

Mark Morris: The Jester of Modern Dance

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Like virtually all the leading lights in modern and post-modern dance, Mark Morris is at once a star performer and an irresistible creative force. Since the days of Isadora Duncan, non-balletic dance has been no less important as a means of self-expression than as a medium for artistic invention. Unfortunately, some modern dancers never get beyond the limits of their own capacities as performers, even after they retire from the stage. Every new piece by Martha Graham these days is designed to exploit the gifts of a star dancer who no longer exists. Mark Morris is less self-preoccupied and can choreograph as brilliantly for others as for himself. At the same time, he is fully aware of his own remarkable gifts as a performer.

At the Brooklyn Academy of Music a couple of seasons back, he appeared in "O Rangasayee," a 20-minute solo to a raga by Sri Tyagaraja in which his fascination as an executant was almost impossible to distinguish from his inventiveness as a choreographer. So striking was the effect of this work that it tended to eclipse the excellent pieces he created for the rest of his company during the same "Next Wave" season. Last summer, at the PepsiCo Festival in Purchase, N.Y., he was seen in two shorter works: "The Vacant Chair," a wildly comic solo danced in jockey shorts to three sentimental parlor ballads of a bygone age, and "Love, You Have Won," a witty duet with Guillermo Resto set to the Vivaldi cantata of that name.

During the recent three-week season given by his company here at Dance Theater Workshop, he and Mr. Resto repeated "Love, You Have Won," and Mr. Morris again danced "The Vacant Chair." This time, however, he shared the role with another dancer, Rob Besserer. Mr. Besserer, while not as compelling a performer as

Mr. Morris, showed that the piece itself is more than just a one-man vehicle.

At Dance Theater Workshop, Mr. Morris also appeared in two new dances: "One Charming Night," a wry duet to four Purcell songs, in which he partnered Teri Weksler, and "Handel Choruses," in which he was simply one of four soloists.

These performances left no doubt that Mr. Morris is among the most interesting dancers of the present time. Though powerful in build, as in personality, he is by nature less suited to the noble and heroic than to the droll and the ironic, largely because he has the face not of a prince but of a jester. He is not a frank and fearless celebrant of virtue but a shrewd and witty commentator on human foibles. As he seems to be fully aware, he has the appearance of someone born to mock solemnity, dishonesty, pretense or any form of purposeless convention.

In the duet, "One Charming Night," Mr. Morris, dressed conservatively in a dark suit and tie, plays a volatile lover, at times aggressive, at others submissive, even to the point of helpless subservience, but always aware of the need to assume the role of the strong protective wooer and the manner of the utterly devoted swain. At the conclusion of a series of encounters in which both partners reveal their predatory nature as well as their mutual dependence, he suddenly adopts a pose of high-romantic bravado, the effect of which is wryly comic. He lifts his beloved from the ground, to which she had slumped not long before in seeming despair. Then he carries her off stage high above his head in a manner that suggests both triumph and exaltation, neither of which has anything to do with the relationship we have just been observing.

It is possibly because he was not born to play the part of a faceless hero that Mr.

Morris has developed as great an interest in the mimetic as in the formal aspects of dance. No doubt, too, it is his awareness of the expressive potentiality of movement that leads him so often to use vocal music—though never just for simple illustration. In "Love, You Have Won," he provides an ironic commentary on the sentiments expressed by the text and music of the Vivaldi cantata, offering not a danced version of the work but a surprising extension of its meanings.

In "Handel Choruses," each of his four solos gives a physical identity to the emotional content of the music, thereby particularizing it and rendering it memorably graphic. In "Lovey," he takes five songs on the subject of physical and mental abuse by the aptly named new-wave rock group The Violent Femmes, and with them conjures up a fully realized imaginative world. Sexual perversity, violation, even murder, are commonplace and all the more horrifying for being distanced from us by association with children's games, during the course of which naked rubber dolls are used as sexual toys and surrogate lovers.

The more abstract of Mr. Morris's pieces are no less interesting. In "Prelude and Prelude" (danced to Henry Cowell's "Prelude for Harpsichord and Violin"), he is at his most engaging, setting up a number of intriguing spatial and rhythmic connections between the various members of the ensemble, who signal their shifts in mood and feeling by the way they deploy the fans they carry. And having thus established his concept, Mr. Morris then repeats the Cowell music while changing the weight and rhythm of the choreography, as if to demonstrate that any relationship between music and dance is provisional and thus capable of infinite adjustment.