



Mark Morris in "Striptease" from his "Mythologies."

Mark Morris premieres his 'Mythologies'

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP — In "Mythologies," presented by the Dance Umbrella and the Institute of Contemporary Art with funding from the Mass. Council on the Arts and Humanities and the National Performance Network. At Northeastern University Alumni Auditorium, last night, through tomorrow.

By Debra Cash
Special to the Globe

Pop culture, seen through the lens of Mark Morris' dances, is a trial by banality. In "Mythologies," a trilogy he says was inspired by the essays of semiotician Roland Barthes, he faces up to soap detergents and stripteases and wrestling. His audacity is that he can ask, with utmost sobriety, where, among these things, passion can be found. "Soaps and Detergents" is set to a dolorous score by Herschel Garfein, performed with clarity by Alea III, that sounds like Webern would sound if he had taken a day job writing radio jingles. Fab, a voice insists, will make us Glad. The drama of the laundry room is played out: dancers scissoring their legs and flipping across the floor in the roiling of the wash cycle. David Landes takes a heroic stance, sheet draped over his elbow like a Roman senator taking a step off his pedestal, as Penny Hutchinson grieves over her displaced brand, snatched away by a sadistic marketeer. Her pathetic passion may be the only one available; Morris grants it its own cockeyed nobility.

Morris' Seattle-based dancers have no uniform "look," and thankfully, none have hard-edged New York glamour. In "Striptease," they take on fantasy per-

sonnas — the bride glinting behind her veils, the cowboy branded on one flank, the Asian man fanning his crotch — but manage to retain a sense of human personality. Yes, they take it all off — even the g-strings. What is more consistently fascinating is watching Morris struggle with the queasy notion of display, which is, after all, a dancer's stock in trade. The strippers' approach to the audience is forced: it is their jobs. Naked, they look more more at home gathering up their clothes.

The theme of display is at work in "Championship Wrestling," too. With enormous physical exertion, the dancers' wrestling leaves their bodies in danger at the very moments they spend their strength. The ways they attack and suppress one another are at moments cartoonish, at others ferocious, at still others, appalling. The dancers in their kneepads are hoisted and jostled and fall as if from great heights. Morris doesn't prettify their grapplings — when one wrestler slaps another you can never forget that the impact hurts, and his last moment has the wrestlers slapping their arms on the floor in pain and in a plea for time out, even though their opponents have departed.

Some of Morris' decisions come too easy, and call for tightening, but his gifts are undeniable, and only at the beginning of their expression. He has a rhythmic curiosity that keeps motion subtle and tractable, a use of space that makes the stage seem dense and pliant, and a thoughtfulness of purpose only a handful of choreographers can match. In "Mythologies," Mark Morris identifies what numbs us, and slaps us awake.