



# Review

A general definition of civilization: a civilized society is exhibiting the five qualities of truth, beauty, adventure, art, peace.

Alfred North Whitehead

## Dance Review

# Dance into the Modern World of Mark Morris

by Lauren Leja

He is self-acclaimed as either "prolific or incontinent." The critics hail him as "the most promising of his generation". I personally regard him as the icon of the artistic/autistic school of modern expression. Regardless of who is raising all the fuss, Mark Morris is a choreographer and dancer of rare talent and originality.

The artistic/autistic label seems particularly appropriate because of the seemingly simple attitude of Morris himself. Is he a spoiled brat or a misunderstood artist? A media glutton or a deserving performer? In recent lectures at the Concert Dance Company and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Morris justified all the critical ad and extensive press coverage he has generated. Wearing black hightops, guzzling a warm Labatt's, and fidgeting with the leathery lizard paw on his beltloop, Morris, at best, first resembles a rather hip gym teacher or everyman's slightly eccentric uncle, rather than the wunderkind of modern dance.

A few teasing tidbits of commissioned works in progress, demonstrated by dancers training with Morris and his company, begin to activate Morris as he simultaneously claps, stomps, and nods out intricate dance beats. His mischievous, often precocious grin charms the audience, while his sensuous gesticulations seduce the viewers with their amazing energy and fluidity.

The choreography of "Canonic 3/4 Studies" perhaps best summarizes Morris' dance philosophy and structure. The work involves the repetition of specific "palette" movements, but with slight variations in direction, speed, intensity, or number of participants incorporated in each cycle. The basic reference motions are what adheres the dance together while the variations add the excitement and energy.

While Morris' dances are meticulously constructed, the element of surprise is essential to the choreographer, "I only create dances that I'd like to see. I'm Utopian and selfish that way...but if I see a dance a hundred times, there must be an element of surprise somewhere. If I'm excited the 101st time, the audience should be too." Elements of surprise are Morris' trademark; backward freefalls, collisions, loss of balance, seemingly illogical herky-jerky movement, and even traditionally unacceptable dance music (i.e. The Violent Femmes) all find a comfortable niche in the subterranean world created by Mark Morris.

These tendencies of Morris tagged pedestrian by many critics, and though Morris is reluctant to concede to this label, he has remarked, "I can't stand the pretentious way that running is usually shown by modern choreographers. People just do not run like THIS" (he leaps through the air in six-foot strides). "Walking is a human action and humans do not leap through the air when they run. But, they may wobble or teeter or fall in their rush to get from here to there."

The human element of Morris' dances reflects the choreographer's own quirky sense of humor. Morris is the man who created a dance around a pair of huge pajamas he unearthed. A major pivot in one piece mimicked a baby Morris viewed who sat down by simply collapsing her legs beneath her. While the human and humorous elements of the dances may connote a light-handed approach by Morris, the complex and often contradictory rhythms he utilizes neatly confirms the genius of his artistic unions. The classical ballet training of all the dancers in the company is important because it establishes the essential "pure" backdrop to Morris' frequent bastardizations and humanizations of traditional movement, as well as providing a general sense of control and discipline.

"Anything is acceptable, as long as it's done well," is Morris' general view towards dance. While he does not particularly enjoy seeing or creating dances about "Vietnam, modern mechanized society, or all that tortured artist bullshit," they do have a purpose and meaning for some. Past attitudes towards dance, from the untouchable sterility of classic ballet, to the "I-Hate-You-For-Coming-To-See-Me-Perform" mentality of 60s dance are equally

important in that they demonstrate not what has already been done, but what can still be done; Morris views the glass as half full, not half empty.

While Morris' inspirations range from observing New York City pedestrians to 10 month old babies sitting, he does not confine himself to strictly visual associations. Recently Morris has found a goldmine of inspiration in printed words: literary critic Roland Barthes' essays on American pop culture in his book "Mythologies". Composer Hershel Garfein first unearthed Barthes' work and presented it to Morris with the explanation: "Barthes' writing is so lyrical and he writes so elegantly about ridiculous things. But they aren't ridiculous after you see Barthes' insight."

Garfein and Morris picked through Barthes' essays for dance guidance, selecting "Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes," "Striptease," and "Soap Powders and Detergents." "Championship Wrestling" premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) Next Wave Festival. The piece, like the essay, displays the theatrical elements of wrestling, its rituals and plays. The dancers dress in brightly colored garb, flipping, rolling, stalking, throwing, catching their enemies and ad-

vocates. In a way, the dance civilizes the world of wrestling while simultaneously destroying the usual seriousness of modern dance. The dance is not narrative, but an exposition of arena sports, exploring the intense physical interaction of the dancer and athlete.

Morris commented that his translation of Barthes' prose into movement is "very third generational. The dancers are not dancing the essay itself, the words, the actions; the essay is not a script. But the essay provides the stimulation, the feelings that provoke the dance. There is a give and take between the two mediums—they expand upon one another." This theory sounds quite feasible to explain the correlation of wrestling and dance, but exactly how does one develop a dance about soap powders and detergents? Though unclear to the inquiring layman, Morris "obviously associates soap powders and detergents with cleansing, washing, scrubbing, wringing, and hanging." A virtual cornucopia of kinetic activity. The dance triptych concludes with the shockingly explicit and self-explanatory "Striptease".

Morris lives in Seattle, Washington, where he began his dance training with Verla Flowers and Perry Brunson. A traveling flamenco troupe mesmerized Morris, dragging him into the dancer's world of no return. Training in classical ballet, flamenco, and Balkan folk dance established Morris' movement vocabulary. In 1976 Morris moved to New York where he performed with the companies of Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn, Eliot Feld, and Laura Dean. In addition to performing with other companies, Morris formed his own dance group in 1980 with assistant Tina Fehlandt. In addition to choreographing and performing for his own dance group, Morris has created dances for institutions nationwide (including Cambridge's Dance Umbrella and The Boston Ballet) as well as the Batsheva Dance Company of Tel Aviv, Israel.

Morris' career has advanced rapidly, perhaps culminating in the BAM Next Wave Festival. Set to Vivaldi's "Gloria in D", Morris premiered his landmark piece based on Barthes' essay on "Championship Wrestling". His own solo performance, "O Rangasayee", danced to an Indian vocal score by Sri Tyagaraja, had Morris in an authentic dhoti, henna-dyed palms, and shoulder length flying hair, swaying, leaping, and twisting, "O Rangasayee" is like a hypnotic vision of a man possessed. The BAM pieces firmly established Morris' choreographic and solo performance work into international limelight as "the most solidly promising heir to the mantle of the great moderns." (Jennifer Dunning, "The New York Times".)

Morris' work with the Boston Ballet, set to the Poulenc Organ Concerto, will be at the Wang Center, February 5-9. The "Mythologies" will be performed at Northeastern University February 27-March 1.



Mark Morris experiments with dance moves.

*Prisoner*

These letters

Dance into the modern world of Mark Morris

The dance world is being shaken by the arrival of a new generation of choreographers. Mark Morris is one of the most prominent figures in this movement. His work is characterized by a bold, rhythmic style that challenges traditional dance forms. Morris's choreography is a blend of classical technique and modern, often theatrical, concepts. He has created a unique voice in the dance world, one that is both innovative and accessible. His work has inspired a new generation of dancers and choreographers, and his influence is felt throughout the dance community. Morris's approach to dance is not just about movement, but about storytelling and emotional connection. He uses dance as a means of communication, and his work is a testament to the power of the human body in art.

Mark,  
This is from Boston College

"... a hip gym teacher"

I love it.

Andy

Tues-190  
Penny- 60  
me - ~~5500~~  
Diner - 50