

ARTS & FILMS



Nancy Tutko photo

Mark Morris is the hottest choreographer around.

Mark Morris Dance Group may call Belgium home

By Christine Temin
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The Mark Morris Dance Group, America's hottest modern dance company, may be on its way to a new home — in Belgium. The group expects to be named the official dance company of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels next week, according to company manager Barry Alterman, who said yesterday that the group's nomination for the post will be voted on by the Monnaie's board next Tuesday. Morris, the most sought-after choreographer in America, plans to relocate to Belgium with his company next year. He will replace Maurice Bejart and Bejart's company, which had been in residence at the Monnaie since 1960. Bejart surprised the dance world by announcing in June that he would move his company to Lausanne, Switzerland, and claiming that the Monnaie's director, Gerard Mortier, was more concerned with the theater's opera component than with the ballet.

As an employee of the Belgian government, Morris, 31, will enjoy working conditions and a degree of freedom that do not exist in the United States, in either modern dance or ballet. "The pinnacle of your career in the US is to be invited to BAM [the Brooklyn Academy of Music]," said Morris over the weekend. "You get two nights there and if you're not a hit, you don't get invited back." In Brussels, Morris's three year contract will allow him to do as he pleases, as long as he gives 60 performances a year there. He will have at his disposal six studios, which Alterman calls "pretty gorgeous," and he can start his own school if he wants to. He will have three theaters of different sizes and configurations, including a winter circus arena, in which to stage any sort of work he wants. He can hire as many dancers as he is likely to want — Bejart had 80 — and the State will pay their salaries. Those dancers need not be Belgian: Morris said recently that he plans to hold auditions in New York, Brussels and perhaps Paris. He will

have no financial worries. His company's existence will not depend on box office business, and his dancers will be decently paid by Belgian standards. His company will always dance to live music. He will be able to rehearse a production for months if he wants to, and will have two to three weeks of rehearsal onstage. Most dance companies in the United States consider themselves lucky to have one or two stage rehearsals. Alterman characterized conditions in Brussels as "groovy."

If all goes according to plan, in November, 1988, Morris's company will make its Brussels debut in Handel's oratorio, "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed Il Moderato," a project Morris was originally supposed to stage this fall with Boston Ballet. Craig Smith, director of Boston's Emmanuel Music, will conduct the Brussels production. (Smith is expected to be named principal guest conductor of the Monnaie in an early announcement). Instead of rehearsing "L'Allegro" in Boston now, Morris is in New York working on a new

dance for Mikhail Baryshnikov and American Ballet Theatre.

Boston Ballet artistic director Bruce Marks said, "Oh, shoot!" on learning the news that Brussels would host the "L'Allegro" premiere. Marks said he had been forced to abandon the ballet's original idea of doing the oratorio at The Wang Center for the Performing Arts this month because "our subscribers are used to our opening the season with a full-length classic. We could have lost half our audience with such an

adventurous beginning." And Marks said the ballet needs ticket sales to pay dancers' salaries. "We have an obligation to pay our own dancers; the state won't do it for us." Marks cited several American choreographers - including the Frankfurt Ballet's William Forsythe - who have gone to Europe and done risky, experimental work with state support. "US institutions have to depend on box office to live," Marks said. "If Billy Forsythe were head of the Sheboygan Ballet, he couldn't do what he does."

But Marks also wondered about how the Brussels public would react to Morris. "Brussels is used to the very chic, French, *recherche* ballets of Bejart, with men in black leather pretending to be Communists." Bejart's sensationalist, huge-scale theater pieces dealing with Life and Death are the very opposite of Morris's chamber-sized, elegantly witty works. Morris himself acknowledged that "There is a consensus that Brussels has a public for Bejart but not for ballet."

Liz Thompson, executive director of the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, where Morris has choreographed and appeared for the last five summers, said of Morris's move, "It sounds like a remarkable opportunity. But it's curious. You wonder why they didn't pick someone like Paul Taylor," the distinguished choreographer with decades more experience than Morris.

It was Peter Sellars, the controversial director with Boston roots, who suggested Morris's name to Mortier. In June, Mortier journeyed to Stuttgart to see Sellars' production of Mozart's "Così fan tutte," and Sellars suggested that Mortier stay on to see Morris's company which was also performing in Stuttgart at the time. Mortier met Morris, and the two began talking about Morris going to Brussels. "It was totally out of the blue, surprising and shocking," recalled Alterman, who added that the timing was perfect. "I'd stopped booking the company as of July, 1988," he said, "because all those tours of one-night stands are so hard - especially for mature dancers." The age range in the Morris company is 29 to 37, making it old as dance companies go. "I was trying to find some kind of base for the company, so Mark could have time to make new pieces."

One possible base was Massachusetts. "Boston is our favorite town," Alterman said. Boston's Dance Umbrella first presented Morris in 1985, before he was the hottest thing in American choreography. The next year, the Umbrella commissioned Morris's full-evening trilogy, "Mythologies," which brought a large share of of the New York dance community on a pilgrimage to Boston. Also in 1986 Boston Ballet commissioned the highly successful "Mort Subite." (Morris said it was mere coincidence that the title is the name of a Belgian beer he favors.)

Dance Umbrella Executive Director Jeremy Alliger said he still hopes that Morris will visit Boston regularly. Alterman seconded that hope, adding that Morris will probably spend only eight months of the year in Belgium. Because Morris appreciates Alliger's support, he has offered to dance for free in a performance to benefit the Umbrella in Boston next spring. But the Umbrella is currently without a home theater, and while Morris will soon have the luxury of virtually limitless time in three theaters in Brussels, Alliger may not be able to find or afford one theater for one night so that Morris can dance in Boston again.