

DANCING

Choreographer of the Year

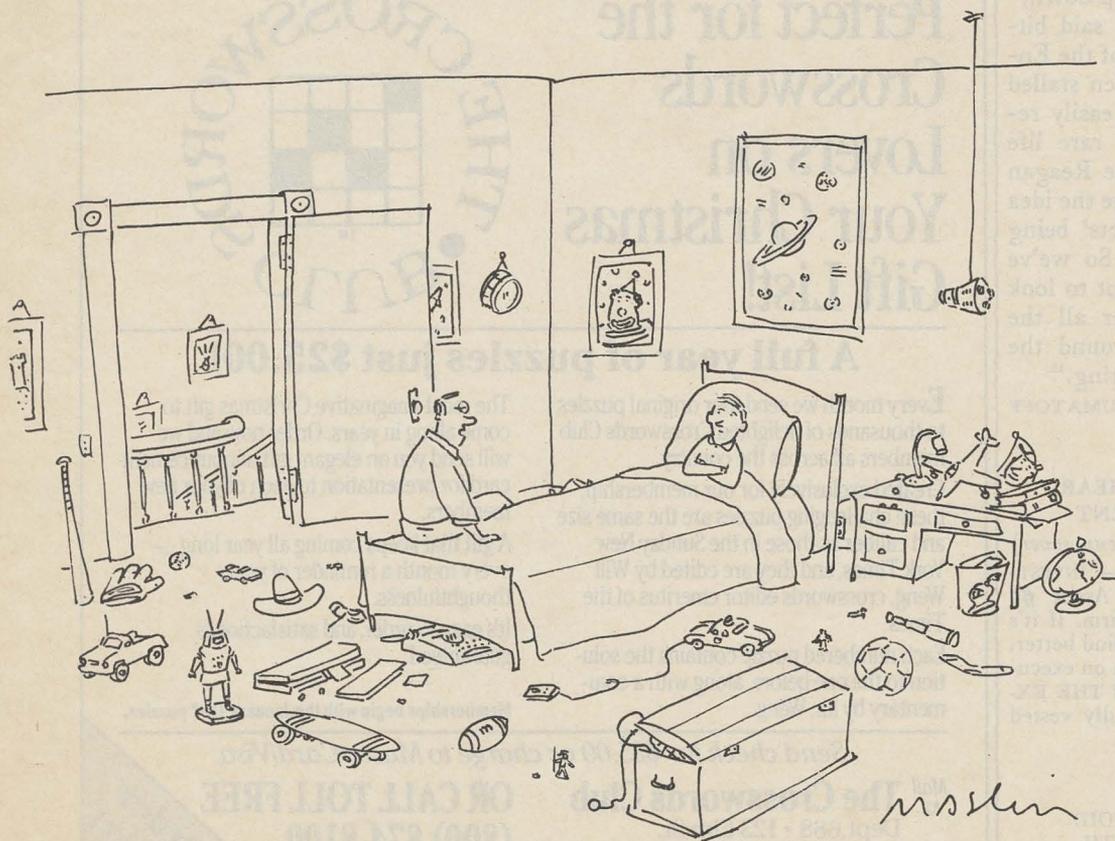
THIS time last year, Mark Morris was at Dance Theatre Workshop, straining its seating capacity (one hundred plus) to the bursting point. A few weeks ago, when the Morris company played New York again, in the Next Wave series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, it was the Opera House's biggest draw of the season. Morris in the past year has become the most widely interviewed, most talked-about, and most commissioned young choreographer in American dance. He interests magazine editors as much as artistic directors, he attracts the musical as well as the dance public, and he holds connoisseurs of fashion spellbound. Between the D.T.W. and the BAM seasons, he showed New York a total of fifteen works. This doesn't include pieces that were part of his "Dance in America" television show, seen here in October, or the ballet for the Joffrey, which was given at the City Center the week of the BAM engagement. And Morris did a lot of work this year that New York hasn't seen: one other ballet commission; a special three-part evening based on Roland Barthes es-

says, mounted in Boston; two pieces for his company's debut at Jacob's Pillow, last summer; and the "Dance of the Seven Veils" in a Seattle Opera production of "Salome." All this in addition to his regular teaching commitments at the University of Washington, in Seattle (where he still lives). At the end of such a year, one might have expected a somewhat depleted choreographer to show up in Brooklyn. Besides "Marble Halls," a Bach piece repeated from the D.T.W. programs, there would be two world premières, and one of these would be set to a piece of sacred music—Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater"—that is around forty minutes long. As it turned out, "Pièces en Concert," to a suite of Couperin dances, was as fresh as anything he has done, and the "Stabat Mater" flowed out in a thick stream, the culmination of the grand and sombre series that includes "Gloria" and "Handel Choruses." Mark Morris is still an amazing young man, and he was all there in Brooklyn.

"Pièces en Concert" is the kind of thing only Morris does, and "Stabat Mater" is the kind of thing only Mor-

ris does well. He's an innovator and a traditionalist, a satirist and a romantic, and one can never tell in advance what side of him will be presented in any given work or at any given moment in a work. The Couperin piece mingles absurdity and sobriety until they begin to look alike. The curtain goes up on a stage primly decorated with potted plants. Three people vaguely resembling eighteenth-century figurines come to life and dance a sarabande, then a courante, and so on. They use regulation deportment and nonregulation steps. Gradually, eccentric bits of timing and attack color the dance with a weird vivacity. As these different bits accumulate, a subversive logic takes over, yet the dance keeps moving with a specific exquisiteness through it all. The overstressed staccato attack turns into a passage about feeding birds, then into a passage about falling down, and soon we are in the totally unprincipled territory of pure slapstick.

How Morris (who is one—the silliest one—of the dancers) extracts the most laughs he can from this portion of the piece and then gets out of it and back to the unbroken porcelain calm of the beginning is a technical feat that I would think other choreographers could gain by studying, not only because of its psychological tact but for its delicacy in negotiating the Couperin music without violation. Impressive, too, is the way the absurdist tone arises so innocently from inside the dance—from Morris's shuffling pauses and distributing accents with a kind of scientific detachment. In generic terms, the piece is an absolute novelty—a pas de trois that, for once, does not set up a situation wherein the two same-sex members (here Morris and Rob Besserer) are rivals for the affections of the other (here Susan Hadley); there is, in fact, no love interest at all. Perhaps the strangest thing about "Pièces en Concert" is that it seems to have been made with no preconceptions—not even



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a preconception of how funny it would turn out to be. It looks as if three Martians had come to earth, having encountered the spirit of Angna Enters in outer space.

Not everyone enjoys this sort of thing, and those who do are almost certain not to like "Stabat Mater." Religious expression in dance so easily becomes sanctimony, I confess to a dread of it myself. But "Stabat Mater" isn't a piece of religious art. It's about religious feeling: specifically, the aspiration to faith and how people, especially young people, experience it in their lives. Even this much seriousness about religion may have been too much for the BAM audience, which gave the piece respectful applause and departed in relief. Maybe it was the triple dose of Baroque music that proved too much. Whatever it was, it was clear that Morris had not designed himself a safe success at BAM. His relation to the haute audience that patronizes Next Wave offerings had grown complex; he was certainly in that world, he was of it, but he was not in service to it any more than he would be willing to be the official standard-bearer of back-to-basics modern dance. "Stabat Mater" may be in an exalted Old Modern tradition, but it certainly doesn't look or feel anything like José Limón.

Morris is a true believer whose fidelity follows from his taste, especially in music. He can, for example, find and exploit the good in the fanatical style of Doris Humphrey. The first section of "Marble Halls" shows him doing it, but the piece as a whole salutes the Paul Taylor of "Esplanade." In "Stabat Mater," Morris reaches a kind of muscular effulgence that reminded me of Taylor's "A Musical Offering." And though both pieces are episodic in structure, it was interesting to see Morris dispense with one of the things he does best—transitions—and invent a continuity by shifting his cast in silence between dances, stylizing the shifts so that each group of dancers runs on from stage left and displaces an equal number of dancers, who run off stage right. This happened over and over; as a device, it had something of the ritualistic power of the walks-to-place in Graham's "Primitive Mysteries." But it also risked tiring the audience, and it points to one of the few weaknesses in Morris's command of choreographic technique, which is that once he has got hold of a structural device nothing on earth can make him let go. Usually, he



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derives structure from music and, as Taylor does, creates a correspondingly organic choreography. The tenacity of Morris's method has about it a marvellous integrity and sense of play, but there are times—the first section of "Esteemed Guests," the ballet for the Joffrey, is an example—when he sticks too close to his musical spine, ignoring its free articulation, and ignoring, too, the possibility of expanding the dance's limits beyond structural equivalence. Morris actually comes close to such an expansion in the second movement of this ballet, when he brings off one of his headiest group transitions, converting a series of lifts into a series of poses. For a few moments, the ballet has a lyrical independence that feels like floating. Does this choreographer, whose sensibility is so Blakean, know Blake's proverb "Improvement makes strait roads; but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius"? His habitual use of Baroque music ("Esteemed Guests" goes to a cello concerto by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach) may have improved his craftsmanship while straitening his poetic language. I make this suggestion mindful of works in the D.T.W. collection which were set to scores by Francaix and Shostakovich and were poetically expressive as well as structurally sound.

Having raised this objection to Morris's work, I should also point out that very few of his colleagues so much as acknowledge the structure of a piece of music or show any other kind of musical insight. The Joffrey chose to present, in the same season with "Esteemed Guests," another piece to Baroque music by another young choreographer new to ballet. This was Mark Haim, whose "The Gardens of Boboli" showed talent and audacity. But it didn't show structural integrity, and it used music as a trampoline, in the manner of Gerald Arpino. The difference between Haim's ballet to Albinoni and Morris's to C. P. E. Bach was the difference between metre and rhythm, between rootless ingenuity and integrated invention. "Esteemed Guests" (who hands out titles at the Joffrey?) is not on the whole a success; it looks rushed and scrappy, and its central idea of a lone ballerina never gets pinned down. But Morris at least presents his credentials, and he makes us smile. I almost laughed at the allusion to Twyla Tharp in his two squirrely female soloists and in his choice of Santo Loquasto for the costumes.

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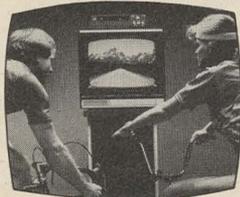
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"Esteemed Guests" comes at the same point in Morris's career that "As Time Goes By" came in Tharp's, and it is, with all its flaws, much the best new work the Joffrey has done since.

The adjective most commonly applied to Morris is "outrageous," and it refers to brilliant porno ballets like "Lovey" and "Striptease," or to shocking fantasies of rape and repression like "One Charming Night." Morris does have a taste for lurid, a taste for camp, and all the rest of that. But his most outstanding characteristic in these matters is his sense of balance. Outrage occurs in his work as a reflection of the natural order and what society has made of it. His sincerity can provoke some people to outraged reaction. Morris wears his heart on his sleeve, and nowhere does he do so more conspicuously than in his pieces with religious themes. But he's no less objective in these pieces than he is anywhere else. His great solo to an Indian raga, "O Rangasayee" (performed at BAM two seasons ago), had both ascetic rapture and sensual languor. Morris's personality seemed to merge with the dualities of classical Hindu dance. "Stabat Mater" is comparatively single-tracked; it's fleshy and glowing and hot with the sensual appetite of youth. Pergolesi wrote the music in the year he died, at the age of twenty-six; Morris turns it into a mirror of adolescent conscience. He sets his stage with three scrim, each with a cross; we see them sequentially, the first enveloped in crimson flames, the last pure white. The discipline of the choreography, formidable as usual, becomes part of the emotional texture. Bit by bit—the dance is in twelve parts—an imagery develops which is dumbfoundingly inchoate, like brutish statues being worked free of the marble that imprisons them. The simile comes from Michelangelo, and Michelangelesque or Blakean images recur in Morris's work. Yet shame, pain, ecstasy are here shown according to no known model. If there can be such a thing in dance as giving voice to the inarticulate, then Morris has done that thing. Once more, he has expressed the passions of a generation.

—ARLENE CROCE

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