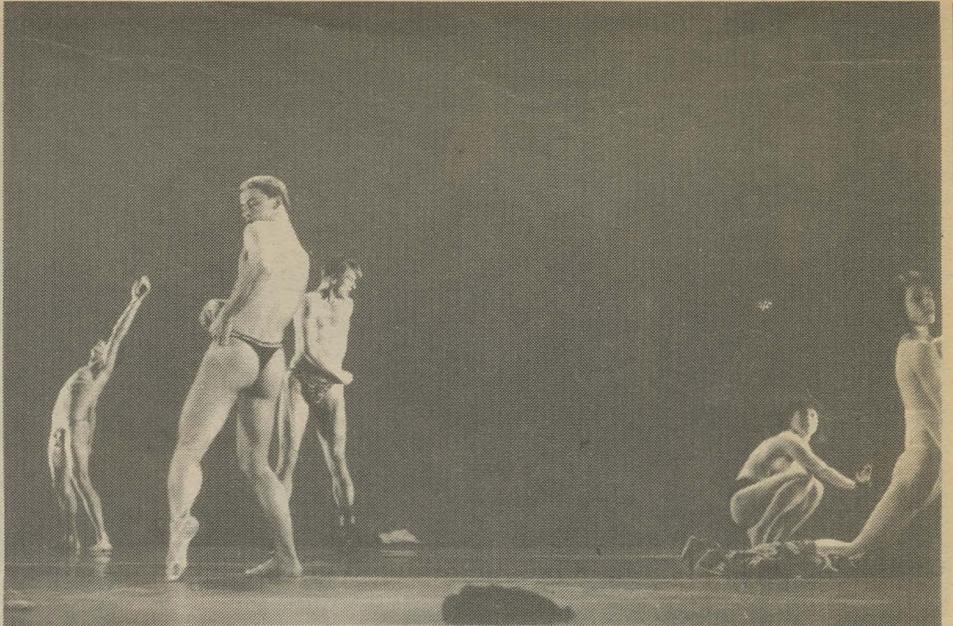




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# Blissing Out on the Gentle Cycle

*How Mark Morris Choreographed Barthes's Philosophy*

by David Daniel

**T**he Mark Morris Dance Group will return to New York May 6-10, for a special program, their first appearance here since their season last fall at the *Next Wave Festival* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Framed in the seedy splendor of the Manhattan Center Grand Ballroom, atop the old Oscar Hammerstein Opera House on West 34th Street, Morris will show an evening-length triptych, *Mythologies*, which takes its name from a work by Roland Barthes and presents a trio of dances based on three of its essays: "Soap-Powders and Detergents," "Striptease," and "Championship Wrestling." The last ballet, commissioned in part by the *Next Wave Festival*, has already been seen in New York, and received a good deal of favorable notice. Its two companion pieces, which will be given their New York premieres on May 6, subsequently were commissioned by Boston's Dance Umbrella, for the express purpose of allowing Morris to devote an entire evening to the work of Barthes.

The original grant for *Mythologies* provided only for its presentation as a one-time event—a single weekend last year at Boston's Northeastern University. Financially and physically, the sheer logistics of *Mythologies* (which features Morris's entire company plus 15 musicians and a vocal quartet) prevented Morris from incorporating the work into his regular repertory and touring with it. But Morris decided to produce the work himself in New York—again, as a *pièce d'occasion*.

We live in a time when the ineptitude of a theme to provide an actual, plausible pretext for dancing seldom, if ever, seems to dissuade a choreographer from building a monumentally lengthy work on it. You know what I mean. We've all sat through the lobotomizing hell of balletic dramatizations of *Carmen* and dances with scenarios such as "Tatiana, while contemplating the poor harvest in the Ukraine..." And I haven't even mentioned the Minimalists, who appear to believe that if you can count to 128 ten times in a row, you are a choreographer, or those so-called "abstract" choreographers, who think that a dance without a story need not have a danced meaning,

either. Even in this wanton climate, you might imagine the essays of Barthes, the sage of the commonplace, would be at the very bottom of anyone's list of provocations to dancing—philosophic discourse being simply one of those things for which a danceable utterance cannot be made. Mark Morris, however, may be unique among choreographers of his generation: He can make an interesting dance. He could make one, I am perfectly convinced, out of the telephone book, a Chinese take-out menu, or thin air. He does not chafe at, nor is he ignorant of, what dance cannot convey.

Morris has not attempted to dramatize Barthes's texts; instead, he has focused his vision in the direction Barthes has indicated, using Barthes's titles as pretexts to elicit novel movements and the situations in which to resolve them. You can read Morris's *Mythologies* as poetic commentaries on Barthes, but if you're not familiar with Barthes you won't miss a thing the ballets have to say.

In "Championship Wrestling," Morris has animated Barthes's assertion that championship wrestling is not a sport or an athletic contest but a ritualized spectacle in which both wrestlers and audience play parts. The "score" is an actual tape recording of a wrestling match,

replete with sounds of hitting, splatting, stomping, cheers, screams, hisses, moans, and deafening roars. Morris shows us the preening, capricious brutality of championship wrestling and delivers its face-flattening slams in close-up and slow motion. Morris has dressed his dancers in wrestling motley: shorts, tights, high-tops, knee pads, and striped socks dipped in grade-school colors so acidulated they make their wearers look like jawbreakers in a gumball machine.

"Soap-Powders and Detergents" addresses laundry day problems, paying especial attention to the ostracizing, crippling agony of dingy whites, to music whose lyrics are the poetry of TV detergent ad jingles. Dancing in sweatsuits whose snugly cloud-whiteness more than amply proves the efficacy of the products offered for our consideration, the dancers wear laundry, wash laundry, *are* laundry. Have you ever fantasized about what it might be like to bliss out while being tumble dried on the "gentle" cycle of your clothes dryer?

Jane Austen's heroine in *Persuasion* tells the faint-hearted recipient of her attentions that there is more to taking a walk than merely trodding the gravel together. Morris shows there is more to striptease than merely taking off your

clothes and walking around buck naked. "Striptease" is one of Morris's *tours de force*, an atomization of eroticism and fetishism and insatiability. Each dancer is given a stock striptease character (or what we immediately recognize as one) and a *schtick*: cowboy, bride, the girl in red, punk, etc.—something for every taste. Each is dressed to the teeth, but they are not wearing clothes, as we discover, their Levi's, boxer shorts, teddies, and garter belts notwithstanding. They are wearing paraphernalia, which are transformed into objects of desire whose desirability fades as quickly as we apprehend them, long before they are discarded. To be told that you are going to see a ballet based on striptease, in which the dancers do in fact wind up nude, but that it produces another effect which renders the nudity virtually inconsequential by comparison, is, I suppose, rather like hearing that you will see the story of "Goldilocks" enacted *exactly as it is written* but that it will have a surprise ending, it simply has to be seen to be believed. Morris's achievement in "Striptease" is, I think, one of the most extraordinary spectacles to be seen on the stage today.

Morris himself will dance in "Striptease." It will be his first performance since last November, when he broke his foot and had to have it mended surgically. Morris has not been idle during those months, however. He has already composed a ballet dedicated to the memory of Liberace, and he's planning to stage Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. As a solo. For himself. ■



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Scenes from Mark Morris's *Mythologies*. Above: "Championship Wrestling" (I) and "Striptease." Below: "Soap Powders and Detergents."

The Mark Morris Dance Group in *Mythologies*, with an ensemble of 15 musicians and a vocal quartet, conducted by composer Herschel Garfein, will appear May 6-9 at 8 p.m., and May 10 at 3 p.m., at the Manhattan Center Grand Ballroom, 311 West 34th Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues. The house will open one hour prior to each performance, with cash bar and pre-show entertainment by cabaret artist Julie Cascioppo and pianist/composer Linda Dowdell. Tickets are available through TicketMaster, (212) 307-7171. Prices are \$25, \$23, \$18, \$12. Wednesday, May 6, opening night, will be a benefit celebration, including a post-performance party. Tickets are \$75. For information regarding the benefit, call (212) 219-3660.