

Dance/Tobi Tobias

# CONTEMPORARY-MODERN

“...No genre or performance style is safe from comment; Morris seems bent on disclaiming his reputation for good behavior...”

**Mark Morris** RESPONDED TO HIS FIRST engagement in the posh Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House with a rerun of his highly original and musical *Marble Halls*—which his expanded audience greeted with roaring acclaim—and two brand-new offerings, one wacky, one solemn.

*Pièces en Concert*, which takes its title from the Couperin score to which it's set, organizes Morris, Rob Besserer, and Susan Hadley into a very peculiar triangle whose venue is a tacky arbor of potted palms on wheels. Morris (huge, dark, and exotic) and Besserer (who could model as an all-American blond hunk) are dressed as Franco-Sicilian peasants from the folkloric segment of a lengthy story ballet you've mercifully forgotten. Hadley—small, fleshy, and feisty—wears white gloves and an evil-green fifties cocktail dress with an enormous bow behind. In a very few minutes, it's apparent that their choreography is even nuttier and more eclectic than their costuming. It ranges in its borrowings, without so much as a transitional phrase, from *commedia dell'arte* through Martha Graham, with side trips to the murkier pit stops of the Ballets Russes.

In a particularly fraught passage, Besserer, looking suitably exalted, catches some manna from the heavens in his cupped hands. “Ah, a butterfly!” he seems to cry. Or has he, perhaps, just received evidence that the merciful gods have called off the prolonged drought? He toddles over to his companions with his prize, like the Sylph toting her handful of Evian to James. They drink and promptly fall down dead—or perhaps into a druggie's dream, from which each arises, unbeknownst to his mates, to do a little show-offy solo. Besserer, actually, thinks better of it before he fully gets off the ground, but Morris offers a glorious rendition of a danseur indulging in a spate of passionately self-involved excess.

No dance genre or performance style

is safe from comment in this madcap piece. Morris, whose background includes time served in ethnic dance, ballet, and modern, and who has regularly turned it all to constructive use, seems bent here on disclaiming his reputation for good behavior.

His *Stabat Mater* is set to the Pergolesi score and appears to meditate on its text—the thoughts of the Mother of Sorrows standing before her crucified son.



**WACKY AND TACKY:** Hadley, Morris, and Besserer in *Pièces en Concert*.

Morris follows the precepts of the early modern-dance choreographers in the scrupulous organization of *his* text. At first the space is claustrophobically constricted to a shallow margin by a blood-red drop; etched upon it are a charred cross and suggestions of skeletal figures in agony. The dancing ground opens progressively, backed by two more of Robert Bordo's drops, which represent a cross of death and one of resurrection. As the space enlarges, the number of dancers grows; quartets dominate the first segment, octets the second; in the last, the full cast of twelve fills the open field. In the penultimate minute, they begin to run, at first through a maze of their fellows; then, just as the curtain is falling, a single figure tears free.

The lexicon is tightly restricted, but it

is not only the resulting starkness and repetition that empower the choreography; the selected movements themselves are inordinately expressive. The opening image of the piece is a bending, swaying chain of humanity—weighted flesh bowed under physical pain and profound sorrow. Actions that seem abstract, some of them modern-dance truisms, suddenly reveal themselves as mirroring Christ's scourging, the piercing of his flesh, the witnesses' awed, horrified gaze upward to the figure on the cross, their pointing fingers, the heaviness of the body in their arms as they receive it, still pliant in the first hours after death. The moves, when they resolve themselves briefly into fixed poses, also refer to a long line of religious paintings, pictures that have a passionate raptness because the artists and their contemporary viewers shared certain stark convictions.

Despite the mood of near-unimaginable suffering and spiritual darkness, and a message about the fierceness and the fright that must have accompanied recognizing as a deity a man your fellow men have tortured and murdered, there is also a gleam of light in the piece—neatly heralded by a golden passage in Phil

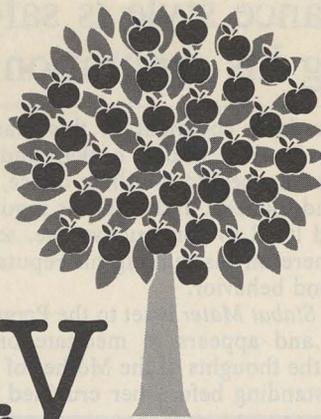
Sandström's evocatively graded dark-nesses. Just a brief gleam, as carefully calibrated as every other element in the work, it throws the whole dance into relief and, as with most Morris coups, it's impossible to say whether it was put there through calculating intelligence or sheer instinct.

TRADITIONALLY, A MODERN-DANCE CHOREOGRAPHER is expected to invent his or her own technique, following in the line of the field's matriarchs, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey. If artists cheat a little (Graham herself) or a lot (Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham) through the time-honored means of borrowing and transforming, it's because they instinctively recognize the fact that a personally derived vocabu-

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lary is a severely restricted one, limited to the capabilities and natural inclinations of the dancer-choreographer's own body. It is extremely difficult to imagine actions—concretely enough to convey them to other dancers—beyond those you can execute with your own physical instrument. **Dan Wagoner**, whose company appeared recently at the Joyce, doesn't care to cheat much, and that's his main problem.

When Wagoner was a young dancer performing with Graham and Taylor, his physical limitations—short limbs, chunky muscles—were endearing, part of his teddy-bearish charm. Even now, with his body thickened further by age, the legs that you expect to be lumbering can achieve surprising lightness and speed, while his manner is as disarmingly sweet and whimsical as ever. But to call on this instrument as a wellspring for choreography is something else again.

All three new-to-New York pieces that Wagoner offered on his opening night seemed to be made of the same stuff: rubbery, foreshortened action (think of muscle-bound runners) interspersed with the roiling, pretzeling encounters of sumo wrestlers. This material is overlaid with incessant, near-literal hand and arm gestures delivered with a staccato pulse, the twitchiness briefly amusing and very soon exhausting. All of this comes straight from Wagoner's own body, a body—just the opposite of your storybook Prince Charming's—that can't seem to take itself seriously. Like the insecure high-school boy who sets himself up as class clown, Wagoner-the-choreographer is so anxious to make fun of Wagoner-the-dancer's shortcomings before anyone else does that he can't sustain a lyrical passage even when he needs one desperately. He'll get started on a beauty and then, after a few phrases, abandon it to jokiness. As Paul Taylor says, "We all know what lyrical means: long arms."

Now, none of this would matter if you could just dismiss Wagoner as a non-contender. But that's far from the case. He's not only, in his idiosyncratic way, an ingratiating dancer, he's an ingratiating choreographer. His compositions are consistently constructed with intelligence, filled with pleasing stage pictures, and pervaded by a tenderness and good humor that seem to spring straight from the man's soul. In *Evening Star* and *Flee as a Bird*, both set to popular songs of a bygone age, he tells you about the rough-and-tumble camaraderie of trusting friends, about absurdly sentimental longings, and about a love born in lighthearted frivolity that darkens into betrayal, violence, and death. If his vocabulary were richer and more flexible, he might move you more deeply, but as it is, he tells his tales with an admirable simplicity and truth.