



(l-r) Susan Hadley, Mark Morris, and Rob Besserer in *Pieces en Concert*.

Color Me Baroque

by Otis Stuart

Mark Morris Dance Group
Next Wave Festival
Brooklyn Academy of Music
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The evening of dance recently presented by the Mark Morris Dance Group at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival consisted of three works—*Marble Halls*, to J. S. Bach and first performed last December at Dance Theater Workshop; a new *pas de trois* to short selections of Couperin, danced by Susan Hadley, Rob Besserer, and Morris (the choreographer's only appearance as a dancer); and the premiere of an ensemble work to the full 40-minute Pergolesi *Stabat Mater*. Obviously, the musical choices are not only ambitious but involved. The specialization, not to mention the out and out temerity to present an evening of dance set entirely to baroque music in New York City in 1986, suggests something more carefully considered than the more popular form of "shotgun collaboration" that has crippled the majority of Morris's contemporaries. Someone has done some homework—and voluntarily, too—and the true measure of Morris's musical sense and sensibility is that it never becomes overbearing, or, worse, competitive. Morris's choreography is unfailingly attached to his music, and not with a nervous, toadying, or note-by-note servility. Instead, Morris exhibits the craftsman's open and generous eye to the whole. It lets us in on it, too.

Characteristically, Morris dismisses any potential redundancy by never even acknowledging it; his availability to the music is too complete to entertain the notion. That completeness is perhaps most

easily evident in the Couperin *pas de trois*. It's all artifice and glad of it. The trio of dancers is discovered wrought into one of these feverishly elaborated baroque groupings in which no one *really* touches. They instantly unwind to introduce themselves—individually, of course—through a rapidly alternating stream of poses. By the time they've progressed to steps, we have not only character but conflict—hero (Besserer), heroine (Hadley and a major performance involving a major dress), complication (Morris). It's choreographer Morris's readiest gift—on-the-spot plot—and, miraculously, he achieves his little comedy of manners without playing down to or abusing his subject. We see and accept the preposterousness because we never lose sight of the purpose.

That same capacity for the textual is among the chief virtues of Morris's less successful attempt at the *Stabat Mater*. The work is dense with its own very powerful iconography. The images develop as the dance develops until both achieve autonomy with an emphatically conclusive "Amen." The work is performed before a progression of three scrims designed by Robert Bordo, each dominated by a crucifix. At first one and then a second succeeds into the third—which features the smallest and most unorthodox of the crucifixes—the dance pushes deeper and deeper into the stage. Choices are obviously at work here, and choices that are visually, structurally, specifically defined. In the dancing, the visual configurations are never static, which means that, however elaborated, they never atrophy into poses. First of all, Morris's choreography cannot be more still than his music. The exchange allows the dancing to achieve the music's quality of high-principled excess. On another level, the dancing depends upon too



Guillermo Resto (r) in Morris's *Stabat Mater*.

many moving parts to allow any time for attitudinizing. For example, the work is visually stitched together at two great central *pas de deux*. Each is based upon the tension (rather than the camaraderie) inherent in any attempt at unity. No sitting still there. The partners pull apart from each other with a deliberate, wrought-iron delicacy which is the inverse but equal of the good-time intertwining of the Couperin. The balance they achieve supports the weight of the entire endeavor.

Of course, it's something of a strain. If Morris is defeated by the size of his subject (and I mean the music, not the Christ), it is because his vocabulary is dulled by a steadily more impermeable structural rigidity. Baroque or not, *Stabat Mater* is pretty stern stuff, blocked out into 13 very deliberate sections. In blocking his three quartets of dancers as deliberately, Morris has not accommodated for a corresponding block in the accumulation of those images. The dances begin to look fixed and held. We

see how they fit together. Morris possibly has been betrayed by his own otherwise felicitous adherence to his musical structures. Even a good thing can turn on you.

It's a lesson Morris might already have begun to learn from the daily press. His Brooklyn season seemed less a leap forward than an almost deliberate coming to terms with dearly held principles. For an audience primed for surprise, it's a ballsy choice. Consolidation is as courageous, if less conspicuous, a creative endeavor as discovery, since both are presumed unconscious. Temperance in heat, however, is the first—and least welcomed—obligation of maturity. Particularly amid the glitterati avant garde-cum-Philip Morris ambiance of BAM's Next Wave Festival, when a less serious artist might understandably have collapsed beneath the hype, Morris has channeled his own undeniable star power into as catholic a collection of dances as you're likely to see. That kind of behavior has always brought out the shears.