

ARTS FAIR

Cultural resolutions: Morris's avant disregard. Kurosawa's epic undertaking. Golub's hard-life cycle. Miller's lust cause. Art is all. All is fair.

DANCE

Sound Steps

by Thomas Connors



CHRIS GARNHAM

Mark Morris, surrounded by a small company, has arrested every critical eye in the dance establishment.

Mark Morris slips into bright-blue sweatpants, flicks on a cassette, and dances out the hangdog heartache of a country-and-western song. Dejection rises through his body like a fever; when it breaks, he walks away, the dance trailing behind him like a vapor. Whether he performs to Bach, exotic Indian vocals, or the barroom rock of the Violent Femmes, Mark Morris makes you see the music in his dances. As the avant-garde hungers for the new-and-improved, this twenty-nine-year-

old dancer and choreographer offers a fresh vision of the tried-and-true: the running and walking of everyday movement, the heavy tread and delicate weavings of ethnic dance, the formal flow and syntax of ballet, and "real old-school modern dance." Next month, his most recent commission will set the Boston Ballet on its ear.

Growing up in Seattle, Morris studied ballet ("With an incredible, frightening man. He'd demonstrate a thirty-two-bar adagio—once. You'd get it or

you were out"), danced with a Balkan folk ensemble, and learned flamenco. He also got the requisite free-form training of the seventies, "where people lie on these mats on the floor, hissing with the lights out." In New York, he performed with Laura Dean and Twyla Tharp, among others; in 1980 he presented his own work for the first time.

Guided by a recessive gene in his choreographic makeup, Morris never quite connected with the other independent dancers on the downtown scene.

He delighted in the kind of material—theme and variation, meaning and emotion—that the postmodern crowd wouldn't touch until quite recently. "I think for a time it was embarrassing for people to do dramatic, emotional, quasi-narrative stuff—unless it was about growing up watching *Leave It to Beaver* and having acne." Clearly, Morris is not interested in choreographed egos. "Dance can be about you, you, you," he says, pointing to an imaginary dancer, "as long as it's about every other person on earth. Good art is like that."

His version of Vivaldi's Gloria in D begins with a dancer's sudden, spiraling descent, a fall from grace that looks sublime. The heroic poses in *Jealousy* (to Handel's *Hercules*) are deflated with diminutive gestures like tracing a line on the floor with a fingertip. In *Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes*, Morris presents a convincing visual counterpart to the late semiotician's theory about why so many of us pay top dollar to see Hulk Hogan in action at Madison Square Garden.

Although Morris didn't set out to become, as he puts it, "a fabulous new voice," he's earned the praise and respect of virtually the entire critical establishment. In 1984, while Morris was relatively unknown, dance doyenne Arlene Croce anointed him with a lengthy profile in *The New Yorker*.

Morris's company, a close-knit collection of as many as fifteen dancers, comes together when there is work to be done. "I can teach these dances to other people," he says, "but we do it right." Operating between Seattle and New York, Morris and his company ("They've had lives, they've read books, they've been in love, so they can dance") are booked for the coming year. Still, "costumes are a matter of 'What can you bring from home?' I have no money, I'm totally disorganized. I have plane tickets, per diems if I'm lucky. I stay with friends."

Whether setting a fugue in motion or dancing with a paper bag over his head, Morris is a humanist in the cool postmodern world. Although he loves the way some dancers "manipulate a tiny palette of steps," he's taken with more expansive emotion: "I love ornament, I love a good swoon." □

MOVIES

Ran Amok

by Stephen Schiff

Akira Kurosawa has always been the Gene Autry of the Japanese cinema, loping westward with a six-gun in his belt and a sentimental song in his throat. While his countrymen crafted obscure meditations on duty and ecstatic suicide, Kurosawa

made samurai and gangster movies, action-packed spectacles that poured forth the ingratiating virtues of the all-American Western: bighearted tough guys, flashy camerawork and flashier bloodletting, soul-freezing villains and unabashed tearjerking. So his Occidental fans may feel betrayed by what will surely be his final diptych, the 1980 film *Kagemusha* and his new one, *Ran*: two wintry, forbidding war pictures in which the wink and swagger of individual heroes are subsumed in the chill geometry of distant armies on the march.

Ran, the movie Kurosawa yearned to make for nearly a decade, turns out to be long and boring and beautiful. It's Kurosawa's valedictory rendition of *King Lear*; the king becomes Hidetora (Tatsuya Nakadai), a feudal warlord of the sixteenth century, and his daughters Hidetora's three proud sons. The film is full of dumbfounding battle sequences and landscapes, and Kurosawa has invented a diabolical new character named Lady Kaede, who is played by Mieko Harada, a mesmerizing young actress with a dragon lady's hauteur and a snake charmer's lilting walk. Kaede's family was murdered by Hidetora; now

she is hell-bent on destroying his dynasty. Goneril, Regan, Iago, and Circe rolled into one, she's probably the most fascinating woman Kurosawa has ever invented. Yet *Ran* feels strangely vacuous. It never achieves what even the meanest *Lear* must achieve—it never makes you weep for its hero and the orderly world he represents.

Ran is the next stage in the towering experiment Kurosawa initiated with *Kagemusha*: he is forging a cinema of ges-

ture, a cinema that carries the Zen-influenced spirit of his beloved samurai warriors into the dark arena of the tragic epic. Because his father was among the last traditional Japanese military educators, Kurosawa grew up steeped in the



Lady Kaede, *Ran*'s most striking presence.

samurai ethical code known as Bushido, whose underlying tenet is the Zen maxim "To know and to act are one and the same." Actions, to the samurai, don't mean merely decisions. They mean gestures—ways of sitting, walking, scratching, even breathing. One man pours tea a certain way, another a different way, and therein lies the difference in what they know and who they are. In *Kagemusha* (a far better film than *Ran*), a thief impersonates a dying warlord, and the impersonation gradually transforms him: by adopting the lord's gestures and postures, he acquires some of his noble spirit. Yet Kurosawa stretches even further; for him, war itself becomes an intricate series of gestures. In *Kagemusha*, honorable gestures can make battles beautiful—can sometimes even win them.

But what happens when gestures prove hollow, when they no longer reveal the soul behind them? That, in effect, is the subject of *Lear*: Goneril and Regan's display of affection is a lie, and though Cordelia's actions speak for themselves, Lear misreads them. When actions no longer signify what they seem to signify, the result—in Kurosawa as in Shakespeare—is breakdown,