

Teasing Gender

BY DEBORAH JOWITT



Gwyneth Jones and Dan Wagoner in *Evening Star*

DAN WAGONER COMPANY. At the Joyce Theater (November 11 to 16). *Evening Star*; *Two Trios*; *Flee as a Bird*.

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. At Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House (November 12 to 15). *Stabat Mater*; *Pièces en Concert*; and *Marble Halls*.

JOFFREY BALLET. At City Center (October 16 to Nov 16). Mark Morris's *Esteemed Guests*, Mark Haim's *The Gardens of Boboli*, and John Wilson in *La Fille Mal Gardée*.

Traditional notions about gender continue to underlie a lot of our stage dancing. Sometimes that's okay by me—say in American Ballroom Theater's work. I can easily become irritated, though, by two sleek, well-muscled athletes (one male, one female) in color-coordinated miliskin unitards doing a Tarzan-Jane number ("Me king of apes; you arabesque NOW!").

In the dances that Dan Wagoner makes, the distinctions between men and women are clear, but gently stated. Dancing to sweet turn-of-the-century tunes like "Waltz Me Around Again, Willie" (in *Evening Star*) or to Doc Cheatham singing Cole Porter's "Let's Do It" (in *Flee as a Bird*), the performers are often, as you'd expect, courting. More often, however, the bustling, vigorous, bouncy, packed-with-surprises phrases and erratic patterns suggest the gathering of a large, intricately related family where brothers and cousins-twice-removed and Great Aunt Jerusha and true-love Sally frolic together. And in Wagoner's hometown-on-stage, as in Garrison Keillor's, "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

The dazzling opening of *Evening Star* (set to a "Galop" by Emil Waldteufel) is a carnival of fond and witty tricks. A woman swan-dives onto a man's back; another woman is swung up to sit on her; someone pulls the bottom woman out, and everyone sets off on some new fantasy. Because of the pacing and the spirit, you never focus on Men Doing Things to Women, or vice versa.

I can't imagine another choreographer who could bring off the corny old "Under the Bamboo Tree" (Joan Morris's and William Bolcom's suave musical rendi-

tion) without condescension and at the same time give us a tall-woman/short-man duet without cracking unpleasant jokes. Elegantly gangling, clever-faced Janice Garrett is paired with Timothy Conboy, a beautifully neat, compact dancer, juicy in his phrasing. The partnering is witty and difficult, the relationship is frankly gleeful and as sweet-tempered as the song.

Evening Star is rich with humor, tenderness, and bold, complicated dancing. There's a duet for Joan Norvelle and Paul Lester to "Waltz Me Around Again, Willie" (she effusive, he gallant), and a thrillingly eccentric one for Wagoner and small, sturdy Gwyneth Jones. Randy James makes his entrance as part of a lively trio, and the boiling stage finally

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settles down to a tranquil simmer for "Come Down My Evenin' Star."

Flee as a Bird, with its old jazz tunes, hints at red-hot mamas and snakey-hipped men, but subtly. There's a mini-story ballet featuring Garrett ("Miss Otis Regrets"), but most of the dancing pits a trio against a double duet. I enjoyed it thoroughly, even though I didn't find it quite as satisfying as *Evening Star*.

Wagoner shows his most lyrical side in the first part of *Two Trios*, set to part of César Franck's Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major. He, Garrett, and the marvelously silky Lisa Fitzgerald perform it with pensive tenderness. Jones, Lester, and James are more turbulent, but all six people can join easily together toward the end.

Wagoner's choreography gets better and better. The non sequiturs, the sudden, squared-off thudding steps that punctuate lighter, stretched-out phrases are skillfully woven in now. The skillful use of repetition gives credibility to the surprises and coherence to the prodigality of his dance imagination.

Mark Morris is insistent about downplaying gender. In pieces where it needn't figure, he makes damn sure it doesn't. Penny Hutchinson

couldn't dance at his BAM concerts; two men replaced her (Long Nguyen in *Marble Halls*, Larry Hahn in *Stabat Mater*). Costumes are seldom a problem; in *Marble Halls*, for instance, the 10 dancers wear lavender tank tops and apricot shorts. All the women who dance for Morris are big, with the exception of Teri Weksler, and when it comes to hefting, they give as good as they get (so does Weksler). In any case, lifts rarely signify romance to Morris; they're a formal device, something to stand for a musical peak.

Morris's Next Wave concerts weren't ideally programmed. Both *Marble Halls* (to Bach's Concerto for 2 Harpsichords and Strings in C Minor) and *Stabat Mater* (Pergolesi) are big, almost doctrinarily formal dances for large ensembles. The only intimately scaled dance was an elegantly foolish trio to music of Couperin. Perhaps the chance to have live music determined the program. Certainly it was a treat to have the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble (Michael Feldman conducting) and the fine singing of Julianne Baird and counter-tenor Drew Minter for the Pergolesi.

Morris's approach to works like the Bach and the Pergolesi seems to be to invent a theme, envisage strong formations that will characterize each section, and manipulate the theme through the sections. His choice of motif is usually as radical as his approach is traditional. That for *Marble Halls* features a leg-lift to the front that sweeps back and forth horizontally like a compass needle, with hands held as if to pat the air; a lunge; a blithe little jump, with both legs slightly bent and feet together to show a diamond of air; a few other interesting items, including some on the floor. The movement themes play against the prettiness of Bach's music, get at something a little crankier and drier. For the first movement, the dancers work in parallel lines ranging from the front to the back of the stage, and Morris rings all kinds of brilliant changes on what step comes when, who gets to the front of the line and how. A crack drill team in some eccentric gymnastic event. For the second movement, the stage picture makes a right-angle turn, and the dancers work in horizontal

lines—four in front, the rest counter-pointing in back. Third movement? Diagonals. And dancers racing back and forth, the little jump a big item now. Morris knows how to make our pulses rise and swing with Bach's when he wants to.

Stabat Mater is almost remorseless in its structure. It begins with all 12 dancers, backs to us, facing a fiery dropcloth (by Robert Bordo), twisting, bending, gesturing somberly. Then we see them in sequences of three quartets. Beautifully engineered, different, but akin, these all keep four dancers working close together, tumbling over each other, sliding under limbs and arched bodies. Then Morris begins to enlarge the scale: eight dancers, now 12. Bordo keeps revealing different drops. Despite the ingenuity and the super dancing, the piece feels tight—the copybook exercises of a wunderkind. Blake's Dante illustrations worked as a fabric design.

The very amusing *Pièces en Concert* features five pretty fuses laid out in a V, and Morris, Rob Besserer, and Susan Hadley being seriously frivolous together. The men wear velvet caps, breeches, and silk shirts; Hadley's in a blue '60s frump dress with a beehive hairdo, although her behavior is not much different from that of the men.

Morris remains something of an enigma to me. Brilliant, yet flawed. His economy of means, his eccentricity, his fluent musicality can combine to charm you, touch you, make you laugh; his dances can also be slightly irritating—too glib and too worked at the same time. *Esteemed Guests*, his new ballet for the Joffrey is fascinating, but opaque. Clockwork Balanchine. Set to Carl Philippe Emanuel Bach's Concerto in A Major for Violoncello and Strings, it offers a first-movement vista of an off-to-the-side diagonal of couples dancing in place, while soloists Deborah Dawn and Jodie Gates natter brightly and elegantly around each other in the remaining chunk of space. In the last movement, another gender game: Tom Mossbrucker and Philip Jerry take over the women's phrase (minus the diagonal). In the second movement, leggy, sophisticated Leslie Carothers forms the centerpiece for two couples.

The pleasantly understated new Dance in America show on Morris (no narration!) shows him deftly chopping and stir-frying vegetables, moving easily about his mother's Seattle kitchen as he talks about his career. I have a hunch he can concoct a dance as naturally and gracefully. Sometimes the flavor is ineffable; sometimes it's just a tasty dish.

Mark Haim, an up-and-coming type, also contributed a ballet to the Joffrey that teased gender conventions and displayed the choreographer's knowledge of music. But Haim, unlike Morris, isn't

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In Tune

BY BURT SUPREE

COLLABORATIONS/COMBINATIONS. At the Field at Pineapple Dance Center (November 14 to 16). Nadine Tringali's *Bull's-Eye*, music by Jeffrey Schanzer; June Anderson's *Aran*, music by Larry Kirwan; Peggy Peloquin's *Venerly*, music by Chris Hyams Hart.

The second program of the "Collaborations/Combinations" series at the Field at Pineapple pairing choreographers and composers demonstrated different relationships of choreography to music in each of the pieces. In Nadine Tringali's *Bull's-Eye*, set to a jazzy composition by Jeffrey Schanzer performed by his five-man ensemble, the dancing springs largely off the rhythms of bass violin and drums. Tringali's trio is slouchy, temperamental, compressed, with sharp little gestures that don't stretch out, and a generally percussive line. In this piece, Tringali doesn't care much about space or body line, but is playing with a tough, resilient,

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