

Giving passionate form to ideas

Dance

THE MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP, performing "Mythologies," based on the essays of Roland Barthes, commissioned by Dance Umbrella and the Institute of Contemporary Art. Music and text by Herschel Garfein; choreography by Mark Morris. At Alumni Auditorium, Northeastern University, Saturday night.

By Gerald Fitzgerald
For The Patriot Ledger

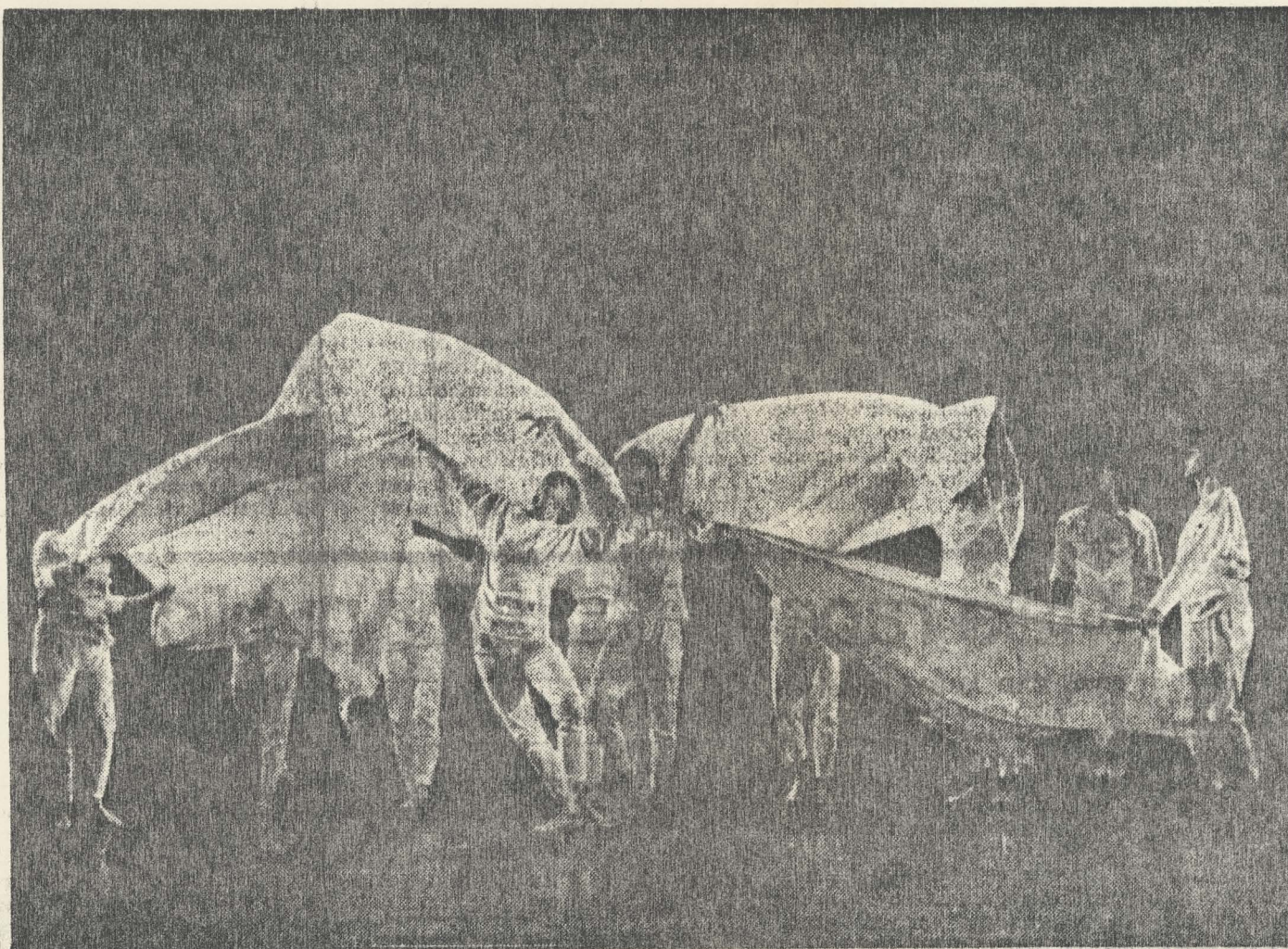
Watching 30-year-old Mark Morris manage his bows after the Boston Ballet's premiere of one of his works last month, I thought he put more dance than possible into two minutes — more body language, more expressive gesture — as he dodged a floral display, summoned up colleagues and raised prayer-clasped hands in ritual thanks to his dancers. Ideas, emotions, plots and counterplots raced across his face and over his body like the twitches of a racehorse. From yards away you could see his body thinking and, believe me, he thinks 15 to the dozen.

In his engagement last weekend at Northeastern University, Morris, with the 12 other dancers of The Mark Morris Dance Group, presented three dance meditations on popular culture, meditations refracted through the work of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, in which the French literary lion and critic himself explicated cultural games with witty elaboration and that typically French desire to say something new and surprising about whatever seems banal to the intelligentsia (who have, of course, already heard everything obvious and assume that you have, too).

Two of the works, "Soap Powders and Detergents" and "Striptease," had been commissioned by Dance Umbrella Boston and were given their premieres in a program under the auspices of Umbrella and the Institute of Contemporary Art. Everyone who likes to think or likes to watch dancing must be grateful to these Boston institutions.

Morris commissioned scores from Herschel Garfein. Boston's avant garde musical ensemble, Alea III, under its director, Theodore Antoniou, was on hand to perform them. The third work, "Championship Wrestling," previously performed in New York, was also set to a Garfein score, but that segment — using crowd noises, grunts, static and synthetic sound, was played on tapes.

"Soap Powders" parodies TV commercials. "Fab makes you glad!" and "Lava handles third-degree dirt," and the ladies of Joliet, Illinois, won't — even for a hundred dollars! — do without their Era. While the score sounds pastoral and sweet as a Poulenc wind serenade, Morris manages to move right through the easy laughs. We giggle at dance formations of unisex, white-pajama-clad dancers who actually make like clothes in a washing machine: Solemn as angels they curve arms and rock as though following the side of a rotating drum in a washer set for "gentle"; they quiver as though "well-agitated" by both the machine and the dread of dirt.



Richard M. Grabbert photo ©1986

The Mark Morris Dance Group performs a piece from "Mythologies" at Northeastern University.

Slowly, a captivating sense of the joy of being clean, the dazzle of sheets flapping on a sunny clothesline, the feel of clean linen, reaches through the soothing music. Euphoria induced by sheer formal elegance takes over.

The stage pictures reminded me of the beautiful sheets on the line in the beginning of Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* and those in the end of Fellini's *La Strada*. Morris makes brilliant use of a line of dancers who pass a rotating gesture slowly along, like a centipede waving in blissful transport.

By now Morris had me thinking about Aristotle, catharsis and the rites of purgation, except, of course, that I was too busy laughing and too lulled by the glories of spatial patterns.

Lucky that Aristotle was, like the genie out of the lamp, out of the Era bottle, since during "Striptease" he was much on my mind — when I wasn't busy admitting that, yes, I have always wondered what dancers' splendid bodies would look like in the altogether. The answer, of course, is ravishing, even when they were doing things that were obscene in ways that surprised me into realizing the word "lewd" still has life in it.

After all, Aristotle makes us ask why the representation of things that are themselves distasteful can still be delightful — in this case, how can nasty-naked become noble-nude as art takes on the subject of the cheap, commercial sexual come-on.

Here Garfein's score was Morris' trump card: no hint of realistic strip music, no bumpy-grindy burley-que associations. By stripping the sex-tease of its easy, undulating charms, Morris unleashes the scary energy. One after another, the four male and four female dancers marched straight to stage edge and took up positions straight out of nudie magazines. From the

start, the despairing and despising aggression with which the girls defiantly eyed their peeping Toms (us, the laughing audience) was made clear. Squats that splayed the female body became counter assaults.

Morris, clad first in business black — suspenders, necktie and all that bizarre regalia — also affected a droopy tango-style mustache and a rouge-red mouth. By sheer force of his presence he became the dark focus of all the fantasizing. There was no contact between dancer and dancer: All the orgasmic pumping was for eyes only.

Just when the faintest hint of 1940s big-band, cocktail lounge ease slips into the score and the light plays rosily on eight — count 'em, eight — whole, bare bodies, one's shocked reactions project an image of hell. Theologians tell us sin is its own punishment; voyeurism certainly is.

Midway through the rites comes a pause. Against silence the dancers stop dancing-out their nakedness and just are people with no clothes on. One feels, intensely, the difference between a person and a performer. One can read the demonic energy that fills the latter even in stage repose, a force that makes performer and performance larger and more real than real life.

The end result (the wrestling piece was literally smashing, an insight into the spectacle of the pleasure we take in the spectacle of pain, as also into the real pain of performers as sacrificial victims) of this thought-provoking evening really was cathartic for me. I realized that for the first time since the death of Balanchine some part of my dance heart stopped feeling like a stone. With artists like Morris in our future, our dance does, after all, have a future to look forward to.