



Mark Morris and Teri Weksler in *One Charming Night*

By Deborah Jowitt

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. At Dance Theater Workshop (December 6 to 22). *Frisson; Lovey; Prelude and Prelude; I Love You Dearly; My Party; Handel Choruses; Love, You Have Won; The Vacant Chair; Marble Halls; Minuet and Allegro in G; Vestige; One Charming Night; Retreat from Madrid.*

CHRISTMAS REVELS. At Symphony Space (December 13 to 15).

You take nine dancers and set them in a diagonal line near one edge of the stage; you give them all gilt fans to wield, teach them an odd, elegant, slow phrase that keeps them in one spot, and displace their moves into canon. Then you make another phrase for a soloist, who dances with a closed fan in his/her teeth. The music is Henry Cowell's *Prelude for Harpsichord and Violin*. A couple of the women are bare-breasted. Then you play the music again; this time the soloist is the chorus, and the former chorus performs the solo—again in a free canon. The solo, with its sinkings to the floor, looks less of a private drama, but more turbulent; the chorus acquires emotional significance.

Prelude and Prelude, one of 13 dances that Mark Morris showed in two programs over three sold-out weeks on DTW, confirms his enormous talent. (I could have chosen another to begin this article with; many are as fine.) Morris makes dances that are short by today's standards, and each has a distinctly different flavor. I'm not sure whether his unusual ideas are simply the result of his "take" on a piece of music he loves, or whether he sometimes starts with an image and finds music to suit. In either case, his musicality dominates. You can admire the craftsmanship on many levels. Guillermo Resto is dancing a three-part solo to traditional Romanian music (*I Love You Dearly*); the singers are emitting little trios of exclamations—"ha, ho, ho" or something; the dancer lands on the motif the first time it appears with three little jumps, and on the second too, but when it comes up a third time, his jumps don't land squarely on it, but become part of a more fluent, intricate phrase. You see the same rhythmic acuity in what's perhaps my favorite of these new Morris dances, *My Party*, a dance for eight to Jean Francaix's dry, witty *Trio for Strings in C Major*; it is a real party, with robust dancing in couples, in parallel lines, in circles, a brief flurry of raunchiness—people falling on each other—and a bit of uproariousness that undermines the tidiness of the patterns.

Often Morris devises a pattern that clarifies the music he's using. In *Retreat from Madrid*, there are four dancers (Tina Fehlandt, Penny Hutchinson, Donald Mouton, and Morris). They wear practice clothes, but their eyes and noses are hidden by masks, which calls to mind paintings of festive Venetians in dominoes and brings on the Italianate anticness and grotesquery that lurks in Boccherini's music. The dancers begin standing in a line, and return to it after each variation, thereby underscoring the form. Since the dancers—one, two, all—come toward the audience to dance, the variations have the air of sorties and retreats. Formal as they are, they get wilder

and wilder too, as if the spirits of both revelers and musicians are coming close to cracking the decorum imposed by the structure.

In other dances, Morris's take on the music is more eccentric. It's as if he has the confidence to go with the first strong thought that crosses his mind. So in a series of solos to Handel choruses, the first "All we like sheep have gone astray," he gives the soloist (Keith Sabado) a motif which undermines the music's beauty and sobriety: on every "we like sheep," he bends over, stiffens his arms and legs, and stares at the audience with mild dopeness. In the first part of *The Vacant Chair*, the soloist (Rob Besserer the night I saw it—Morris believes in cast-changing) dances with a paper bag over his head to the emotion-laden voice of (I believe) Vern Sutton singing the title song; in the last, to the strains of "The End of a Perfect Day," he does sweet runs and waves a long leg beautifully, but he also staggers and clumps about in a circle with huge unwieldy steps, clawing the air and butchering the beat. In *Minuet and Allegro in G* (Beethoven), two women in colored trunks, bandeaus, and long white tutus chase each other in circles, bustling along like people who need to catch up to a fast walker in order to have a good conversation, or to catch up with someone who's ranting, in order to say, "Hey, calm down." *Love, You Have Won* seizes on the flowery "After you Alphonse" disputations of two countertenors in a Vivaldi cantata and converts them into elegantly foppish side-by-side dancing for two men (Morris and Resto).

Morris is rare among young, with-it choreographers in that he seems to understand George Balanchine's idea about families of steps. That is, once Morris has settled on his idea for a dance, a vocabulary that suits each one emerges. I don't mean to say that the steps are totally different for each dance, or that some don't appear in several dances, only that Morris is very selective, and that, even in his most florid dances, you feel a compositional stringency.

I like the fact that Morris's presentations aren't slick or glamorous. His dancers don't show off (a few of them are unremarkable technicians), but they all dance with the fullness and the musicality his pieces require. (Those I haven't mentioned so far are Ruth Davidson, Susan Hadley, Lodi McClellan, Jennifer Thienes, David Landis, Scott Cunningham, and Teri Weksler.) However difficult his choreography gets, it is never about its own difficulty.

The relationships that Morris presents on stage are usually amicable, rather than loving. I notice that dancers rarely lift each other or embrace except in the

patterns of social dance or in a piece like *Frisson*, to Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. In this, careful structures and wide stiff-legged poses (like giraffes preparing to drink) convey a ritualistic atmosphere in which four dancers wheeling a fifth immobile one through the air seems appropriate.

Morris downplays gender distinctions with an offhandedness that nevertheless comes across as a political statement, creating roles that can be danced by a man or a woman, exposing women's breasts as if the fact had no particular significance, dressing a man rather like a woman. Perhaps it's not that he downplays gender, but that he points up androgyny.

At this point, sexuality appears in his works only in its beyond-the-pale mani-

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festations. I wasn't too disturbed by his duet with Weksler, *One Charming Night* (to Purcell), in which what you might take for a repressed woman and an uptight suitor turn out to be lascivious vampires. But I was taken aback by *Lovey*. Adults, unable to deal with each other, rub baby dolls against their private parts and plant kisses on pink, plastic bottoms. Someone said it was supposed to be an anti-child abuse statement; if so, it's more like a sick joke, and, what was more depressing, it turned the audience on.

Morris makes some wonderful dances. His work is the most profoundly craftsmanlike of any of his generation. What it doesn't seem to me to be is profound.

Christmas, as Garrison Keillor observed the other night on *A Prairie Home Companion*, is about remembering. In part anyway. You remember every Christmas you ever celebrated—not just what made you laugh or cry, but what Aunt Susan said or how you tried to run your new sled when there wasn't enough snow and scraped up the bottom.

The latest edition of John Langstaff's Christmas Revels dredged up some surprising memories. This year, the onstage festivities turned Symphony Space into a hospitable log cabin in Appalachia or New England. The ensemble so gorgeously blaring Marshall Barron's overture from the balcony was called the Bear Mountain Brass. A group of lively, smart-talking teenagers from East Harlem School of the Performing Arts and the Drama Club of Washington Houses Community Center called themselves the Clinch Mountain Dancers when they cut loose to "The Babe of Bethlehem," and the Sawmill Mimmers when they offered a rowdy mimmers play.

But when the stage lit up and Jean Ritchie walked on with the Cumberland Chorus, it wasn't a childhood Christmas I thought of suddenly, but the 1950s in New York. I used to hear Ritchie's high, clear, true voice a lot during those days of the folk music boom. While she sang or told tales, as if the stage really was her kitchen (asking one of the littlest children if she felt okay), I thought about when people dropped in to Israel Young's Folk Music Center on MacDougal with new songs, when Susan Reed and her husband ran an antiques store on Greenwich, when Allen Bloch's sandal shop was about the only shoe store around, when up the street at Jon's Scandinavian Shop you could get free glögg at Christmas, and when if you went to the Country Dance Society's dances in the church basement at 13th and Seventh Avenue, you might get Pete Seeger as your partner during the changes of a contradance.

I thought of those dances and those days when the men and women of the Cumberland Dancers handed each other smoothly around the stage. I remembered when Ritchie sang, or Peter Clarke, or Karen Wilson with her big, warm voice, the awe I'd felt coming from Southern California where folk songs were only for grammar school kids, and going to Village parties where people picked up instruments and sang beautifully and asked you to join in on the choruses. When Ritchie and the women of the Cumberland Chorus sang the strange modular "Star in the East" (from the Ritchie family's storehouse), I realized that, although I'd never heard it sung, I'd long ago picked it out from a little paper pamphlet I'd bought in Asheville, North Carolina, one summer. And it was that summer that I'd first seen clogging—all us New York dancers goggle-eyed over some old guy whose feet were flying—although it wasn't clogging of the high order of Ira Bernstein's clogging for the Revels.

Even though I didn't think that the tasteful, gestural little "modern dance" that Mary Craighill's St. Mark's Dance Company performed to "The Cherry Tree Carol" fit in with all the traditional singing and dancing, I had to acknowledge that I'd made a similar dance 30 years ago for a New York Christmas program and believed it to be appropriate—in fact, good.

The Revels manages to be orderly and still give the feeling of spontaneity, with its beautifully chosen hymns and carols, with its friendly mix of amateurs and professionals, with its mix of the traditional (like a splendid sword dance by the Greenwich Morris Men) and the up-to-date (like Stan Strickland's wonderful saxophone solo). It gets everyone singing and dancing in the aisles (which isn't exactly a 1980s thing) to "Lord of the Dance," with Carter's lyrics and that familiar Shaker hymn tune. I certainly remember when I first heard that (although maybe it was during the 1960s), and realized that, however many things Jesus Christ meant to people, I could now think of him as a dancer—which made everything all right.