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Reinventing the tradition:

a talk with Mark Morris



Choreographer Mark Morris

RUDY KIKEL

By the end of February, he will this year have appeared in lecture/demonstrations at Dance Umbrella in Cambridge and at the Museum of Fine Arts, taught master classes at Boston University, appeared in "Boston Dancers Unite," choreographed works for -- and set them on -- both Boston's Concert Dance Company and the Boston Ballet. And February 27-March 1, the Mark Morris Dance Company will present at Northeastern University's Alumni Theater, with music by Herschel Garfein, works that one critic has said all eyes in the dance world will be on -- three dances based on essays by Roland Barthes: *Championship Wrestling*, *Soap Powders and Detergents*, and *Striptease*.

Now, relaxing over a beer at Boston's Metropolitan Cafe, after six hours of rehearsing (three with the Boston Ballet, and three with his own company) dancer and choreographer Mark Morris is reflecting upon the "total inundation" (my phrase) he, his choreography, and his company have visited upon the cultural life of Boston.

"This is wild!" he acknowledges. "A first, this... festival." Then he wonders: "I don't know if it's good or bad." But concludes: "I think it's probably fine."

Fine for Boston certainly! Mark Morris, at 29, is the darling of contemporary dance -- at once "the most solidly promising heir to the mantle of the modern dance greats" (*New York Times*) and "the most revolutionary choreographer of his generation" (*Dance* magazine). He's modern dance's "new crown prince" (*Esquire*) -- "the choreographer of the moment," said Christine Temin in the *Boston Globe*, "as essential to the 1980s as Twyla Tharp was to the '70s."

Only taking classes in Spain for a while ("It wasn't a problem of leaving the states, it was a problem of living in Spain") dissuaded Mark Morris from his first ambition -- to be a flamenco dancer: he studied flamenco dancing from the ages of 9 to 18. He spent 8 or 9 years in New York City -- working, for example, with Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovich, Laura Dean, and Hannah Kahn. Now, though he's based back in his native Seattle, he's on the road a lot.

And --oh, yes -- he's openly gay. And friendly and accessible enough to have granted Bay Windows an interview.

Rudy Kikel: What is it you do that's attracting all this attention?

Mark Morris: I'm highly musical. I'm a good craftsman, a structuralist. And there's more emotional stuff in my work, more *romance*, than there is in a lot of other people's work whom I don't like.

Lyrical, maybe?

Yeah, maybe that's the word.

But some of it is tough, too, and hard. There's danger.

But it *means* something. Because I think dancing *means* something. I think action has meaning, in itself. I see no reason to pretend it doesn't. And that's old-fashioned.

It means something. Does that mean you have a message?

Just a Utopian message. There's not a lot I can do about, like... WORLD HUNGER, as far as choreography goes. So it's more like people should be nicer to each other -- better, kinder, clearer. *Better*. That's all. Everything should be better. That's my only power as a choreographer. And I have *considerable* power as a choreographer. And that's great! And as a somewhat marginal, public figure that's a responsibility. It doesn't matter if the dances are ugly and mean; that's an example of... *things*.

The thing that's ugly, are you making it beautiful by presenting it?

No, it doesn't have to be beautiful to inspire beautiful or good-spirited work.

"The Vacant Chair" [the dance Morris presented in "Boston Dancers Unite," the AIDS benefit at the New England Life Hall] has you reeling about wildly. It's scary, threatening. It made me reflect upon isolation and city life.

It's a pretty depressing dance, as I see it.

Because the figure breaks down at the end?

The whole thing is very difficult. With the bag over my head I can't see. It's not like pretend. So you have to use other senses. It's sort of a humiliating piece.

You're about to go out of control. I think we really relate to that.

He is out of control... I'm old-fashioned, a modernist. I want to make up dances that have a beginning, a middle and an end. And people are going to watch them thinking they're done by other people who are also humans.

Mark Morris

Continued on page 12



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A talk with Mark Morris



Mark Morris dancing "The Vacant Chair" at "Boston Dancers Unite," a benefit for AIDS at the New England Life Hall (photo: Rick Asensio)

But you're not so stuffy, so conventional that...

Those are not the same things-- stuffy and conventional. My dances have more in common with earlier modern dance than they do with my contemporaries, though I gladly and readily appropriate concepts from the post-moderns and minimalists whose work I admire.

Some names?

Lucinda Childs I think is a great choreographer. As do a lot of people. My work has less to do with people like Childs, David Gordon, Tricia Brown, Laura Dean, in fact. It's less like that. But it's part of the history.

I feel that too, that there's a real respect for tradition.

I like that. I like to see that stuff. So I make it up.

You reinvent it?

I guess.

Could it be that they satisfy everybody, your dances? The traditionalists -- and those who are in quest of the fresh and new?

Maybe. They're watchable. People like to watch my dances, even if they don't like them. There's something going on that's interesting to watch. That's like the bottom line.

Being gay.

What about it?

Did you make a decision at a certain point to come out -- or were you always out?

Oh, no. Once I'm being interviewed as a sort of featured person, then my coming out has added significance. I've known I was gay from about the age of fourteen or fifteen. I came out to my family and friends when I was 17, 18 -- when I finally, actually had a name for it.

What was your name for it?

The name for it was being homosexual, was being gay. My responsibility as this sort of public figure is not to make a big deal about it. I mean I'm gay and I'm an artist. I'm a gay artist.

But many would not have mentioned it at all. So it's brave of you to say so.

No, it's not brave at all. I'm gay. Big deal.

No homophobic reactions?

Not that I know of. Dance is very much gay-owned and gay-operated. And that's fine. To be a choreographer who actually says he's gay might be something, because there are a lot of choreographers who don't. But it's also true that what I do at home is nobody's business. I'm not talking about sexually, just politically. So I'm gay.

I'm a gay artist. This is my work. Take it or leave it. It's not: you should like it or dislike it because I'm gay. I didn't call a press conference to announce it. It comes out.

No reactions to it? No one telling you you shouldn't have done that?

Oh no. I've been thanked a few times. By people who read the press.

When you say it's political, how do you mean that?

It's an integral part of what I am. It's how I think. It's my life. It's not sucking cock. That's a different thing, which has nothing to do with being a gay artist.

It's your identity, you mean, and not an activity.

That's right. So it's not a big deal. I'm gay like I'm a feminist, a humanist, a modernist, and whatever else I am. I'm pretty loose but I have feelings and opinions about things. I can do what I want, you see. My job as a choreographer is to make up stuff. And I love that. It's great. It's exactly what I want to do. So I make up stuff that means the things I want them to mean, or they come from a point of view that's my point of view. And my point of view includes those things.

Gay sensibility. It's a term that may mean nothing unless it's given a meaning. Do you give it meaning? Is there a way in which your gayness influences your work? In which it would have been different had you not been gay?

Of course.

Can you say what that is?

No, because I'm gay. I can't imagine how it would have been different. If I were straight this conversation wouldn't be happening. And I can't imagine how my work would have been different had I been straight. I have a great deal of freedom. First of all, to be a performing artist you have to be pretty much beyond embarrassment. You know what I mean? To perform honestly, and to do anything that's required of you, you have to get over the fact that people are watching you, get over feeling stupid or ugly.

Do you feel those things?

I never feel particularly beautiful when I dance. I feel powerful a lot. When I work with people there's no problem with my being gay. I'm gay all the time. I'm not just gay when I'm working, or when I'm dealing with straight men. I know people who work with straight dancers and act different and do... weird stuff. Like it's somehow not all right [to be gay]. But it's more than all right. Because I'm making up

the piece. And I can say to these people: "That's great -- but now dance like you're a 12-year-old girl. I want that quality." And if you're an honest performer, you can come up with an image like that without embarrassment. You know what I mean?

But it's the gayness that gives you that? If you're gay, you're not locked into a role?

If you're gay and comfortable. To make decisions. As I am. "Everybody walk around like babies now!"

Why couldn't you do that if you were straight?

I could. It's not being straight or gay. It's acceptance of that. So I have no problem. I don't have to edit what I do at all.

There's no image you have to support which is not really you.

Right. I'm very strong. I'm very big. So I get respect just from that. Instead of being totally femmy, which I am. I can do everything. You know what I mean? I can lift girls and stuff.

Do you see yourself as androgynous?

I'm all of that stuff. Androgynous is a word that's used on me all the time. Once I cut my hair, I stopped being androgynous.

Bruce Marks, the new artistic director of the Boston Ballet, told the audience that had assembled to see you at the Museum of Fine Arts, that when he first saw your work he was very attracted and very uncomfortable. He felt he was "looking into someone's bedroom window."

That's "Ten Suggestions" -- a solo I do. It's a private piece like "The Vacant Chair." It's not projected. The dance is contained in itself. And you watch it. It's not like a show. It is a show. But it's not about people watching it.

Could our being forced to become voyeurs in watching it be evidence of a kind of gay sensibility?

I don't know. I don't think so. That particular dance is sort of serene. It's all very small-scale, so that's why it seemed like maybe you shouldn't watch it. It's hard to describe. I do that sometimes in dance, when the dance is completely self-contained and then we watch it, instead of being focused a certain way, like out, out of the proscenium.

Like Giselle.

Right. Great dancers do that. Like the best Giselles aren't doing as show. They're doing a Giselle. It's bigger, because it's in a bigger house and we've got to see it. It's larger, but it has to be motivated from the same place, where no one is watching. That's what I mean. And that's any good dancing.

Shall we let that topic go -- how being gay influences your work?

Yes, because they're inseparable. Like how being white influences your work. Like how do I know.

How does Boston seem to you as a dance community?

It seems fine. There are not many good dance theatres, good spaces. I haven't seen other companies. I've seen the Concert Dance Company and the Boston Ballet.

And in other cities?

I don't go to dance concerts much. If I go to one, it's usually the City Ballet in New York. Ballanchine. They're great!

They've influenced you too?

Everybody influenced me. I just saw the Paul Taylor Company here last week. There are people who are always good to see -- like Taylor, or Lucinda Child, or Merce Cunningham. But I like

music better. Boston's a good music city. I went to *Turandot* and almost died, it was so great. It's one of the best opera productions I've seen in a very long time. It was great. *Turandot* could be a big war horse, but this was really beautifully done -- very well sung. Sarah Caldwell's work is amazing.

The work we'll see at Northeastern -- what'll that be like?

I don't know as much as I should. "Championship Wrestling" is done: it was done last year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. They are three pieces based on Roland Barthes essays, from a book called *Mythologies*. Each is about twenty minutes long. Each is set to music by Herschel Garfein. Musically and choreographically we went in different directions. "Wrestling" has an all-electronic score, with some crowd sounds on tape. "Striptease" is for orchestra and tape. And "Detergents" is all live music, sort of a cantata. "Wrestling" is the most realistic, "Striptease" is a cross, and "Detergents" is the most abstract.

The press release speaks of "Striptease" as "shockingly explicit."

We strip.

You told the Phoenix that some of the research for it you did in the Combat Zone.

When I was here last summer. It's where I've seen the best stripping -- at the Naked I.

You'll have females and males stripping. Seen any male stripping in Boston?

Not around here, no. I didn't get very far. Is there any place to go?

The Haymarket has male stripping every Monday.

That's good to know. I go when I can.

I was told "Striptease" is such a controversial piece that it's best to get to Northeastern the first night because it's not clear the curtain will be permitted to go up a second!

What?! Because we take our clothes off? You can't do a piece on striptease and not take your clothes off.

Will there be total nudity?

I'm not sure. I'll try it both ways, look at it, and decide what works best. Everyone always asks me about this ballet. They want to know everything, all the details -- and I don't have them yet. And I don't think they're too interesting. It's either a good dance or it's not.

What should interviewers ask?

You're doing fine. But interviews are not choreography. They're just me



Mark Morris (photo: Rick Asensio)

talking about what I do. They're not the same thing as a dance concert. I'm not trying to be a fabulous press celebrity, a media star. My medium is dance.

Do you feel pressured to perform for the media?

I don't mind doing it, but I'm very busy. They want a TV crew to come into rehearsals. It's like: give me a break. That's fine, but don't get in my way. I'm working. I'm here to work.

Are there costs -- to being a media celebrity?

I don't mind it at all. It doesn't change my opinions. It doesn't make me more guarded necessarily. There's a pressure certainly. I'm treated differently. When I first come in to teach a class, everybody's totally terrified of me. That's good because they're attentive. It's bad because they don't think I'm human anymore. And if I take a class -- well, it hasn't happened in Boston -- nobody will talk in the dressing room. I feel as if they want a job with me or something, which is a joke, because I have enough dancers. With college students, I'm suddenly sort of a joke role model. It's like: how to have a job like mine!

That could make you a focus for envy and resentment.

I'm sure that exists. But I'm basically doing a service for the dance community -- not a disservice. It happens to be me. But it's not all about me. It's about the work, dancing, and dance companies.

You don't seem pretentious. You could give off a lot of attitude.

I sort of have anti-attitude. I've seen people with jobs like mine be so stupid, so I try not to be. But also, dancers are trained to present themselves in a certain way, physically -- with a certain grace. And that becomes part of your life. It's not necessarily attitude, but it can easily turn into attitude.

You turned down People magazine for an interview. Why?

I've seen how they dealt with people who might have had something interesting to say. It was like: who's hot? It's not worth it. Too disposable.

Are you happy?

Pretty happy.

Anything you're not happy about?

I'm not very good with money. I procrastinate a lot. I'm not very good at answering letters. Then I get guilt. But nothing horrible. I have great friends. The dancers I work with are wonderful.

What's next on your path?

Right after we do the show at Northeastern, my company goes to Vienna for two performances. Then I go back to Seattle, to choreograph a Dance of the Seven Veils for *Salome*, the Strauss opera. There I teach the Spring semester at the University of Washington, in the middle of which we go to Denmark to film a TV show, "Dance in America." Then I'm teaching an intensive workshop in Seattle for a couple of weeks. We perform there and at Jacob's Pillow, and I don't know what else. It goes on. I'm booked for a year and a half. Next Fall, we're at the Brooklyn Academy of Music again. That's one I'm sort of focused on.

Belgian beer

Choreographers' Festival,
of the Boston Ballet,
at the Wang Center,
February 5-9

This year's "Choreographers' Festival" at the Wang Center underscored the Boston Ballet's commitment to new works. It showcased newish pieces by two resident choreographers and a squeaky new one by Mark Morris. Historical perspective came by way of a classic excerpt, the pas de deux from "Le Corsaire."

The program showed the dancers to be strong, skilled and flexible, if a bit under-prepared. It had stylistic sweep, from romantic and neo-classical works to contemporary ballet in both traditional and avant-garde idioms.

Bruce Wells' "Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto" (1982) is a neo-classical work, without plot, but full of narrative elements, from the puppy love between Deirdre Myles and Christian Zimmermann, to Elaine Bauer's gypsy coquette out for tips. Wells gave soloist Bauer as much to work with as Mendelssohn gave his violinist: impetuosity, fire, lyricism, and wit. Whether due to choreographer or soloist, there was also a touch of camp.

With the segue to the second



The Boston Ballet in *Mort Subite* by Mark Morris (photo: Jaye R. Phillips)

movement, Wells and lighting designer Craig Miller (who gets a pat on the back for the entire production) created a memorable gesture to introduce that movement's solo couple, Leslie Jonas and Devon Carney. Despite a dragging tempo that destroyed musical continuity, they danced a touching adagio.

Laura Young and William Pizzuto were wonderful in Anna Marie Holmes' staging of the pas de deux from "Le Corsaire." They brought conviction to what can be danced as a war horse. Pizzuto's leaps had that classic, yet astonishing, quality of hanging in midair.

In Bruce Marks' 1977 setting of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "The Lark Ascending," the ballerina represents a bird going about its day, as five men alternately pose and partner her, representing her habitat.

While the piece looked easy on these people, the men had the strength and flexibility to carry off transparent partnering and lifts of apparent ease. Marie-Christine Mouis made a triumph

of Marks' "ascending gestures."

The work also showed off the Ballet's strapping male dancers. For, while the men were on stage to support the ballerina, Marks ennobled them, and they were costumed and lit to accentuate their virility.

This prompts historical comparison with Ted Shawn and his pioneering, all-male dance company (with which Jacob's Pillow was founded in 1933). Like Shawn, Marks showed us the male athlete in motion, celebrating his shapes and abilities. As the men moved from pose to pose (trees in the wind?), Shawn's work came to mind -- with its freestyle movement, orientalism, athleticism, and eclecticism. Like Shawn, Marks chooses triumphant movements that originate in strong, laboring backs, some of which we now see as "very Deco." Since the Vaughan Williams score also has a British folk element, Marks gives us what one takes as highland folk dance.

If Marks and Wells tend to groom their tableaux and characterizations, then



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