

DANCE VIEW

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How Not to Get Trapped In a Choreographic Rut

One of the most likable things about Mark Morris as a choreographer is the way he romps through styles and forms like a frisky puppy. Since he began making dances in 1980, he has choreographed to Brahms, Vivaldi, rock, gospel songs and traditional Tahitian and Indian music, and his themes have ranged from the intoxication of love to the social significance of wrestling. His refusal to limit himself to any single way of moving should gladden dancers who hate to see young choreographers fall into esthetic ruts.

Mr. Morris has lots of ideas, including ideas about structure, and he enjoys trying out different ways of putting dances together. Take "I Love You Dearly," which was offered during the Mark Morris Dance Group's recent season at the Bessie Schönberg Theater. This solo for Guillermo Resto, to a suite of Rumanian folk songs, made one recall that Mr. Morris once performed with a Balkan folk dance group. In fact, the suite's first dance was like a folk song made visible. At the beginning of each new stanza of the accompanying song, Mr. Resto would pause in a corner of the stage. Thus the dance, like the music, was stanzaic in structure.

Whereas that made "I Love You Dearly" choreographically logical, as well as true to the folk spirit, other dances over the years have been charmingly illogical. At one concert, "Etudes Modernes" and "Jr. High," two unrelated works, were yoked together by having sections from each presented in alternation. In "Etudes," women twisted themselves into striking poses with the intensity associated with the great pioneers of modern dance. However, in "Jr. High" men portrayed ordinary kids trudging to school, answering questions in class and trying to look macho in the gym. Just as the sublime and the ridiculous coexist in life, so Mr. Morris combined them in art.

The beginning of "Gloria," to Vivaldi, contained a kinetic surprise. Two people were seen moving laboriously forward. As the music swelled, one expected bursts of activity. Instead, the lights faded and a whole jubilant vocal chorus went undanced. But let no one therefore assume that Mr. Morris cannot choreograph to choral music, for this season he showed us "Handel Choruses," to excerpts from oratorios. Such music would surely prompt many choreographers to devise monumental ensembles. Instead, "Handel Choruses" consisted of solos ranging in tone from the grotesque (a solo in which a dancer clutched and clawed at his body to a chorus about jealousy) to the gently whimsical (a solo in which a dancer wiggled sheepishly while the singers confessed, "All we like sheep have gone astray").

Mr. Morris has ideas about content, as well as form. Occasionally, his employment of them may seem strained. "Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes" was inspired by an essay, written in 1952, in which

the French critic called wrestling a "spectacle of excess." However, whereas Mr. Barthes likened wrestling to classical tragedy, Mr. Morris suggested a somewhat different interpretation of the sport. After beginning as what might have been a parody of wrestling, the dance grew increasingly violent until one could easily conclude that Mr. Morris felt wrestling's "excess" to be akin to the debased spectacles of a fascistic regime. All these implications loaded down the dance — and wrestling — with unwieldy symbolic baggage.

Although Mr. Morris may veer between deftness and brashness, he is seldom heavy-handed in his best dances. At times, his concerns can be called spiritual, in the broadest sense of that word. "O Rangasayee," in which steps derived from Indian dance are invested with a modern dancer's sense of weight and energy, resembles a sacred quest. The laborious movements of "Gloria" eventually give way to joyous leaping. But because one remains conscious of the effort required by these celebrations, one suspects Mr. Morris believes that though mortals find it hard to offer praise in this troubled world, when the impulse to praise is felt at last, it may be accompanied by fervor.

Other works concern the presence or absence of love and aspects of human sociability in general. Dancers swoop through "New Love Song Waltzes" as if head over heels in love. "My Party" shows people having a giddy good time. Both dances are fascinating for more than their conviviality. Like several other choreographers today, Mr. Morris cheerfully ignores conventions of sexual role-playing in his works. Some of his solos are danced by men at certain performances and by women at others. And, in his duets, women may partner men, or the two performers may both be of the same sex. Occurring in dances about social relationships, such partnering is more than a formal device: it is a sign that Mr. Morris envisions a utopia in which loves of many kinds are cherished.

One of Mr. Morris's strangest pieces is "The Vacant Chair," a solo to three sentimental, even corny, songs. To the first — a song by George F. Root about death — the soloist, wearing a bag over his head, keeps lunging downward. Like a mask in a 17th-century ballet, the bag depersonalizes the performer so that his movements become not one individual's lamentations but emblems of grief itself. Then the dancer removes the bag, yet keeps his back to the audience and mimes the growth of a tree to Oscar Rasbach's familiar setting of Joyce Kilmer's "Trees." Finally, to Carrie Jacobs Bond's "When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day," he staggers mysteriously, and it is possible to interpret his staggerings as deliberate contradictions of the untroubled lyrics.

"The Vacant Chair" is ambiguous throughout, and

Mr. Morris, by first covering and then turning away his dancer's face, prevents the solo's interpreter from establishing an emotional tone through facial expressions. To judge from their giggles, a few viewers consider the piece a spoof. Yet I find it poignant, as well as eccentrically amusing, for it demonstrates how simple, even trivial things can trigger deep emotional responses. We have all been touched by sentimental songs, perhaps more often than we may care to admit; and, surely, one reason why some old songs remain popular is that, for all their emotional excesses, they still contain sentiments we recognize as genuine.

The solo makes something complex out of what could have been only a pretext for "camp" extravagance. Nevertheless, despite his achievement here, Mr. Morris would do well to guard against superficiality and cuteness, especially now that he is, in addition to being a prolific young choreographer, a popular one as well. Mr. Morris's choreography may range widely, but it does not always go deep, and there are times when his ideas prove foolish notions.

"Songs That Tell a Story," to gospel songs, combined goofy gallopings with naive actings-out of the songs' dramatic content. If the songs were not really taken seriously, neither were they satirized. Religion thereby became little more than an excuse for a romp. "Love, You Have Won" can also be cited as example of Mr. Morris being cute, for it depicts two vain courtiers posturing to a Vivaldi cantata. Their posturings possess formal complexity, for they involve movements that complement or mirror one another. But, finally, to match florid and heavily ornamented musical phrases with preenings and flutterings is to make sophomoric jokes about the Baroque period.

Curious about all sorts of ideas, Mr. Morris plays with good and bad ones alike, and so one can never predict what he will do next. This in itself may be heartening, for it indicates Mr. Morris is blessed with inquisitiveness. If he resists the temptation to become nothing but an amiable prankster, one can expect further choreographic delights from him in the seasons to come. Right now, he is a choreographer obviously in love with movement.