



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY TEE DULLY

Choreographer Mark Morris at the Boston Ballet.

## MORRIS BELLIES UP TO THE BARRE

By Christine Temin  
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Anyone who saw Mark Morris' Boston premiere a year ago — featuring the choreographer clad only in underpants and acting out the sappy lyrics of Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" — would not have been surprised at the scene at the Boston Ballet the other day.

There were the company dancers, wearing T-shirts that said things like "Boston Ballet" or "American Ballet Theatre" or "Bermuda." And there was Morris, in a shirt that advertised "Hoboken Exterminators." (He noted later that he had, indeed, lived in Hoboken for several years and that exterminators were a necessity there.)

Audiences seem to love the self-assured brashness Morris displays both onstage and off. He has become a media star, and he doesn't mind. All the attention "gets me work," he observed, in constant demand both in the United States and Europe, he has become the choreographer of the moment, as essential to the 1980s as Twyla Tharp was to the '70s.

At the Boston Ballet's South End headquarters, a dozen or so of the dancers were engaged in a *promenade en attitude*, a classical step that in Morris' version looked like the stacked-up planes circling Logan Airport at 5 p.m. on a Friday. The 29-year-old choreographer, gulping beer and puffing on a clove cigarette, acted as air traffic controller, heading off many a collision until the entire scene dissolved in giggles — a highly unusual conclusion for a rehearsal at the generally sober ballet. In a dance world that often takes itself far too seriously, Morris is known for giggles.

Not that all his dances have the endearing silliness of the "Trees" number (actually part of a longer solo called "The Vacant Chair") in

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## ■ MORRIS

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which Morris held crumpled paper bags that served as rustling leaves. Take, as a contrast, the dance he was teaching the ballet, called "Mort Subite" ("Sudden Death"). "It's dark," he said in a post-rehearsal interview. "And it's slightly depressing. It's a little tiny bit about people disappearing." The ballet will premiere the work for 16 dancers Wednesday through Sunday at the Wang Center for Performing Arts. (Also on this "Choreographers' Festival" program are "Lark Ascending" by company artistic director Bruce Marks; "Mendelssohn Violin Concerto" by associate artistic director Bruce Wells; and the pas de deux from Petipa's "Le Corsaire," staged by company ballet mistress Anna Marie Holmes.)

Morris has, of late, played a prominent part in dance in Boston. Yesterday, Concert Dance Company of Boston finished a round of performances of his "Canonic 3/4 Studies," set to Harriet Cavalli's arrangement of ballet classroom music. Morris' own 13-member company performs Feb. 27-March 1 in Northeastern University's Alumni Auditorium. On this program are three dances inspired by essays by Roland Barthes. Of the trilogy, "Striptease" and "Soap Powders and Detergents" are premieres, while "Championship Wrestling," based on the theatricality of that sport, is an earlier work.

For "Striptease," Morris said he will indeed disrobe completely, unless forced into a G-string by the authorities. He says his research has convinced him that "real stripping isn't around much. It's a dying art. Now what you've got is sex shows when what you really want is Gypsy Rose Lee in long evening gloves and feather boas, teasing you." In recent forays into Boston's Combat Zone he did, however, discover one exotic dancer whose style he liked: "Princess Cheyenne at the Naked I is very good."

Like Twyla Tharp, Morris has branched out into wider markets than live stage performances can offer. He's already choreographed a television commercial for Capri Sun fruit drinks. There's a public television "Dance in America"

special on Morris in the works. Another pending project is choreography for a 1987 production of John Adams' opera "Nixon in China," to be directed by Peter Sellars.

From the moment he began showing his work in the early '80s — after putting in time dancing in the companies of Tharp, Elliot Feld, Laura Dean and others — Morris' dances have been greeted with near ecstasy by critics and audiences who couldn't take one more minute of minimalist restraint. Morris is anything but minimal. His solos convey a ro-coco excess, his body twining into complex curves. His torso is slightly puffy, like a cherub's. The beer-drinking shows. His dances seem to take place in a constant state of emergency. Dancers must move with the rash carelessness of 2-year-olds to succeed in them. And then there's his eccentric humor. His scenery for the "Trees" solo consisted of a music stand holding simple drawings of a chair, a tree and a bed. He changed the set by changing the drawings. Morris' humor is not caustic, like Twyla Tharp's, or cynical, like Paul Taylor's. His is, instead, innocent.

### Varied musical taste

Music is often the motivation for Morris' dances, and his musical taste runs to the ornate and the odd. He's used both Bach and popular music from Thailand. "I'm really sick of dances with music by Reich and Glass [minimalist composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass] that is either bad stuff or misused." "Mort Subite" is set to the voluptuous Poulenc

Concerto for Organ, Strings and Tympani. "I've loved the piece for 10 years. And I wanted to do the dance with live music," so there will be an organ in the Wang Center pit.

The women in "Mort Subite" will wear costumes designed by Morris himself, consisting of oversized undershirts, shorts and ankle socks that remind Morris of those ballet rehearsal photos of the 1930s, with the women in cute little trunks and bare legs. The Boston Ballet women will also be on pointe. After all, Morris said, "It's a ballet. I used to be totally against toe shoes, because they made female dancers look ethereal and set them apart. Now I think they're OK." Ditto for lifts: "I never used to do them. Then after a while, I had everybody lifting everybody," which meant women lifting men and men lifting other men. In "Mort Subite," there are actually times when men lift women, in ways not too different from the good old days.

Morris doesn't have to fight the battles earlier modern dancers waged against classical ballet. He belongs to a generation that has benefited from the rapprochement between ballet and modern dance. He can afford to be eclectic in his dance tastes. He would love, for instance, to dance the weighty, chiseled "Negro Spirituals" suite of solos choreographed by modern dance pioneer Helen Tamiris. And he'd also love to choreograph a version of the ballet staple "Les Sylphides," set to Chopin's original piano music because he hates the orchestrated version commonly used.

Morris is part of the current

phenomenon of modern choreographers being tapped by ballet companies. It's not a trend that everyone likes — there are those who grumble that ballet ought to develop its own choreographers — but Morris said, "There needs to be some sort of adrenalin pumped into the ballet system." He is happy with the Boston Ballet dancers: "They're open, adult and musical." But he hasn't found all classical dancers to be so. In working with Ballet West dancers last summer, he found them "weird, resistant. They wouldn't do anything they felt made them look ugly."

Much has been made of the fact that Morris lives, at least part of the time, in his native Seattle, where he teaches for 10 weeks a year at the University of Washington in exchange for rehearsal space. To some people, Morris' Seattle connection symbolizes the decentralization of dance. "I don't have to live in New York to choreograph," he said. "But you have to be in New York to see the [New York] City Ballet, which is the best dance company around of any kind."

Would he like to choreograph for City Ballet? "That's way over my head. I saw what happened when Twyla Tharp and Jerome Robbins worked together there [on their collaboration "Brahms/Handel." That was a big mistake." But, after pausing a moment to consider the possibility, he allowed that "If Lincoln Kirstein [City Ballet's cofounder] called me up and begged me to do a piece, I'd say, 'Sure, Linc. No problem.'"