

Seattle's Young Spellbinder

Mark Morris choreographs with originality and wit

The title alone is provocative: *Soap-Powders and Detergents*. Will this be some arch exercise with dancers dressed up as bubbles or boxes? A soggy bit of social criticism? A spoof on Balanchine's *Snowflake Waltz* in *The Nutcracker*? No, Mark Morris' latest creation, commissioned by Dance Umbrella of Cambridge, Mass., is a lighthearted, structurally elegant look at washday.

The dancers somewhat resemble fresh laundry themselves in their loose white costumes. Lying on the floor, they suggest the rotating wash cycle by briskly waving their arms and legs. Later, as the action speeds up, they swing rolled-up sheets that churn around Penny Hutchinson, who plays a sort of heroine-housewife. Set to music and words by Herschel Garfein, the fantasy moves from borderline silly to giddily lyrical. Morris laughs at soap-company ad pitches but not at the washday ritual. For the indomitable housewife he has open affection.

Soap-Powders is a brimming piece of choreography, filled with wit and invention and a certain brash confidence. At 29, Morris is the hottest young choreographer in the country. His Seattle-based troupe of 13 dancers is in heavy demand, and other signs of success are visible: bookings in Europe, commissions from established ballet companies (Boston, the Joffrey), a program on next season's PBS *Dance in America* series, invitations to pump some life into grand opera productions. (Morris choreographed the *Dance of the Seven Veils* on alternating sopranos in the current Seattle Opera production of Strauss's *Salome*.)

Like many modern and postmodern choreographers, Morris also dances with his company. He is a riveting performer, with a delicate, Chaplin-esque face atop a strong, bulbous body. For a while last year he wore his hair in a thick mass of long black curls that would have done credit to a baroque grandee. In motion he radiates amplitude verging on excess. In *One Charming Night*, a dance set to four Purcell songs, he presents his own outrageously funny version of the old warhorse *Le Spectre de la Rose*, leaping and swooping with abandoned ardor around his seated beloved (Teri Weksler). But unlike Fokine's blithe spirit, Morris does not finish by flying out the window. In-



Morris and Weksler in *One Charming Night*
Amplitude verging on excess.

stead, he and Weksler thrash out their all too mundane frustrations and resentments before he finally carries her off, high above his head, as if to reassert his ideal of love. *One Charming Night* shows both sides of Morris' creation: ingratiating invention and, occasionally, youthful overkill of a good idea.

What sets Morris apart from most of his contemporaries is his extraordinary musicality. He seems open to a huge variety of styles—raga, rock, Poulenc, with perhaps a special affinity for such musical architects of the baroque as Vivaldi and Handel. Morris can find the dance in the music. Like Balanchine, he can hear a

piece whole and render a fresh visualization of it instead of transcribing it as a pattern or making it serve as an organizing element for arbitrary action. In *Jealousy*, a solo set to Handel, he fills out the score with large, writhing moves and smaller, intimate ones that serve as a kind of punctuation. In *Mort Subite (Sudden Death)*, made for the Boston Ballet, he uses a repeated figure in Poulenc's *Organ Concerto* as a signal to the dancers to turn and change direction—often leading to their abrupt disappearance from the stage.

Morris' musical education is limited to the instruction in reading music that his father, a teacher, gave him while he grew up in Seattle, and a theory course in high school. At 14 he joined Koleda, a local, semiprofessional Balkan dance group, where he stomped out the folkloric rhythms. Three years later he went to Madrid and spent six months studying flamenco. After he returned to the U.S. his performing experience continued to be wildly varied: Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean, Eliot Feld. He never stayed anywhere very long. His own group began coming together five years ago. Like their leader, most Morris dancers are not built along strict classical lines. For one thing, they must be strong. In his choreography, everybody lifts everybody else, men and women alike.

The work that probably shows off the troupe most gloriously is an exercise in mayhem called *Championship Wrestling*. Set to a Garfein collage of crowd noises, sportscaster commentaries and electronic insults, it pits men against men, women against women and each against the other. The centerpiece is a duel fought in slow motion by two women who are borne on the shoulders of several supporters and who flay each other outrageously, but at a subaqueous pace. When not engaged in combat, the dancers, some of them with rakish topknots and splendidly authentic wrestling gear, mug and glare with a fine appreciation of TV histrionics that never becomes simple mimicry. At a

recent performance in Boston, the audience fairly broke up at the sheer bravura of it all. A lot of things contributed to the general satisfaction: shrewd staging, superb timing, movements that were sophisticated for all their mock violence. The vividness of *Championship Wrestling* helps explain why the dance world is converging on Morris' doorstep. These works are not internalized essays in autobiography or homages to the modern dance canon. When he choreographs, Morris seems to have the audience in mind.

—By Martha Duffy

All wrapped up: the Morris troupe performs *Soap-Powders and Detergents*

