

Mark Morris' classicism shines through in a triumphant homecoming.

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## Dance

# Choreography that is not a joke

By Roger Downey

Mark Morris Dance Company  
Bagley Wright Theater  
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**M**ARK MORRIS AND HIS DANCERS hardly need certification from Seattle—the all-powerful New York dance critics irrevocably certified their station at the top of the contemporary dance heap 18 months ago when they performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of the 1985 "Next Wave" Festival. But the company's performances last week at the Bagley Wright Theater had an air about them that wouldn't have been there if the program had

been, as intended earlier, performed at Meany Hall on the University of Washington campus. Somehow the Seattle Center is more public, more exposed than Meany.

We always knew, seeing Morris' work at Meany or Washington Hall, that it asked no quarter or special consideration. But seeing it at the Center, quite detached from past fond associations, ratifies the choreography still more firmly. The program was, for Morris, a fairly conservative one, employing none of the pop-culture materials in costume, scoring, or gesture which have sometimes obscured his fundamental classicism from his fans.

The opening work in last week's perform-

ances, *40 Arms, 20 Necks, One Wreathing*, while not classically proportioned, was as severely cut as anything I've seen from the Morris wardrobe. Against the background of a recorded Herschel Garfein score—something that sounds like by-the-yard mid-'50s academic atonality lightly diluted with structural references to the age of ground bass and continuo—Morris sets up his own architecture. He builds four solos of varying lengths but uniformly meditative-technical character, each of which evolves into a canonic quartet based on the same materials.

The soloistic passages are separated by, sometimes embedded in, passages for large chorus that articulate similar movement more simply, slowly, and grandly. The work is very cool, even dry, a kind of illustrated *Gradus ad Parnassum* introduction to the Morris vocabulary, or the part of it associated with earlier deliberate, hieratic modes in modern dance.

The very next work on the program, the first movement of *Handel Choruses* set to "All we like sheep" from *Messiah*, was formally just as tight, as closely or more closely rooted in the music that accompanies it. But here the still pictures flow together in a dazzling rush. Keith Sabado danced lightly but with relent-

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less attack and seamless continuity, simultaneously illustrating the variation-refrain structure of the piece while dancing exuberantly over it.

The gestural vocabulary of *Handel Choruses* is not as rigidly formalistic as in the earlier work, and a problem endemic at Morris concerts immediately surfaced. Generations of un-inspired choreographers attempting to amuse have conditioned audiences to perceive gestures unexpected, incongruous, or drawn from everyday non-dance behavior as funny. Mark Morris uses gestures of every conceivable kind for purely choreographic purposes. That is not to say that he never simply makes a gestural joke, but he does not do so often, and never, so far as I have seen, without a formal justification as well.

Morris' fans, at least in Seattle, have not yet learned to suspend judgment of apparent incongruities in their hero's choreography until they have a chance to see what role the incongruities may take in the grand design of the piece. They yock, loudly and immediately, as much to demonstrate their own eagle eye and dance sophistication as from the presumed inherent humor of the moment. It took no more than a single gesture in Sabado's Handel solo—a momentary framing of the face with forward-facing palms, thumbs touching, faintly reminiscent of Judy Garland's "close-up" gesture in *A Star Is Born*—to set the yockers off last Friday, and they were rarely silent thereafter.

In up-tempo work like "All we like sheep" the guffaws were only a minor annoyance. In a slow piece like Morris' own "Jealousy" (to a meditative chorus from the oratorio-opera *Hercules*) they seriously disrupted one's concentration. A sequence of faintly Indian-inspired serpentine rotations of hand on wrist and foot on ankle set them off this time. (Morris once told *The New York Times*' Jennifer Dunning that he composed his most famous solo, to East Indian singer Sri Tyagaraja's "O Rangasayee," in part because he "wanted a hard solo that people couldn't possibly interpret as a joke." It's a good thing he didn't risk it here last week; it would have brought the house down.)

The yockers found nothing to laugh about in Penny Hutchinson's chastely beautiful rendition of "He sent a thick darkness." They

may have burst out during "Crown with festal pomp the day," but Susan Hadley's performance erased recollection if they did. Hadley is a big, full-fleshed woman—not at all the bony birdlike Dresden figure a ballet choreographer would have set such a bouncy, airy piece on. Her supple substantiality gave the piece a lusty joyfulness that had one swaying, even breathing in sympathy.

*The Shepherd on the Rock*, to the *scena* for soprano, clarinet, and piano by Schubert, also set the yockers going, but they hardly mattered. The inciting opportunity this time was Morris' refusal, even when operating almost across the border into ballet and very much within the conventions of romantic-pastoral

as he does many others in his repertory, casting its roles with no regard for sex. But the piece is not an attack on sexual stereotyping. Rather, it's a demonstration of its irrelevance to dance.

The program concluded last week with *Gloria*, to a multi-movement setting of the mass text by Antonio Vivaldi. *Gloria*, for ten dancers, is perhaps Morris' most well-known work. What struck me about it most on a first viewing was the catholicity of gesture in it, all successfully subdued to a single impulse by Morris' effortless command of dance diction and stage space.

Baroque music is faddishly popular in the dance world right now, yet it is desperately hard to set for dancing. The pulse that drives it allows no hesitation, no breathing room for the performers. It enforces the strictest rhythmic and gestural decorum on the choreographer. In his earliest version of this piece in 1981, Morris recalls, he set "every note, every turn, every mordent. And of course it was too much; I had to take out about every second thing."

There's nothing congested about *Gloria* now (the present setting dates from 1984). It's simply full—of dance-historic reference, emotive-dramatic coloration, musico-architectural articulation. Morris' dancers, each with his or her own weight, stance, attack, and phrasing, move like angels in it, sustained and unified by its tense formalism, illuminating and humanizing it by their rooted reality and passion. ■



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MORRIS MOTION: REVOLUTIONARY.

duet, to subscribe to the sexual conventions of the genre. Girls support men in turns, men slide between girls' legs under their calf-length skirts, skip over other men's extended legs in close partnering, even leave their female partners and dance together.

There is hardly a step, gesture, or attitude in the piece not sanctified by tradition, but it is still revolutionary. It demonstrates the formal purity of the romantic *demi-caractere* duet conventions. No doubt Morris will perform the piece in future (this was its world premiere)