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TAKING NOTES FOR A BOSTON 'STRIPTease' WITH MORRIS AND CO.

by Rudy Kikel

It was as if, in the first two months of 1986, the reigning prince of American dance, Mark Morris, had been given the key to the city of Boston. He was visible everywhere: master classes at Boston University; lecture/demos at the Museum of Fine Arts and in the Cambridge studio of Dance Umbrella; appearing solo in his underwear (in "The Vacant Chair") for "Boston Dancers Unite," the AIDS benefit; and setting commissioned works upon both the Concert Dance Company and the prestigious Boston Ballet (which, in collaboration with Dance Umbrella, was responsible for bringing the choreographer to Boston to begin with).

And on Feb. 27, the world premiere commissioned by Dance Umbrella and based on three essays in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* ("Soap-powders and Detergents," "Striptease," and "Championship Wrestling"), with music by Herschel Carfein, was performed by the choreographer's own company, the Mark Morris Dance Group, at Northeastern University's Alumni Hall.

On Monday night, Feb. 24th, I sat in on a Boston rehearsal, where Mark Morris was putting finishing touches to "Soap-powders and Detergents"—or to that stretch of it that is concerned with the tragicomic separation of a Joliette, III., housewife (Penny Hutchinson) from her precious ERA detergent. (There's a lot of business with bed sheets in "Detergents." At rehearsal, Morris, the campy seamstress of modern dance as well as its crown prince, told his dancers: "Put on your fabric awareness. Let's get in touch with *fabric*." And again, while the company went through its paces: "Keep it smooth... Sparkle... *Fabric awareness!*")

After a "Detergents" run-through, Morris announced to the Group that that night he would be visiting the Haymarket, "a homosexual bar where homosexual males congregate. And you're welcome to come..." Pause. "Even if you're not homosexual... or male." All laughed.

Arrangements made to meet him there, I departed. In point of fact, as a member of the press, I was asked to leave the studio, so more top-secret work could be done on "Striptease," which wasn't finished.

The Haymarket was my idea. In interviews, Morris had often lauded the stripping of Boston's Princess Cheyenne, a.k.a. Lucy Johnson, the headliner over at the Naked I. But in his piece "Striptease,"

Morris planned to have men as well as women defrock. Had he ever, in the city, seen a male strip show, I asked him. "No. Are there any?" Yes, Monday nights at a Combat Zone bar called the Haymarket, where, to recorded music, contestants compete for a \$150 prize by slipping down to underwear, jockstrap or G-string. Morris wanted to go.

Just after midnight and just prior to showtime, he showed up at the bar—along with six members, about half, of his company; all but one (David Landis) of the company would, in three days, be *themselves* taking it all off, in a Northeastern auditorium, in a performance one critic had said the entire dance world would have its eye upon. With Morris were Rob, Keith, Donald, David and two women, Susan and Jennifer.

Jennifer has danced with the openly gay Morris since 1980, but this was her first visit to a gay bar. "It seems more lively and friendly than, say, Danceteria in New York," she said, "where people stand against the wall like they're in junior high school. You know what I mean?" Hustlers frequent the Haymarket. So do black transvestites, and what, if Boston were surrounded by water, one might call (as in Manhattan) the city's "bridge and tunnel crowd"—boys from the burbs. Each of these populations is a victim of attitude administered elsewhere—so there may be less attitude at the Haymarket than there is at other of Boston's gay drinking saloons.

Morris was always, choreographically speaking, on the prowl: "I

gladly and readily appropriate concepts," he had told me, "from the post-modernists and minimalists whose work I admire." He was famous, too, for his 11th-hour tinkering, so—a member of his company, Dee, had told me—he often only finishes choreographing a dance just prior to performance. Here he was three days before the unveiling of his own "Striptease"—at a strip show. If he saw something he thought might find its

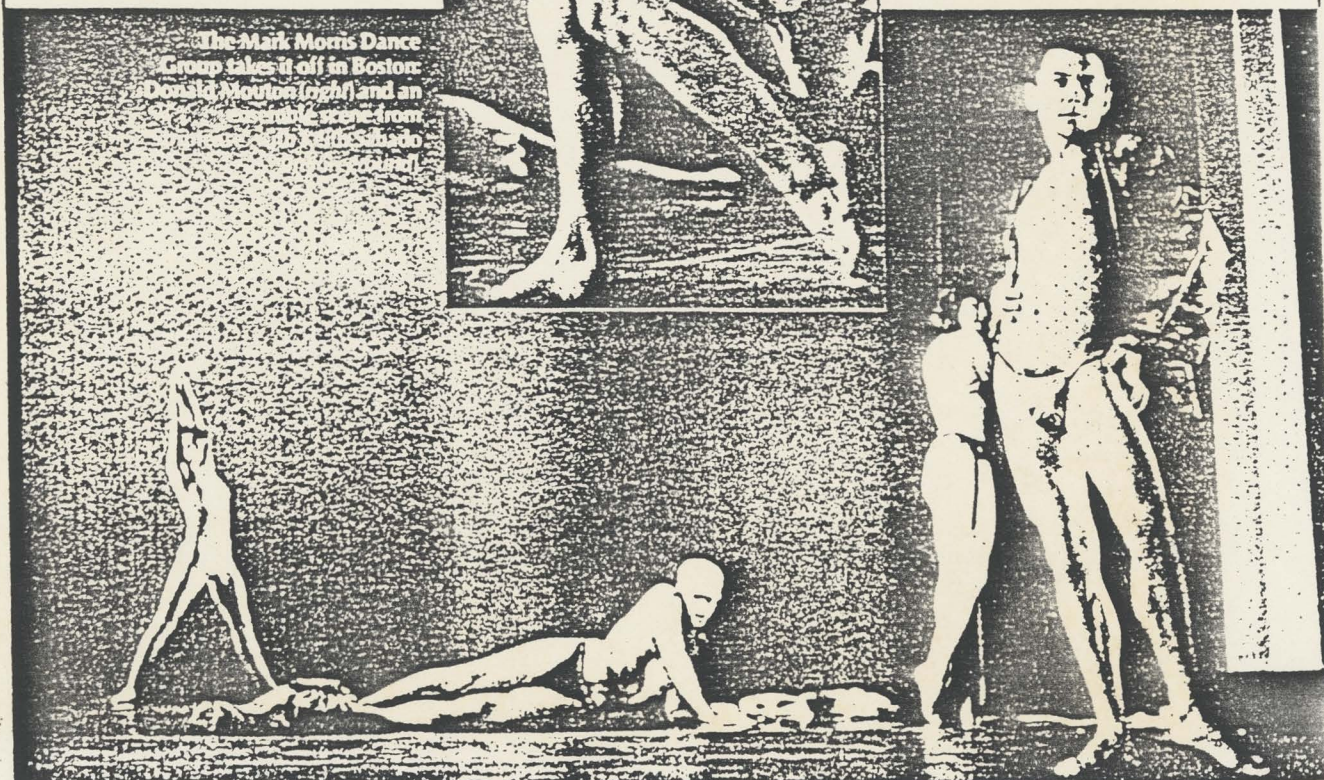
way into his dancers' performances, I asked the choreographer, would he mind sharing that information with *The ADVO-CATE*? Predictably, Morris responded: "I'll never tell." No, but I had eyes to see and ears to hear.

Showtime! John came out first, a boy next door if ever I saw one, clad in dungarees, a T-shirt riding high on his torso, a baseball cap (on backwards), and the high-top white sneakers that are popular in Boston's burbs. (Morris said, with his eye for detail: "The shoes are great!") When the cap came off, Morris piped up: "Hair action!" (He should know all about "hair action"; his long curly locks were, until he gave himself the '50s pompadour style he sports today, a trademark: "Androgynous was a word they used on me all the time. Once I cut my hair, I stopped being androgynous.") Then the dungarees came off. "It's great," said Morris, who is often seen on stage *himself* in underwear, "'cause it's like a locker room."

When John was hustled off, after his regulation two numbers (usually, the shirt comes off during a first disco tune; pants, during a second), Morris bubbled: "That's the best thing. The announcer comes out, cuts them off, and *then* they have to pick up their *clothes*!"

(Asked if his dances had a message, I remember Morris responded: "Just a Utopian one. There's not a lot I can do about, like... *world hunger*, as far as choreography goes. So it's more like people should be nicer to each other—better, kinder, clearer. *Better*. That's all.")

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The Mark Morris Dance Group takes it off in Boston: Donald Mouton (right) and an ensemble piece from "Striptease" (left).

MORRIS' SEXY 'STRIPTease' PREMIÈRES IN BOSTON

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Next up was Cal, the most calisthenic of the evening's performers, in yuppie drag: white sneakers, black cords, a sweater over a polo shirt with its collar up. The drag came off. Cal's specialty was flips. Once he somersaulted backwards from off a low platform and landed on his feet. Morris: "That was great." And as to the performance: "Really good. I think he *meant* it." Looking like they *mean* it: That's the muscular quality the Mark Morris Group supplied to "Championship Wrestling." "When one wrestler slaps another," the *Boston Globe* reviewer said, "you can never forget that the impact hurts."

"This guy really worked on his costume," said Morris — with regard to Tony, next up, pelted on his head, arms, shoes and at his neck and wrists in fur. When the pelt about his loins came off in the course of his act, he was still *pelted* — on his jock strap.

When the stripping began, the Mark Morris Group, clustered at the bar, was at some distance from the dance floor. One by one they had drifted. Now they were all seated or crouched at its edge. On my right was Mark; Susan, at my left, was finding the dancers "too self-absorbed," their performances "too inwardly directed."

Not so for long — tall Ramoné, next, moved, Morris noted, "right into the crowd." Ramoné provoked some disappointment, though — by leaving on his socks, underpants and T-shirt. "I wouldn't have minded his keeping his top on," said Jennifer, "if he had taken his bottom off. That would have been quite wonderful!" "He's very cute," agreed Morris, "and he gets a lot of mileage out of that."

Getting a lot of mileage out of being cute is *not* an accusation that's likely to be made of the Morris troupe, who, while they're all very *nice* looking — the *Boston Globe* said it best — "thankfully" don't have "hard-edged New York glamour." They are dancers who we read across the footlights as people, not idols. And judging from the glances and smiles that passed among Group members, they relate to each other that way too. "I have great friends," said Morris. "The dancers I work with are wonderful."

Next, the Morris Dance Group was happy to pay attention to Hector, a smooth-skinned cutie who had the most finely chiseled torso of the contestant lot. "Dancers, of course," Jennifer said, expressing the majority Group sentiment, "are attracted to something like *this*."

Prompted by a few of Hector's grinding motions in the direction of her face, Susan exclaimed: "He has a *great* body, his body is *great*, that's the bottom line." Into Hector's rhinestone-studded jockstrap, Keith wedged the dollar bill Morris slipped him. Susan followed suit, as did Morris himself, with a buck to that strap's rear elastic band.

There was one dancer left, a beefy guy named Michael. "That's what I want to do," Susan told Morris, "real awkward stuff." She complained, as Morris had earlier, that "it's really gross how," as the dancers leave the floor, "they have to pick up after themselves." Morris observed that Cal, the tumbler, who would in fact take the evening's prize, "threw his stuff in a corner so he could pick it up on the way out."

"Oh god," Mark Morris confided to the Group as it left the bar, "that gave me empathy." Mark Morris didn't need to be given empathy: He already had it. It's his empathy, in fact, that may make his choreography so appealing: he himself distinguishes his work from that of his contemporaries by its "emotional stuff," its "romance."

In "Striptease," Jennifer is a bride, Rob a cowboy with a branded butt, Keith an Oriental, whose fan is used to cool down his hot breast and crotch, Morris a gangster, until clothes and personae get shed. My companion at the "Striptease" première thought that some of the dancers seemed uncomfortable in their roles. He cited Susan in particular. But I remembered her words, in reference to Michael at the Haymarket: "That's what I want to do, real awkward stuff."

"Striptease" is undoubtedly sexy and funny by turns, but it also reveals Mark Morris' identification with the *dilemma* of strippers, and by extension, of course, with all dancers: "I don't feel particularly *beautiful* when I dance," he had told me.

The dancers' touching, underlying vulnerability is best suggested at the conclusion of "Striptease," wherein — for one frozen moment — four men and four women assume "inhuman" stances; statuesque posture and hard-edged lighting transport wholly naked bodies to the realm of the purely iconographic. "Woman is desexualized," said Roland Barthes, "in the very moment when she is stripped naked." In the next moment, a softer light bathes the stage, shoulders slump forward and, while they shuffle off stage, dancers — you guessed it — gather up their discarded wear. "Striptease" has a tender, conclusive touch, I would argue, supplied by the night Mark Morris and his Group visited a gay bar in Boston called the Haymarket. And not only *one* touch: Peeling back his dungarees, cowboy, Bob unveiled a jockstrap adorned in imitation leopard fur.