

“If It’s Not Fun, Why Do It?”

Mark Morris Talks About Being Dance’s Most Recent Superlative

by Otis Stuart

“It’s spooky, actually.” Thirty-year-old dancer/choreographer Mark Morris is being queried about his status as the dance’s most recent superlative. “The dance world is so desperate that I was elected. I’m not complaining. I can pay my dancers. But it has been pretty extreme.”

The statistics surrounding the season of the Mark Morris Dance Group, which opens November 12 at the opera house of the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of its *Next Wave Festival*, reflect the current extremity of the Morris phenomenon. The 12-member troupe will be making its New York opera house debut, although, like its engagements to date at the 400-seat Lepercq Space in the BAM complex and at the 100-seat Dance Theater Workshop’s Bessie Schonberg Theater, the 2,100 seats of BAM’s opera house are virtually sold out for all the company’s performances.

Morris himself is sweeping into the larger house on something of a record personal roll. In early October, PBS aired a 60-minute profile of Morris, his company, and his choreography, as part of its *Dance in America/Great Performances* series. Concurrent with his company’s BAM season, the Joffrey Ballet is performing *Esteemed Guest* (reviewed in this issue), a work it commissioned from Morris for its present City Center season. After seven years as a professional choreographer, Morris has received this unprecedented triple crown while debunking three of the contemporary dance world’s most precious myths. He doesn’t live in New York (in 1984, he returned to his native Seattle). He doesn’t have a press agent. His dances look like dancing.

“People accuse me of having a great press person. I’ve never had a press agent,” says Morris. “I didn’t even have a manager until 1984, and he’s someone I’ve known for eight years, who’s never done this before in his life. We’re just now getting around to forming a board.”

Since the Morris group’s New York debut performances in 1980, Morris has been in the enviable position of having both press and audiences seeking him out. By his own admission, he makes very good copy. Besides being openly gay, Morris’s palpable physical presence is complemented by an equally full-bodied flamboyance, which makes him seem to occupy even more space. He is nearly six feet tall, big-boned, and bristling with energy, a virtual paradigm of his generation’s effortless androgyny. “Sex,” he explains plainly, “is a part of the *pas de deux*. Period. That’s what the *pas de deux* is. I make everybody broader. I want everybody to be able to do everything. The active/passive roles for my dancers are adjustable. That way you can have real surprises.”

Morris was not converted to dance by either ballet or modern dancing, but by a



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flamenco troupe which visited Seattle when he was nine. After seeing the troupe dance, he went straight to the class of a local flamenco teacher. By his early teens, was performing regularly with a local troupe, the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble, which specialized in Bulgarian and Yugoslavian folk dances. “Ethnic,” he explains, “was the first music. Everything else came after.” He also studied with Seattle ballet instruc-

tor Perry Brunson. Morris moved to New York City in 1976, to pursue a career in dance. Before beginning to choreograph, he danced in the companies of Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean, Hannah Kahn, and Twyla Tharp. His experiences in this diverse cross-section of contemporary dance have given Morris an immediate and savvy perspective on his professional environment, which he often expresses in very strong and succinct

opinions.

“Basically,” he admits, “I would rather watch a show of mine than of most other people. Actually,” he continues, “I was zany at first. I suppose I’ve tuned that down some now.” (He is wearing a multi-layered post-rehearsal outfit involving at least three widely contrasting prints, with a gold hoop earring shining out from beneath a tangle of tight black curls.) “I notice that I say ‘stuff’ now, instead of ‘shit.’”

“Part of the idea behind my work is that what we’re doing is supposed to be fun. If it’s not, then why would we be doing it? But I think that that aspect has attracted a great deal of attention, and you’ve got to be careful. People might only remember the jokes, and the serious side could suffer,” explains Morris, asserting, “Make no mistake, I’m very serious about what I do, and I think that what is often perceived as humor or parody in my work is actually the only way I can get close enough to the bone of a piece. Make a joke. It’s very difficult to approach those deep subjects that are really close to us—love and death and sex and God. I used to do work that was, ‘Black. Black. Black.’ And then, ‘Joke. Never mind. Didn’t mean it.’ No more; or not so much. Now it’s, ‘Black. Black. Black. Gray.’ I don’t undercut myself as much, because I’m less embarrassed by what I feel. I’m getting better at the really depressing stuff. But, if you approach it only with some exaggeration of piety, then you get why everybody hates modern dance or modern poetry or modern music. Because it’s dull. It’s always about you.”

Paradoxically, Morris’s choreography has been cited most consistently for the strength and clarity of its traditional values, particularly for a kind of retroclassical adherence to structural lucidity and musicality.

“I suppose I picked up some steps from all the choreographers I danced for, but the references turn up much more than I am aware. Face it. As soon as you move to Bach, it’s Paul Taylor to *someone*, unless it’s *Concerto Barocco*. But that’s part of how I grew up, too, because you learn by watching. You go, and you watch Balanchine.

“I love that people mention the music, because I love the music I choose. That’s why I choose it. I am an early music queen, and this is my baroque season. The ballet I did for the Joffrey was to a C. P. E. Bach cello concerto. C. P. E. was, of course, a nut, but he came right at the cusp of two epics. There are Vivaldi elements and echoes of his dad—you know, Johann Sebastian—and Haydn prefigurings. And it’s perfectly danceable. The Brooklyn season is German, French, and Italian baroque. I will dance in a new trio with Susan Hadley and Rob Besserer to some Couperin pieces, and then there’s a company work to the Pergolesi *Stabat Mater*, which is 40 minutes long and has 13 movements, including an ‘Amen’ which lasts about ten seconds. It’s the longest work I’ve ever done. Pergolesi’s amazing. Died at 26. He did things with string instruments that weren’t done again until Bartok. We’re using period instruments and live musicians, and I have great, great singers.

“Actually, I work almost exclusively with vocal music now, which is part of why my work has this textual quality. Funny. When the words are in English, people say I’m Mickey Mousing. When they’re in Italian, I’m told it’s brilliant. I use gestural motifs, little sign language secrets, that relate to certain points in the text or a rhythmic point. The idea is a visualization of the score something like what the composer wrote. When I come into rehearsal, I know how the piece will build, how it will add up. What I don’t know are the steps. That’s what you find in the studio. Repetition is the mother of invention.”