I made steps.

BR: That whole structure of the corps group that is constantly being replaced by *another* is remarkable. Most of our readers haven't seen it, so let's tell what happens. It's for sixteen dancers, with a core group (at first) of four men, each of whom is replaced, one by one, by a woman; at the end, one of the women is in turn replaced by a man. This scheme, with its constantly changing series of relationships (from four men to three men and one woman, to two couples, and so on), may be seen as a metaphor for the life cycle itself, for example. In some of your earlier work, you haven't gone much beyond literal music visualization, but *Mort subite* does, in the sense of having a structure of its own on top of the musical structure.

MORRIS: Well, when I knew that I wanted to infiltrate the group and reverse it as it went along, I did it exactly — I went through the score and counted bar for bar. I didn't look at when it sounded like a new person should come in. I did it exactly in numbers and divided it so everybody would be equal. I ended up bending that rule slightly but not really very much, because it coincided with musical changes, for some reason.

BR: How long did you take to choreograph *Mort subite*?

MORRIS: A week less than I would like it to have taken. It was a National Choreography Project, so it was sort of an assignment. I had four weeks from audition to performance. I made it, but it was really close. The music changes meter so often — I could always tell what was going to happen because I had the score all the time, and Tina, who was helping me, would sort of usher everybody around, getting the steps at the right time. But it was really three weeks.

BR: Do you plan movement before you go into rehearsal?

MORRIS: I knew some steps, like the creepy walk. And I always have to do temps de cuisse, because I love them so much. Stuff like that. Like, I had to put a gargouillade in the vampire dance, because you never get to do them. And if I can't stick them in, then —

BR: *Mort subite* wasn't the first piece you've done for a ballet company, was it? Hadn't you done something for Pacific Northwest Ballet?

MORRIS: Yes, one of my first commissions, a long time ago. I did a piece to Beethoven's trio for cello, piano, and clarinet. That was just a summer thing, they didn't keep it in the rep.

BR: The Paris Opéra Ballet has announced a creation by you. How did this commission come about? A dancer there asked, "Oh, d

Interview
Vaughan
Morris
3

commission come about? A dancer there asked, "Oh, do you know Mark Morris' work?" So we were telling him about you.

MORRIS: Well, they asked for a video tape to be sent to Nureyev at the Dakota. So we did, and that's the last I heard. Maybe they're setting it already from video tape. No, I have no idea, not a clue. I've also heard rumors that I'm doing a piece for Pacific Northwest Ballet. They've applied for a grant.

BR: But the Joffrey commission is not a rumor, right?

MORRIS: I have five weeks for that one. Unfortunately, I'm spending August, my least favorite month, rehearsing it in New York, and then they perform it in L.A. I'm using the C.P.E. Bach cello concerto in A major.

BR: Are you the sort of choreographer who listens to music all the time on records and tapes?

MORRIS: I go to concerts when I can. I listen to a lot of music because I like it. Most of it isn't music that I intend to dance to. I've been listening to a whole lot of baroque music, because there's been such good stuff. John Elliot Gardner is my hero. And I go crazy. I listen to Handel a great deal, and a lot of Bach. The BAM concert we're doing in November in the Opera House is going to be all baroque. The Pergolesi "Stabat Mater," and *Marble Halls*, the Bach harpsichord concerto that I did last year, and a new piece, probably to Handel, I'm not sure. But we're using St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble and Drew Minter, the countertenor. Great, great singer.

BR: In the Vivaldi *Gloria*, it's clear that the content of the dance reflects the religious content of the music, but why do you have a program acknowledgement to God?

MORRIS: I always do. To my mother and God, always.

BR: And to Eve Green. Does she still teach in Seattle?

MORRIS: She's sort of a consultant at the University of Washington and she just joined my board and she's a saint.

BR: She doesn't teach your company?

MORRIS: No, she golfs.

BR: Do you actually subscribe to a particular religious belief?

MORRIS: No, I meditate. I'm not part of any club.

BR: The religious feeling in *Gloria* is very strong, the dance images for the "Gloria" and the "Miserere" sections make them seem quite spiritual.

MORRIS: I didn't want to be denominational, necessarily. There's one action of pushing, the healing thing, the pushing over backwards from the forehead that

Interview
Vaughan
Morris

4

over backward from the forehead that comes in many times. That really came from when I was fourteen or fifteen in Seattle. I went with some friends to see Katherine Kuhlman, the evangelist. We went on a lark. She was in an angel outfit: "I believe in miracles!" And a huge chorus. People came out, lined up to come onstage. She would go like this—push her hand out, palm flat—toward them and knock them over backward. But her assistants would catch them, and they'd wake up: "Oh, my God!" It was incredible—miracles to these people who came to shout. I'm waiting to go "Ha-ha-ha," but I went out as if I'd had a sort of revelation. I didn't sign up, but it was impressive. Whether it was real or not I don't know, but it was that powerful.

BR: We have a feeling about the Northwest that there's a propensity toward a sort of pantheism in that part of the world.

MORRIS: That's good.

BR: It comes out in Merce Cunningham and John Cage, who were there in the late thirties—Merce is from that part of the world—when they were beginning to be involved in the whole idea of Zen Buddhism. And painters such as Mark Tobey—

MORRIS: And Morris Graves—

BR:—were out there and involved in this as well. Just in being there, one feels close to nature. And if you have a tendency toward a pantheistic feeling, that can be very positive there. Did you feel in any way affected by that kind of thinking? In other words, is coming from the Northwest an important factor for you spiritually, as well as in other ways?

MORRIS: Maybe. It could be. Erin Matthiessen, who's my—my best—he's sort of my lifemate. We don't live together or anything, but we seem to know certain things. When he was growing up, he spent a lot of time in Washington and Oregon, and he would see Mount Rainier when he was little. It was—he didn't tell anybody, but he knew that was God. It was like, "Oh, of course." When people called Mount Rainier something else, well.... You don't see it whole that often. You see it above the clouds. The native people who lived there felt the same way. So there's that, and the weather moves fast and there's water....

But there's also a maudlin New Age sort of spirituality that I don't want to get into.

BR: The other strong element one senses in your work, of course, is the sexuality, your often sardonic or even savage treatment of sexuality. You seem drawn to a specific physical type, too, in dancers for your group. The viewer is struck by the monumental quality of your women, and the way you use that quality in their movement is exciting to watch.

Interview
Vaughan
Morris
5

MORRIS: Yes, I've got big people. You see, it also ties in with them being grown-ups. Because everybody's late twenties, early thirties. So they don't take much shit from me. Everybody can sort of participate relatively equally. There are exceptions, and people have different skills. But everybody has weight, presence, personality. not like—projection— but they have themselves. Everybody can drop their weight. Everybody can pick everybody up. And I want that.

Part of that is not for androgyny. That was one of the big words being used about me for a long time. But I just want a wider range from everybody so anything is possible choreographically.

Because there aren't really any rules. In making up my own for a piece, I decide on my tiny range that I'm going to allow to have happening in a particular dance. I require that everybody be able to do everything, just in case they need it. And then I throw out a lot of stuff, right?

BR: They all learn all the movement?

MORRIS: Often, yes. When I did the wrestling piece, *Championship Wrestling*, everybody had to be able to do everything with everybody else, and then I decided what looked best, what worked, what it meant to have this person do it with that person. I don't get crazy about it, but I keep track.

BR: Working with ballet dancers is obviously a different experience for you, but do you find it more difficult because of the way ballet dancers tend to be? For example, in the ballet company situation, they're not really called upon to express their individuality in the way that your dancers are.

MORRIS: Right.

BR: The tendency is more for the ballet dancer to be given specific work by the choreographer and to add nothing. Do you find that it's hard to get through that to do what you want to do?

MORRIS: Well, my experience with Boston Ballet was very nourishing. They were really present and capable, and I was expecting something else. But they were free of attitude.

They were puzzled by a lot. I thought I was giving them stuff that would be so much fun to do, like *my* favorite stuff in ballet class: "Okay, now you're Taglioni. Okay, everybody—boys, too—here we go." And they were asking, "Is my arm like this, or not?" So we got over that fast.

At the beginning, I would walk into the room and they would be standing there silent, waiting for me to show them something to do. They'd learn it instantly, read it back to me, then stop and wait for the next bit: "Let's see—well, try this." So I made up a ballet for them (there are probably oddities in it), but it's much easier for me to go in that direction than to try and force them into a kind of physicality that would probably hurt them.

BR: If you're going in to work with a strange group of dancers—a ballet company—do you try to make a more personal contact with them?

MORRIS: I do, partly because I'm young, maybe—I like to hang out and stuff—and I'm not particularly nasty, until the end. I keep track of people. I like to know what they're doing. I can see clearly, pretty quickly, who can do what well, and either work on that or the opposite of that.

Interview
Vaughan
Morris

opposite of that. Does this make sense?

BR: Yes. Do you find that they are able to contribute movement? Do you ask them to?

MORRIS: No, I never do that with anybody, really.

BR: You give your group a program credit of thanks for contribution —

MORRIS: We don't improvise. For example, the Pancake to Woman section in *Dogtown*, the evolutionary sort of tableau. That was all "Do this, and this is the time it takes to go through this thing." You have to get from here to there leading with this body part and turning this direction. Then I fine-tune it, and it's a very small range that I'll accept, though I don't tell them what it is. I can adjust from there because we know how to work together, and I can trust what they do.

It could be improvisatory if there were not as many rules: "It has to be done in this amount of time, and it can have no accents" — I do things like that, which with strangers is more trouble than it's worth. So I'm more exacting that way. I also give more steps.

BR: But you begin with a knowledge of the ballet vocabulary. You're not the sort of modern choreographer who has to ask, "Show me some ballet steps."

MORRIS: No, no. It's not a problem. I love ballet. I use ballet terms in my group's dances. When they change from one foot to another, it's a *sissonne* instead of a *glissade* — or something like that. Even if the image is all monsterlike, those are the terms we use.

I love *pointe* problems, which is weird because I seldom work with *pointe* people. At the Boston Ballet, the *pointe* work was driving me crazy in rehearsal because everything looked ahead of the music to me. It was because in the whole piece I accent everything in the *plié* part before the *relevé*, so everything is *plié, relevé, plié, relevé, plié, relevé*. They used to be finished

with the action and the shape on time, yet I wanted them to swing into it because I was convinced that somehow the whole dance had shifted a quarter beat forward, though it hadn't. I thought I was going nuts. It took me a week to figure out that I wasn't, to understand the sense of the move, which is that a *pointe* person takes a longer trip to get up and they're used to showing more line.

BR: What kind of "Dance of the Seven Veils" did you do in *Salome* for the Seattle Opera?

MORRIS: That was wild. It was double cast so I made it for two sopranos, and both would suddenly have lots of trouble hearing the music. Funny, they'd sing great for an hour, but when they had to do the dance, it was "Ohmygod, is this a three — or a four?" Amazing! They were so nervous about doing the dance they could hardly move. Also, they had to get pretty naked, and that was hard for them. But it was great.

I have an ongo

Interview

Vaughan

Morris

7

move. Also, they had to get pretty naked, and that was hard for them. But it was great. I have an ongoing relationship with Seattle Opera's general manager, Speight Jenkins, who I really admire. I made the *Aida* piece there for an opera benefit, just the Triumphant scene. The shapes in my dance are 2-D not only because it's Egyptian, but because there were sixty choristers on stage risers and the soloists in caftans on the sides, and they kept on singing, so we hardly had any room to move.

BR: Do you take your company out to Seattle with you?

MORRIS: Once or twice a year.

BR: For the rehearsal period or just to perform?

MORRIS: A rehearsal period, almost always. We rehearsed for the TV show in Seattle for a week and a half.

BR: What do you teach at the University of Washington?

MORRIS: A modern-dance technique.

BR: Of your own devising?

MORRIS: Well, it's basically a ballet class structure. I teach a barre, and I do a lot of back stuff. It's much influenced by Hannah Kahn's teaching. You give a leg assignment and then a body assignment that's not necessarily related, so the student has to do a lot of brain work while dancing. It's pretty hard, I think, but I'm not sure. I never take my own class.

BR: You don't teach ballet, though?

MORRIS: Sometimes. I use ballet principles. You have to turn out a lot. I think modern dancers should be able to use their feet more. That's always a problem. Because I like relaxed feet, too. Not just pointed and flexed. I like them limp.

BR: What is the content of your "Dance in America" show?

MORRIS: We did existing pieces, seven dances, mostly excerpted. I do *Jealousy* from *Handel Choruses*, which is independent anyway. We do about two-thirds of *Gloria*. That's why it's on the Jacob's Pillow program, because we got it up for TV and I wanted to keep it because I like it, for one thing. What else? Oh, *Love, You Have Won*, the Vivaldi pas de deux — I do that whole thing with Guillermo Resto. The rest are excerpts. Part of *Dogtown*, half of *Prelude* (the fan dance), one movement from *Songs That Tell a Story*, the country 'n western thing.

BR: Something much with us nowadays — BAM's "New Wave" seems based on it — is collaboration.

MORRIS: The shotgun collaboration.

BR: Touché. But so far, haven't you always used existing music? Or have you worked in collaboration with composers?

MORRIS: Only with one guy, Herschel Garfein, on *Mythologies*. That's when I met him. I just did *Forty Arms, Twenty Necks, One Wreathing* in Seattle. It's for twenty people, so I have to have student supplements.

BR: Have you collaborated with visual artists?

MORRIS: At BAM, and it's fun because it's with someone I've known for ten years and I really like his work, the guy who did our poster — Robert Bordo. He teaches at the Studio School. He's a great painter, and he's designing the *Stabat Mater* for me. He did the sets for the television, too. Because we had to place the dances in that space; we ended up having sets for everything.

BR: Although you're very much a person of now,

Interview
Vaughan
Morris

F

BR: Although you're very much a person of now, you also seem to have a true concern for the past, obviously in music, but in dance as well. You don't reject the past. *Soap Powders and Detergents* seemed filled with references to modern dance's past. Or are we reading that into it?

MORRIS: No, it's there. Tobi Tobias or somebody gave specific quotations —

BR: Like Humphrey's *Soaring*.

MORRIS: Well, that's the obvious one because we danced around with sheets all night and got dramatic. It's an unconscious quote, though, as with some of the Balanchine steps I've ripped off just because I love them. It's never a take or anything like that. I never do a cover on things. But there's a style, a drama happening in the source that really pleases me, and I want to recapture that.

It's similar to what I said in a correction before we did *Shepherd on the Rock* last night. We were working on the slow movement, and I demonstrated: "This isn't walking, *this* is theater walking, *this* is stage dancing/walking." I like that sort of mystery. I like the theater and I like performing people. It's not all projected, but it has to be slightly bigger than pedestrianism, because I'm weary of that. I like a line to be straight, and if it's a unison move, it should be.

BR: Ignoring influences, which choreographers do you admire?

MORRIS: Past—Balanchine, Humphrey. Present — Merce, Lar Lubovitch, Lucinda Childs, Paul Taylor, Eiko and Koma I adore; there are plenty.

BR: What of your future? You don't seem to have a wide-ranging plan. Will you just be going on as you are?

MORRIS: Well, see, I've toured a lot with many companies, and I don't care much about going to France, for example. Because it's a lot harder to travel as artistic director—my company calls me C.F.A.D. — Company Founder Artistic Director. C.F.A.D. Morris is what they call me. So I travel to show people dances and so my dancers can do that. They haven't toured, so that's important.

My real interest, though, is doing special projects, because real live people playing music is extremely important but very difficult, budgetwise. I'm just now able to pay dancers anything worth talking about. Doing *Mythologies* in Boston was so much fun for me — to be able to put up a show for that instead of maintaining repertory, which I don't much like to do. I'd rather work on a new piece. We're negotiating with the Seattle Opera to do the Gluck *Orpheus and Eurydice*, which would thrill me. I want to do big projects that are sort of occasional.

BR: Rather than saddling yourself with a permanent, large-scale repertory?

MORRIS: Like a six-week tour. I hated doing that when I was dancing with those people, and I'm not wild about it now. If I go to Asia, I would love that. But as for the capitals of Europe, I'd rather go on a trip instead of a tour.

BR: And make new work.

Interview
Vaughn
Morris