

Dance/Tobi Tobias

YOUNG BLOOD

"...Mark Morris went from adolescent daring to perverted sexuality, with a wealth of ideas about movement and music..."

THE TWO PROGRAMS—COMPRISING OVER a dozen pieces—that Mark Morris presented in December at DTW's Bessie Schönberg Theater can only be described as fecund. Not everything worked, and some of the dances seemed little more than studies, but the evenings contained a wealth of ideas about movement and music, to say nothing of humor, sensuousness, and wild adolescent daring.

An expert at working with popular and folk music, Morris is also fearless when it comes to tackling scores that would seem to demand a Balanchine-like mastery of musical and choreographic structure. On these programs, he confronted Bach's Concerto for Two Harpsichords in C Minor (for *Marble Halls*), Stravinsky's Symphonies of Wind Instruments (*Frisson*), and Shostakovich's Sonata for Cello and Piano (*Vestige*), and made handsome sense out of each. The Stravinsky, with its fierce, linear quality, actually reminds you of Balanchine's *Symphony in Three Movements*, and the Bach, with its serene architecture, of *Concerto Barocco*, not because Morris is imitative but because he, too, has seen inside the music. He seems to like these "big" scores because they allow so much to happen. The Shostakovich in particular gives him a field day in which lots of bodies are lavishly deployed through the space, expending huge amounts of visceral energy yet obedient in their paths to the order laid down by the composer.

The two strangest pieces on display had to do with perverted sexuality. In *Lovey* (to New Wave country-and-western songs by the Violent Femmes), themes of incest and murder are given a particularly horrific twist by the dancers' performing a number of erotically explicit acts with ugly little naked dolls. As a dance, the piece is nothing much, but the shock it purveys stays with you. *One Charming Night* (to four Purcell songs) finds the angelically delicate Teri Weksler playing an innocent maiden open to suggestion, with Morris as her most peculiar suitor—a combination of a Victorian Prince Charming, a sex maniac, and a vampire. It is very clever, and very, very funny.

My favorite piece was little more than a trifle. *My Party*, set to Jean Francaix's Trio for Strings in C Major, is a half-abstract version of a sock hop—a portrait of

early adolescence. Its four women and four men couple up according to Morris's usual sexual egalitarianism and impetuously roll on the floor in bear-hug embraces. Other times, they promenade in a circle, hands trustfully linked, limbs awkward. The dance is skillfully made, coherent and inventive, but the main

lection of a posh sweetshop in St. Petersburg, whose goodies were way beyond his means—a large part of the ballet's magic is concentrated in the first act, which depicts a bourgeois Christmas party and is almost entirely naturalistic. It contains far more mime (ballet's equivalent of prose) than dance (its poetry), and



MORRIS DANCE: *My Party* is Mark Morris's abstract version of a sock hop.

beauty of it lies in Morris's understanding—objective in its observation and touching in its sympathy—of what it's like to be new to the grown-up world.

AN EXCURSION TO GEORGE BALANCHINE's *Nutcracker*, given by the New York City Ballet, has become as obligatory a part of a middle-class-Christmas-with-children as ice skating at Rockefeller Center and inspecting the animated panoramas in the department-store windows (on the frostiest day of the year, with hot chocolate to follow). Now that my own offspring have outgrown both being escorted to it and being in it (it features some 40 students of the School of American Ballet), my visits are no longer scrupulously annual. I checked in this season, though, and found it had lost none of its power to enchant.

Although the second act takes place in the fantasyland of a child's imagination—it is based on Balanchine's recol-

the pleasure one takes in it consists in seeing a commonplace, domestic event evoked with such innocence and charm, not theatricalized out of recognition or tarted up with cloying sentiment.

Within the ordinary, however, lies the extraordinary. In one of the great visions of the first act, the little nightgowned heroine, prey to the childhood fear of unknown presences in the dark, runs in wide circles through the deserted family parlor as the Christmas tree expands to immense proportions. Her terror is familiar to us—we can recall it almost palpably—but this time something uncanny really is happening, and it's as beautiful as it is frightening. The little girl realizes this, too, and finally checks her flight and kneels in wonder, gazing at the rising green mountain dotted with stars.

The youngsters in this season's cast, coached by Garielle Whittle, are proficient and appealing. Jocelyn Hayes, the ten-year-old I saw in the leading role,

might have been chosen for her face alone—sweet enough, but with a kind of unruly animation. All the girls and boys (and girls playing boys) in the party scene couple enthusiasm-just-held-in-check with manners so well tuned that you might conclude a few years in a good ballet school was the best possible training for civilized social intercourse.

IF NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS ARE BEING made over at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, one had better be to seek out stronger choreography. The company, in residence at the City Center for most of December, offered splendid dancing in several inadequate new works. Ailey's *For Bird—With Love*, a look at the tortured life of the great jazz musician Charlie Parker, had a few atmospherically potent moments and a couple of clever solos for the fellows playing the backup musicians. Most of its dancing was negligible, though, and the story it told so vague as to be incomprehensible. *Speeds*, touted as Jennifer Muller's signature work, is a dubious acquisition. After a couple of cute observations about acceleration and deceleration, coming and going, it stays and runs off at the mouth for what seems like weeks.

Still, the dancers are glorious. Take Deborah Manning. The Ailey company has its share of bodies beautiful, but Manning isn't one of those long, shapely, sveltely muscled types. She's small and stubby-necked, with a tough jaw and spindly little-girl limbs. Yet she carries herself with such fierce pride and moves with such power and conviction, you wouldn't for a minute have her otherwise. In *Speeds*, she descends slowly into an arabesque *penchée*, perched like a stork on one frail leg, the other rising heavenward while the torso swoops down like a diver's. You feel that if you could figure out what keeps her balanced, unwavering, you'd understand one of the top secrets of the universe.

SCHEDULING CONFLICTS POSTPONED MY seeing the new work Bill T. Jones had made for the Ailey company, but I did get a good look at Jones's recent work in the concerts he and his partner, Arnie Zane, gave at the Joyce. I especially enjoyed *Shared Distance*, which Jones dances with the extraordinary Amy Pivar and which plays intriguingly on the disparity in their heights and physical temperaments, Jones being long and lyrical, Pivar a little dynamo of gutsy strength. Like much of Jones's and Zane's work, the piece incorporates sculptural tableaux, dramatic gestures divorced from their context, and the virtuosic feats with displaced weight typical of contact improvisation. Here these elements were particularly well meshed, and warmed by humor, challenge, and tenderness. ■



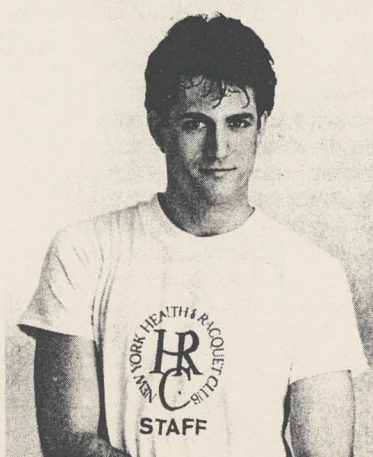
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