

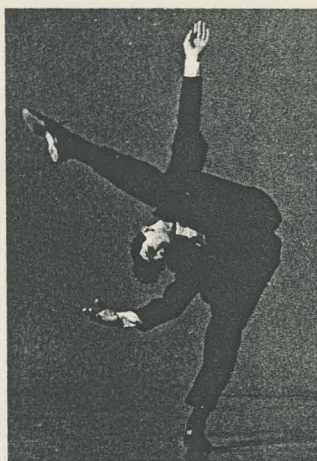
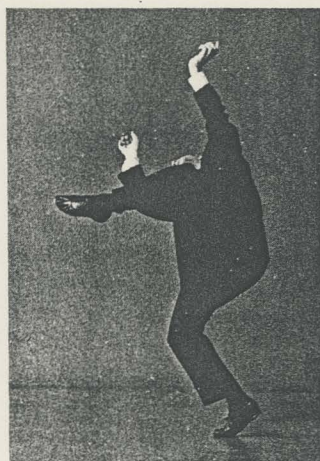
1986

# THE LIVELY ARTS

MARK MORRIS—TODAY'S HOTTEST CHOREOGRAPHER AND A SUPER DANCER, TOO

BY ERIC LEVIN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOIS GREENFIELD



*Inspired by vampire lore and Purcell songs, Morris whirls through One Charming Night.*

Mark Morris, the brilliant young choreographer, was in a New York pub last winter and decided to order another beer. He might only have lifted his stein off the table, but Morris, it seems, can't help turning life into choreography. He raised the empty smartly to his cheek, pointed to it with a long index finger as if to introduce Exhibit A, gave it a cartoonish me-and-my-baby hug, then sadly rocked the stein back and forth. The bartender nodded, and Morris set the stein down—so impishly that he made the glass seem alive. You half expected it to curtsy.

It was just a throwaway, but the episode had a clarity and completeness that was pure Mark Morris. The same qualities characterize his dances and unify them in their remarkable variety. Dances have been spilling out of him since he was a child in Seattle leaping around the living room to the *1812 Overture*. Now, at twenty-nine, in the opinion of virtually everyone in the dance world, he is fast proving himself a master. Certainly he is the most gifted new choreographer in the modern firmament, the most prodigious talent to emerge since Twyla Tharp.

"He is very clearly hot," says Joseph V. Melillo, director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival. "His movement is idiosyncratic. It's rooted in

classicism but taken to a very contemporary level that is still accessible. And he's not only an extraordinary choreographer but an extraordinary dancer."

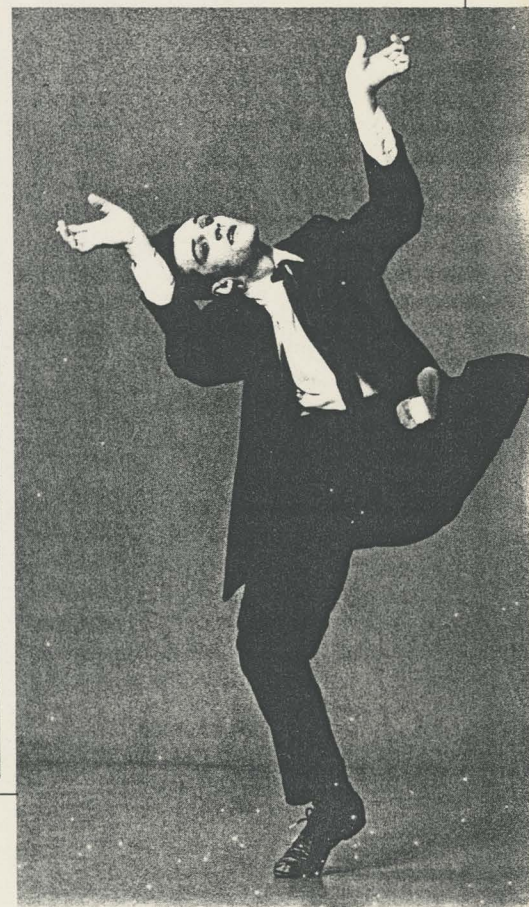
It was at the Next Wave Festival in 1984 that Morris fully exploded on the scene, though dance insiders had been onto him since he formed his company, in 1980. At BAM he opened with a large-scale, breathlessly kinetic work full of near-miss crisscrosses and sudden falls and recoveries, set to Vivaldi's *Gloria in D*. Next came a twenty-minute solo to an Indian vocal raga by Sri Tyagaraja, which Morris danced in a loincloth, his soles and palms painted red. Cryptic and perverse in its waggles and squats and cocked-arm poses, the dance kept growing wilder, pressing against its fiercely controlled patterns until, as Morris says, "the only thing left is for me to burst into flame." The final piece, to an electronic score by Herschel Garfein, was based on an essay by Roland Barthes about the spectacle and theatricality of championship wrestling. Witty yet at the same time distressing, it was not a spoof but an outlandish magnification of the brutalities of the ring.

From item to item, there was no telling what Morris would do next. He does not follow fashion or get stuck in a rut of his own. A year before his BAM triumph, when the buzz was just beginning, he left "filthy, expensive, crowded" New York

and moved back home to Seattle. "I don't feel particularly competitive," he says. "I don't deal with the dance world much, and I don't go to fabulous nightclubs." In Seattle, he feels in touch with real life.

Last year a friend came rushing up to Morris's apartment one day with an album by the country-punk group the Violent Femmes. The Femmes' "really ill" spirit set off a chain reaction in Morris's mind. The result was *Lovey*, a group dance as jangling and pent-up as the songs and named for the doll that Morris's seven-year-old niece used to tote around like a security blanket. The dancers for *Lovey* come onstage with pink plastic dolls: they seem bereft whenever they set them down. The difference between Morris's niece's doll and the dancers' dolls is that theirs are naked, and the depraved, libidinous things they do to them made Seattle audiences blanch. After the premiere, someone cried out, "Wash the stage with antiseptic!"

"*Lovey* was a reaction to the goody-goodyness of Seattle," says the dancer



*Eric Levin writes for People magazine.*



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Tina Fehlandt. "Mark said, 'Art can be ugly because life can be ugly. It's not just drinking cappuccino and gazing at the mountains all day.'"

Since last fall, Morris has created, among other pieces, *Frisson* (set to Stravinsky's *Symphony of Wind Instruments*), an intricate study of balance and human geometry in which dancers interlock like Tinkertoys; a suite of evocative solos to choruses by Handel; two dances with Garfein scores based, again, on essays by Barthes (this time on soap powders and on the art of striptease); and his first major work *en pointe*, performed to the mammoth Poulenc Organ Concerto and commissioned by the Boston Ballet.

This month through next, he and his thirteen-member company are going to Denmark to tape a "Dance in America" (!) special to air on public television next season. Then he returns to Seattle to run a dance seminar at the University of Washington before preparing for Jacob's Pillow in July and mapping out a commission for the thirtieth anniversary of the Joffrey Ballet, to premiere in Los Angeles in September. Is he fazed by this hectic pace? "I'm pretty happy," Morris says. "This is the work I want to be doing."

"Making up dances" comes as naturally to Morris as dancing. And dancing came as naturally as breathing. Growing up in Seattle, he studied flamenco, tap, and Tahitian, Hawaiian, and Balkan folk dancing as well as ballet and modern. "He was like a sponge," recalls Verla Flowers, who taught him from the age of nine. "He could absorb anything just by watching it, even the most complicated rhythms. I never felt I was working with a child."

### AT FOURTEEN, MORRIS WAS "COMPLETE ALREADY, LIKE A YOUNG MOZART."

In 1968, when Morris was eleven, José Greco came to Seattle to audition college dancers for a scholarship to study with his company for a week. Mark was clearly too young to try for the scholarship, but Flowers asked Greco to look him over just "to see if [she] was training him properly." Mark put on his castanets and leaped and spun through a magnificent *jota*. Said Greco at the time, "He reminds me of myself when I was young." Morris, incidentally, got the scholarship.

At fourteen Morris became a choreographer, presenting Flowers's best students in

ballets for her annual concerts. "The parents didn't know what to make of these things," Flowers recalls. "It was like nothing anyone had ever seen. He was complete already, like a young Mozart." Says Morris, "I didn't know anything, so I just made something up."

Following high school, Morris backpacked through Europe and spent half a year studying classical Spanish dance in Madrid. After further ballet training in Seattle, he arrived in New York in 1976, at the age of nineteen, convinced he "had no chance of ever finding a job." Yet within two weeks he was dancing for the Eliot Feld Ballet and later worked with such diverse talents as Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean (with whom he toured India), and Hannah Kahn. As Robert Joffrey observes, "Mark has a very big reservoir to draw upon."

Morris has a huge record collection and listens to a piece dozens, sometimes hundreds, of times over weeks, months, and even years before turning it into a dance. His late father, a schoolteacher and amateur pianist, taught Mark to read music. Like George Balanchine, he has the ability—surprisingly rare among choreographers—to analyze a score. When



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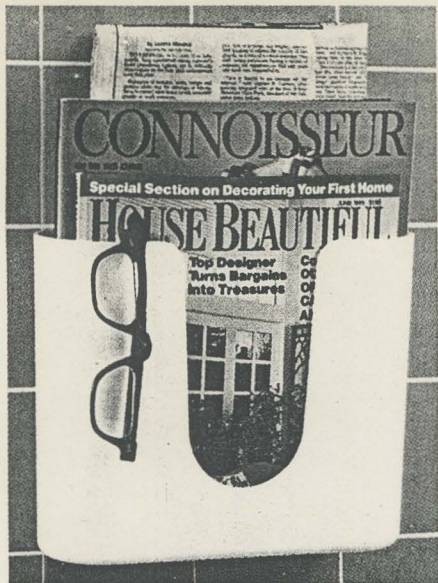
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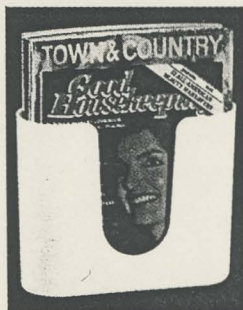
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## THE LIVELY ARTS

dealing with a big composition, such as the Bach Double Harpsichord Concerto, used for *Marble Halls* in 1984, he will pore over the notes for weeks in search of "secret clues" to the work's soul and structure.

Despite his formal concerns, Morris says that the realization of a dance starts "instinctively. I find what the music feels

### "I GET HYSTERICALLY INVOLVED IN THE STRUCTURE AND PHRASING."

like. I get an image, or an action, a little phrase I made up or maybe something I saw. That's the germ. Then I get hysterically involved with the structure and the phrasing of it." He has often and accurately been described as a "musical choreographer"—not that he constructs a one-to-one correspondence between musical phrase and dance phrase. "I'm concerned with the beginning, middle, and end of something, creating a piece that has certain cadences that are musical. Whether it's the same cadence as the music or not doesn't matter. It has to be logical so you can see the piece progress."

Rigorous as his method is, Morris never forgets that an audience is watching. "Structure is not the point," he says. "If you've never been to a dance before, there has to be a first shot that's interesting for you. And it doesn't have to be a gimmick. It can be a truth. Like gravity. Or death. In every dance there has to be something happening of interest to humans and not just to dance makers." □

In *O Rangasayee*, a mesmerizing twenty-minute solo, Morris danced as an Indian mystic.

