

Mark Morris Dance Group
DTW's Bessie Schönberg Theater
New York City
December 6-8, 11-15, 19-22, 1985
Alumni Auditorium, Northeastern
University, Boston
February 27-March 1, 1986

Mark Morris's choreographic faculties have about them the kind of profound gift one associates with musical genius, something inherent, so completely woven into and springing from the genetic fabric that it cannot otherwise be acquired. Not at all incidentally,

one of the greatest aspects of Morris's gifts is his extraordinary musicality; his response to music is various and intense. And he is startlingly prolific. Of the sixteen pieces his company showed recently in New York and Boston as well as his new work for the Boston Ballet, all made within the last two years, virtually all are successful (not one is a throwaway), and they have terrific variety—not the searching for a voice, but the discovery by the choreographer that he has many. It was the same kind of discovery George Balanchine made: Starting with *Apollo*, it changed the face of dance forever. None of this collection of Morris's dances is immediately recognizable as a masterpiece, but all are deftly crafted and authoritative. Everywhere, there is the master's touch.

Morris has an astounding ability to invent or summon fresh vocabulary for each of his dances. Much of his movement has a likable, handhewn quality to it; he uses what works in the circumstances—thus the organic feeling of the dances, and the variety. He roams free over a horizonless range of moods and subject matter; his works encompass perversity, joy, obsession, loneliness, satire, love, sexuality, abstraction, narrative. He has, as Beethoven observed of Schubert, "the divine spark."

The small dances shown at DTW are Morris's own kinds of epiphanies, sometimes nutty, sometimes sober, sometimes both. In *The Vacant Chair*, a man (Morris or Rob Besserer) dances with his back to us and a brown lunchbag over his head—funny, but full of angst as well. In the usually religious "All we like sheep have gone astray" section of the wacky, inventive *Handel Choruses*, a group of solos, Keith Sabado puts fingers to head to simulate sheep's ears.

The finest duet of the DTW season was *One Charming Night*. Delicate Teri Wexler is the agitated heroine, cross dangling from her neck; Morris is her suitor. The wonderful swooping movements Morris makes at his entrance, which seem so full and kinetically delightful, so balletic, also foreshadow the fact that this man is a vampire homing in on his prey, who turns out to be devouring herself. Morris unexpectedly sets his romp to a countertenor's rendering of Purcell songs. He crossbreeds forms with delight and authority: Carrying Wexler off aloft, he sweeps her through the air in a simultaneous reference to all the vampire films and romantic ballerinas we've ever seen—a sort of *Spectre de la Vampire*.

Masterly as Morris is at the vignette, the attention to detail, it's his group works that I find the most exciting. In his DTW season, there was the austere purity of *Frisson*, ravishing in its restraint, all lines and angles, set to the piquant sonorities of Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. (Restraint is another of Morris's distinguishing characteristics, the aesthetic refusal to succumb to lushness.) In contrast, the disturbing subject matter of *Lovey*, easily read as graphic child molestation, is perhaps more completely intended as the abuse of any love object. In the first great section of *Vestige*, the dancers

jump and leap across the stage. And in *Prelude and Prelude*, to Henry Cowell, Morris exquisitely distinguishes the individual from the group, as one bare-breasted woman (Penny Hutchinson) backs out of a line of rooted dancers in profile holding fans; the second prelude reverses this, and it's she who remains stationary while the others move across the stage.

Two new works commissioned by Dance Umbrella, Boston, and premiered there, complete his trilogy *Mythologies* which, like the 1984 *Championship Wrestling*, had their genesis in Roland Barthes's essays. In *Soap-Powders and Detergents*, the dancers—all in the cleanest white—manipulate sheets, floating them through the air, winding them totem-like around Hutchinson, the piece's heroine, creating a never-ending slow-motion jump rope for her to run through. For all the billowing fabric dances in the history of modern dance, this looks unlike any of them: Such is Morris's facility that he is able to combine the most mundane of concerns—the TV soap commercial—with powerful imagery that suggests Greek tragedy. The dance goes hand-in-glove with Herschel Garfein's splendid, droll score, a chamber cantata, performed live by Alea III, in which among other things, women sing recitatives and arias extolling the virtues of Fab, lamenting the loss of their Era.

Morris's *Striptease*, full of human savvy, humor, form, and showmanship, is about the world of striptease, its practitioners, male and female, the variety of its fantasy, its audience. There are eight men and women, and they do indeed strip, entirely. There's Rob Besserer, tall and sweet and enthusiastic and innocent, dressed up as a wide-eyed cowboy. There's Jennifer Thienes discarding her bridal white. There's Keith Sabado in a kimono, in profile, opening a fan at his groin—a witty metaphor for ejaculation and a brilliant piece of theatricality. Morris himself sends up the prurient interests of the audience by portraying a sleazy, thin-moustached, hair-slicked, suited voyeur. Once the stripping is complete, the dancers strike one aggressive pose, hands over head, and then simply drop the position, gather up their clothes and walk offstage, a poignant denouement that removes them from the world of outlandish, titillating fantasy and places them back in the land of vulnerable humanity.

Morris is a keen observer of humanity, its mores, its emotions. In every one of his dances, there is attention to human behavior in its many forms. No choreographer was ever great without it. Morris may well turn out to be a tremendously gifted ballet choreographer; his musicality, the way he moves large groups about, suggests this, and a look at the archival tape of the Boston Ballet piece, *Mort Subite (Sudden Death)*, only reinforces the impression. He is a maverick, full of surprises. Whatever diverse forms his work takes in the coming years, he has all the equipment for an amazing journey.

Amanda Smith