

# Dance/Tobi Tobias

## DIRTY LAUNDRY

“...Oddly, what I recall with most force about Mark Morris’s very funny *Soap-Powders and Detergents* is its grave formal beauty...”

TRUST **Mark Morris** TO CHOOSE BOSTON for the premiere of a piece with full frontal nudity. Morris isn’t allowing his growing reputation as the biggest choreographic talent to emerge since Twyla Tharp to stifle his impulse to see just how far he can go. The final image of *Striptease* is a shocker and a beauty: Morris front and center in a deep backbend, pelvis thrust up to our eyeballs, penis and scrotum blooming like pale mushrooms out of a dark forest of pubic hair. The piece works itself up to that point through a continuous parade of eight dancers peeling down from sex-fantasy costumes (cowboy, bride, Chinaman, whore) to the purity of their birthday suits. It’s not much of a dance—the movement is nothing more than a set of isolated raunchy platitudes—but the excess of it is a kind of weird confirmation of Morris’s gift.

*Striptease* and the far more substantial *Soap-Powders and Detergents* were commissioned by Boston’s Dance Umbrella to form, along with the 1985 *Championship Wrestling*, a concert-length trilogy called “Mythologies”; each piece is loosely based on an essay in the collection of that title by the semiologist Roland Barthes. Set to a score for vocalists and chamber ensemble by Herschel Garfein, with a libretto based on commercials for Era, Lava, and Fab, *Soap-Powders* is at once a mock epic, a tongue-in-cheek homage to the modern-dance giants who are Morris’s aesthetic forebears, and a ballet blanc in the tradition of Paul Taylor’s *Aureole* and, yes, Fokine’s *Sylphides*.

The ballet starts out semi-abstract, with supine, white-suited dancers, limbs flung skyward, representing the various dynamics of wash, rinse, and spin cycles. Soon we move on to high drama, with Penny Hutchinson representing a beleaguered housewife reduced to a gray funk when forced temporarily to do without her favorite detergent. The sheets so prominent in the average laundry bag are first used à la Doris Humphrey (the floating canopy held at each corner by a running quartet) and then variously in the manner of Martha Graham—as screens, for example, that lift suddenly to reveal lurid tableaux. Thus inspired, Morris works up his own ravishing images with the fabric. At one point, swaths of it,

rolled into ropes, are manipulated to create a turning Ferris wheel through which our heroine solemnly steps on her way to an exaltation altogether appropriate, cleanliness being the very next thing to godliness.

An orchestral interlude is matched with an abstract passage: a lineup in which gestures are spilled from body to body, the front of the line working on the next phrase before the back of the line has completed the first one. This device, which has the hypnotic effect of the

which recently gave a two-week season at the Joyce. In its place is an effort—an effort with a hint of desperation in it—to expand the repertory beyond its core of dances by Limón and his mentor, Doris Humphrey. While some of the acquisitions, like works by Anna Sokolow, do make perfect sense, the value of the current push to add pieces in the so-called Kurt Jooss-Sigurd Leeder tradition is dubious.

It’s true that Jooss’s ballets are similar to Limón’s in their humane concerns, but



**TWO SHEETS TO THE WIND:** À la Martha Graham, the Morris troupe airs its linen.

foamy, surging sea that is visible through the glass porthole of a washing machine, has been blithely borrowed from middle-period Trisha Brown. More of the movement—sculptural contortions, postures of imploring and spiritual ecstasy—comes from Graham. Morris, it seems, has appropriated as his birthright whatever he considers interesting and beautiful, inventing an ironic, even slapstick, context for the stuff suitable to our irreverent times. But strangely enough, what I recall with the most force about this very funny piece is its grave formal beauty—the measure and elegance of its design.

THE “JOSÉ” HAS VANISHED FROM THE name of the **Limón Dance Company**,

it is hard to see the connection between Limón’s essentially sanguine worldview and the bleak outlook of Jooss’s descendants. Even when Limón allows violence and corruption to get the upper hand, he never questions the existence of ultimate order in the universe, while the contemporary German dance-theater people, led by Pina Bausch, Reinhild Hoffmann, and Susanne Linke, propose worlds in which gratuitous atrocities and profound alienation are the norm.

Two pieces from the German school were aired on opening night. Linke’s *Also Egmont, Bitte!* (to a rehearsal tape, complete with conductor’s cajolings, of Beethoven’s *Egmont* Overture) is one of those perennial things about dancers’



working lives: the endless rehearsals, the heavy moods, the infighting, the love-hate relationship with the audience—in other words, the least interesting aspects of dancing. The piece makes two mildly interesting points: A woman who projects turbulent if unspecified feelings is expelled from the safe anonymity of the group, where everyone does the same thing *ad infinitum*; this, apparently, is her punishment for being a star. Then, much reverent ado is made about an empty chair, which seems to symbolize a departed leader; soon the company members are fighting over it until a woman (Carla Maxwell, the Limón group's present artistic director) is left in possession, her face a study in mixed emotions. For the most part, however, the proceedings are as dull as a corps rehearsal for spacing. The movement itself, though it aims at projecting angst, succeeds only in inducing ennui.

*Recueil*, by Jean Cebron (who danced with Jooss and Leeder, and now teaches for Hoffmann, Bausch, and the Limón group), can almost be dismissed out of hand. It is set to the kind of electronic music—here by Juan Allende-Blin—that numbs your brain even as it attempts to destroy your eardrums. The action involves a male and a female creature who meet and attract each other, all the while curling themselves up into egg shapes; the thing might be taking place in a primordial singles bar.

The best thing about the program—which included two Limón works marred as usual by the choreographer's discursiveness and emotional naïveté—was the presence of Nina Watt in every last piece. Watt is a small woman in her mid-thirties, strikingly pale, with albino skin and waving hair the color of young corn. Her body has not for one moment entertained the idea of the drastic thinness coveted by today's young dancers, but her legs, with their strong, swelling calves, and her feet, which arch like bowstrings, could serve them as emblems. Aspirants would also do well to study Watt's torso—for its sensitivity and its alertness—and the way Watt gets all the parts of her body working with one ardent intention. She is as lyrical as one could desire, and expressive even when she's doing next to nothing.

In *There Is a Time*, she plays the laughing girl with the unabashed silliness of a pre-teen, then comes back minutes later to do the duet about embracing with a sensual stillness that is entirely adult. She's marvelous, too, in *Dances for Isadora*, as the wreckage of that free spirit, filling the stage without the help of music and displaying a profound knowledge of flamboyant independence and physical desire run amok, breeding their own destruction. Despite the weaknesses in the company's repertory, she's worth a trip to the theater.

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**The New York Times**

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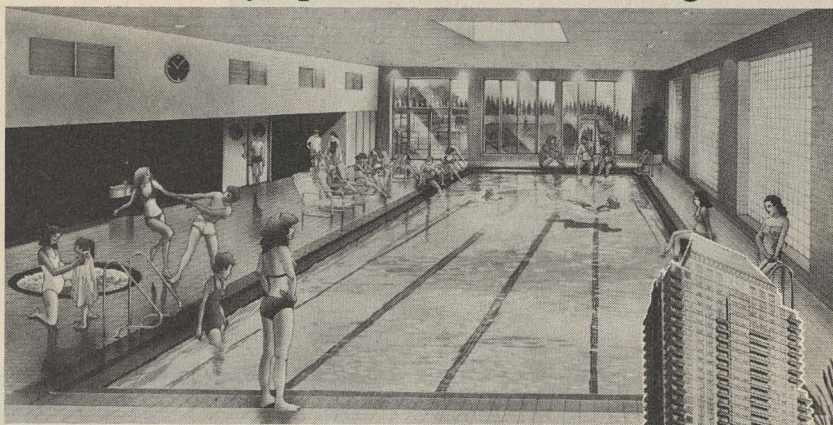
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