



(l-r) Keith Sabado, Donald Mouton, and Rob Besserer of the Mark Morris Dance Group perform "Striptease," part of Morris's *Mythologies* at Boston's Dance Umbrella.

Dance

Risqué Business

by Robert Greskovic

Mythologies
Mark Morris Dance Group
Boston Dance Umbrella
February 27-March 1

The utter audacity of Mark Morris's latest work is immediately striking, on paper, in the printed program. His three-dance bill, commissioned by the Boston Dance Umbrella, is called *Mythologies* and subtitled *Dances Based on the Essays of Roland Barthes*. The individual works are named after the essays—"Soap Powders and Detergents," "Striptease," and "Championship Wrestling"—from the collection that inspired them.

Even taking into account the Anything Goes School of Dance now current, Morris's terms are brazen, mostly because, having already established himself as a real choreographer (as opposed to a performance art dabbler), he has chosen to take inspiration for dancing from someone else's complex and serious thinking. Then, as if to make his trilogy triply daring, Morris reveals with his consistent approach to his Barthes dances that he is not going to anchor his "essays" in his formidable musicianship. None of the scores here (all commissioned by Dance Umbrella from Hershel Garfein) is used as the "floor" of its dance; each acts variously, as accompaniment or atmosphere.

So where, you may ask, do these risks and limits lead Morris? To works of striking simplicity and amazing depth, is my impression, after one viewing. The simplicity of each work results from Morris's unshakable and confident focus on his individual subjects. The depth results from the rich development Morris makes out of what he's got in focus.

"Soap Powders and Detergents," the most elaborate piece, is performed by ten dancers, and set to an instrumental and vocal score, with alto, soprano, tenor, and bass soloists. Garfein's lyrics include verses that focus on

Fab, Lava, and Era laundry products. Morris's dance features Penny Hutchinson and David Landis as leads. If you've read your Barthes, Landis can be recognized easily as the spirit of caustic detergent, and Hutchinson as a less abrasive, but no less potent, soap powder. If you haven't read Barthes's essay, these two figures lose none of their force or importance, as they perform the parts of principal characters in the carryings on Morris has invented with a wicked, Grahamesque touch. The piece has a drive, a definition, and a determination that are physically and spiritually equal to Martha Graham at her best. The manipulations of bed sheets, which Morris has included in this opus, make reference to everything

from Doris Humphrey to Isamu Noguchi, and are every bit as masterly as Graham's work with fabrics and draperies. If Graham had ever made "Errand Into the Laundromat," it might well have looked like Morris's "Soap."

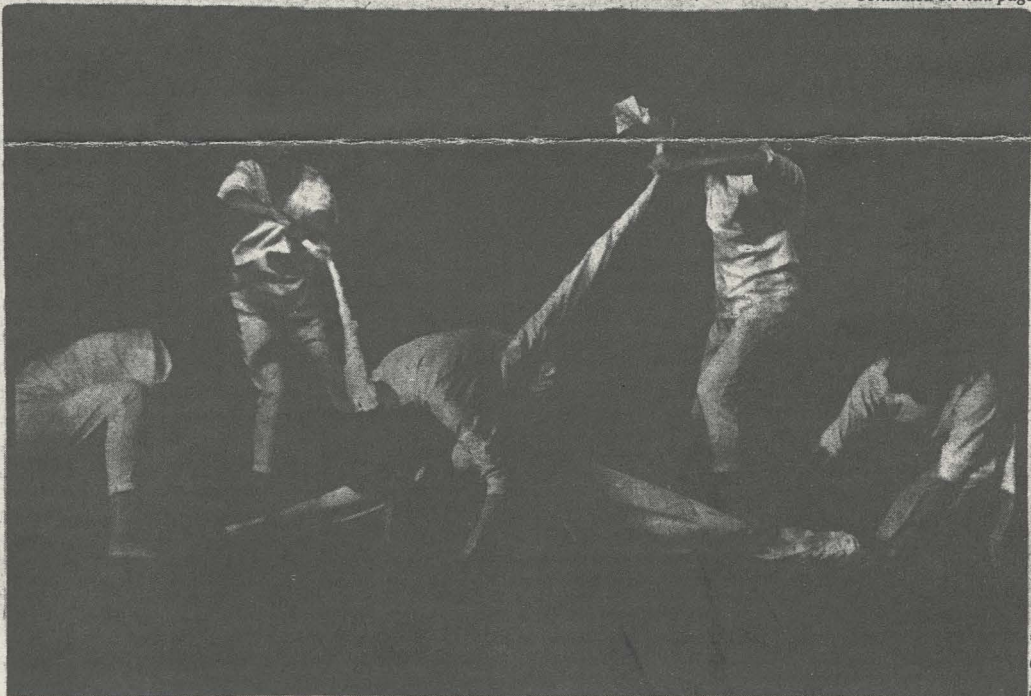
"Striptease" is ostensibly the simplest work; set, to appropriate cabaret-like background music, for eight dancers (four women and four men, including Morris), all of whom strip. Each performer appears first in a distinct disguise (for instance, Jennifer Thienes as a veil-encased bride and Keith Sabado as a lounge lizard from an opium den) and proceeds to approach the audience and work with body language befitting his or her station—"Exoticism" according to

Barthes. In spite of the seemingly predictable structure, with one dancer following another, over and over, each time minus one more bit of clothing, "Striptease" is full of invention and wonderfully timed. The variations on which garment to peel off, and when, are so thoroughly exhausted by the time everyone is down to a G-string, you feel certain the striptease has come full cycle. Then you realize the only way Morris knows how to go is all the way. Off come the G-strings, and "Striptease" goes into an apotheosis for eight dancers posing and moving all together in the altogether.

"Championship Wrestling," created in 1984 and performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, involves a cast of five men and women in producing the "spectacle" Barthes saw as characterizing this "sport." Initially, Morris presents his "wrestlers" as individuals, then as combatants. Finally, he casts the non-competing performers as props and/or puppets to support, amplify, and exaggerate the moves of the wrestlers in action. Following his absurd, but accurate, slow-

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The Mark Morris Dance Group performs "Soap Powders and Detergents"

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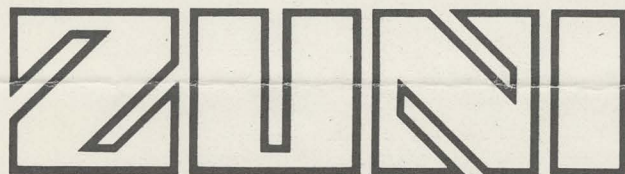
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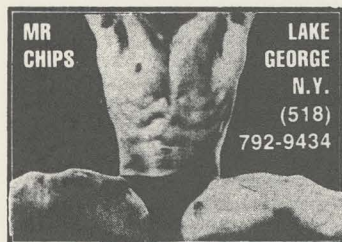


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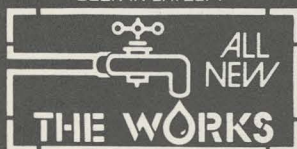
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motion segment. Morris's "Wrestling"
dissipates into a recapitulation of the opening, where every performer acts individually. Only this time, we see the flailing, the pounding, and the fake agonies in another dimension—that of real fatigue.

As of now, there are no plans to perform this all-Barthes program again. For all its substance, *Mythologies* can safely be called a *pièce d'occasion*—and a brilliant one. Putting it in repertory could tip the balance, turning brilliance into prurience. ■

Too Many Cooks

by Gary Parks

Darkness and Light
Beach (Act One)
Speeds

Solo: For Burt
Jennifer Muller/The Works
City Center
February 25 and 26

Jennifer Muller may be too smart for her own good. A professional dancer since she the age of 15, Muller is a mature artist who was a leading member of the Jose Limon and Louis Falco companies before founding her own troupe a decade ago and subsequently touring it all over the world. *Darkness and Light*, the evening-long work she premiered at City Center February 25, is drawn from sources as diverse as the *I Ching* and a 16th-century British treatise on mathematics. The premise of the work is as broad as its curious array of sources, and that's the trouble. Intended as a group of related ballets about the duality inherent in all things, *Darkness and Light* (subtitled *Polarities*) attempts to cover too many bases. The premise is so general as to be no premise at all.

The evening is divided into five sections, each with a title, subtitle, and at least one quotation. "Darkness and Light," the title of the first section as well as of the entire work, features the company of 11, blindfolded, searching furtively through Ken Tabachnick's rapidly changing lighting. "If light is there, there is no darkness; if light is not there, there is darkness" is the program note by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (there's another by Joni Mitchell), and who can argue with it?

"Fields," a fractious quartet for associate artistic director Angeline Wolf, Lana Carroll, William Adair, and John Brooks, is followed by "The Enigma," subtitled "analytical/experiential." In it, a businessman

hopelessly caught up in the madding crowd attempts to "civilize" a lightly clad innocent from some lost Stone Age tribe.

In "Couches" ("id/superego"—get it?), set to Laurie Anderson's *Big Science*, Muller divides the stage in two and shows us two families—emotionally repressed, stage left; free and easy, stage right—simultaneously acting out the same scenario of jealousy and suspicion. Finally, in "Life/Times," also divided into two parts, a pompous lecture on mathematics (by Muller) is interrupted by a lighthearted frolic in which the dancers count out their phrases before Tom Slaughter's brightly colored backdrop of geometric shapes. A quick-paced but oddly low-key dance for the company concludes the work.

Though there are some good moments scattered throughout *Darkness and Light*, the piece is made of too many disparate elements for any clear statement to emerge. The various sections don't relate to one another in any meaningful way, and the entire enterprise seems weighted down by all the pretentious annotations. What difference does a distinction between the id and the superego make, when the two families in "Couches" eventually reach the same conclusion of family harmony? And what are we, truly, to make of the Stone Age innocents of "The Enigma"? ("This is every straight man's dream," a friend whispered, as we watched Tarzan cuddle with three Janes.)

The Works' second program, which alternated with *Darkness and Light*, was a tribute to the company's former music director, Burt Alcantara. The three dances—*Beach (Act One)*, the signature *Speeds*, and a new solo for Muller dedicated to the composer—each featured scores by Alcantara. It may be churlish to say so, but Alcantara's synthesizer Muzak has always seemed to me the weakest aspect of any Muller work. Nevertheless, with ears covered, the 1976 *Beach* was the high spot of the Works' City Center engagement. The dancers, always attractive, are positively glamorous here in Muller's choreography evoking sun-drenched shores. In particular, there's a dazzling trio for Brooks, Wolf, and Jorge Gale, and a friendly tussle of a duet for Carroll and Jennifer Brilliant (who had played such different roles as the opposing wives in "Couches" the evening before).

Muller's solemn *Solo: For Burt* is a disturbing dance. A highly polished dancer with a strong stage presence, Muller begins and ends the dance on her back. In between, she's upright, scurrying back and forth as though besieged by the sirens and other loud noises from Alcantara's tape. It's a thought-provoking piece, but seems a rather dour choice considering its premiere as a *pièce d'occasion* saluting a collaborator. As the program note from the *I Ching* appended to "The Enigma" states, "That aspect which cannot be fathomed in terms of the light and the dark is called spirit." ■



The Works perform Jennifer Muller's *Darkness and Light*.

Johan Elbers