At Jacob's Pillow

Lynn Garafola: Mark Morris

IN OUR POSTMODERN world of artistic and spiritual agnosticism, Mark Morris is an anomaly: a believer. True, he belongs to no particular church. But his work reveals an imagination colored by the outrage of the moralist and the transcendental longings of the mystic. In *Lovey* and *Dogtown*, he bears witness, in the manner of an Old Testament prophet, to a spectacle of human degradation that profanes our most cherished beliefs. In *Gloria* and *Stabat Mater*, by contrast, he holds out a Christian promise of redemption: man reborn without sin through the sacrament of art.

His new *Strict Songs*, seen at Jacob's Pillow over the Fourth of July weekend (it had its première in Seattle in March), belongs to the choreographer's "redemptive" cycle. Like its predecessors, the work is profoundly religious. But it is not, strictly speaking, a Christian dance. With its many Indian allusions and dedication to Liberace, who died last year of AIDS, *Strict Songs* is a requiem conceived in the spirit of Zen, a hymn to life and its transcendence of death through art.

Not surprisingly, given the theme, the circle is a recurring motif. Again and again, Morris loops his ten dancers into rounds, rolls them across the floor, spins them, trancelike, as couples, curves their arms upward in ecstatic arcs. The circle is a catholic image, open-ended in its suggestiveness. But as elaborated by Morris, the motif takes on a specificially mystical quality. The first hint of this comes early on, when the ten dancers, touching forefingers and thumbs, circle their hands into

Strict Songs. (Photos: Tom Brazil)

mandalas. As the work progresses, these schematized representatives of the cosmos grow more complex, moving from signs of the hands to overall body signatures. The second section, in fact, opens with a subtle dramatization of the image, rendered first by Tina Fehlandt, then multiplied by the other dancers: lying on the floor, they curl their arms and legs upward in an appearance of concentric circles.

In Hindu iconography each such concentric shape of the mandala supposedly contains an image or attribute of a deity. In the third, culminating part of *Strict Songs*, the deity who comes forth is Siva, the dancing god of cosmic synthesis. He appears first as a single posed idol (Donald Mouton), one leg bent under him, the other lifted in front, then in multiple, as the joyful, leaping dancer in whom

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creation and destruction, incarnation and liberation are symbolically reconciled. In the successive transformations of the mandala, Morris pays a deeply felt tribute to the entertainer whose personal flamboyance once seemed as outrageous to middle America as the choreographer's sometimes campy persona appears to neoconservative critics today.

Unfortunately, the symbolism of *Strict Songs* doesn't really work. As with the mudralike gestures of the middle section it seems obscure and esoteric, meaningful only to initiates or adepts in Hindu mythology. The themes of the piece – transcendence, community, creation – come across for other reasons entirely; the music, by Lou Harrison, which swells melodically from a still, meditational center; the choral accompaniment (by the Seattle Men's Chorus, which commissioned the work), a musical equivalent of the ensemble choreography; the formality of the lifts and of the strange, beautiful groupings that bring the piece to an end.

Above all, Morris' use of space conveys the work's quiet exaltation. The opening is a rush of crosses – waves of motion as continuous as the flow of life itself. In the relative calm that follows, the design grows bolder: diagonals erupt from masses; lines hook up to form expansive circles; lifts shoot bodies into the heavens. The vocabulary is simple – brushes, jumps, bends, and falls. But in the orchestration of movements, the interplay of levels and dynamic contrasts, and the subtle coupling of music and dance, Morris reveals a choreographic intelligence rare in an artist who has been making dances for less than a decade. The breadth and clarity of his design, apparent even on the Pillow's diminutive stage, marks him as a direct descendent of Doris Humphrey.

The Mark Morris Dance Group, augmented by Jon Mensinger (returning to the company after a four-year absence), has a slimmer look these days. At the same time, the company appears noticeably stronger – technically sharper, bigger in its use of space, more unified in its ensemble work. What has not changed is the collective

Strict Songs.

belief in Morris' choreography. Thanks to the dancers, *Strict Songs*, however flawed its blend of Christian redemption and Indian mysticism, reminds us that dancing is as much a spiritual matter as a matter of art.

Otis Stuart: Choreography Project

AN URBANITE in the Arcadian isolation of Jacob's Pillow is first struck – and hard – by the quiet of the place. It seems unnatural, as if something were missing, and it takes some reorientation to realize that absence, in at least some cases, does not always mean loss. The Jacob's Pillow Choreography Project With Dancers From the New York City Ballet, 11-15 August, echoed that welcome return to basics, particularly in relation to European-style dance events immediately preceding it in and around Manhattan.

The combined effects of, first, Nureyev's *Cinderella* for the Paris Opéra Ballet, then two weeks of the Netherlands Dance Theater, leading into a three-week, three-ring season by the Bolshoi, all capped by the American début of William Forsythe's edition of the Frankfurt State Opera Ballet, had generated a few generalizations on the concerns of international contemporary ballet choreography. Most of these were expressed through such attractive subjects as confrontation, chaos, and anomie. At the very least, the spectacle can be hard on the eyes, and anyone still squinting from that onslaught of idiosyncrasies was apt to be initially bewildered by the Choreography Project: "Where are the sets and speakers...the crowds...the spiked heels?..."

The four working choreographers represented in the project – Miriam Mahdaviani, Bart Cook, Christopher d'Amboise, and Daniel Duell – speak an easily traditional language, one that they appear to have no interest in upstaging through effect-oriented or extradance excess. Following the Eurobrouhaha in Manhattan, the sound of that choice might seem muted or incomplete, like that resounding silence outside the theater in the Massachusetts woodland. The choices might even seem ordinary in the extreme, the same old proven goods of form, format, and formalism. "Who wants to hear *that*?" as the Europeans might suggest. "Wake me up when the killing starts."

Of course, the fact that there was no destruction evident anywhere in the Choreography Project proved the program's overriding asset. The representative works pledged a kind of positivism that was the key to a quiet, palpable vitality. Without interest or investment in negation, the only thing to do, apparently, is build (which was one of the reasons why, as a reference to the essential building block, the pas de deux from Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes* seemed an effective rather than an excessive addition to the program). There was a language – ballet – at stake in every work, and the choreographers first responded to that challenge through an abiding, all-assuming faith in its communicative capacities. The choice kept them from bruising or abusing the steps, the dancers, and/or the audience. In each work, the point was always an extension of the material at hand.

Identifying individualities may have been inevitable. Mahdaviani's *Romances Sans Paroles* suggested a woman who has seen, and been deeply affected by, Suzanne Farrell's quality of movement. The male soloist and stalking quartet in Bart Cook's *Arctic Fire* (I hate that title) were the Melancholic babies of Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*, and the choreography for the male lead in d'Amboise's *Ha'penny* reflected d'Amboise's own ebullient dancing style. In each case, however, the references seemed without calculation or self-consciousness. They were subsumed into the fabric of the whole rather than slashed across the surface like a signature.

But with each choreographer on the program, that good-faith reserve was

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