

New York Newsday

ENTERTAINMENT

From Beauty to Humor on Soap Suds

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP.

'Mythologies.' Dances based on essays by Roland Barthes: 'Soap-Powders and Detergents,' 'Striptease' and 'Championship Wrestling.' Choreographed by Mark Morris. Music composed and conducted by Herschel Garfein. Lighting design by Phil Sandstrom. Thursday night at Manhattan Center, 311 W. 34th St. Through Sunday.

RUDOLF NUREYEV, Jerome Robbins and Peter Martins all were there at the Manhattan Center's chandeliered ballroom Thursday night to see Mark Morris do his inimitable version of the laundry.

"Soap Powders and Detergents" is a poetic, hilarious, inspired bit of madness. It's set to Herschel Garfein's text, which puts commercials for Fab, Era, Duz and the like in an

operatic setting worthy — no kidding — of Handel or Bernstein. It isn't what's sung, it turns out, but how, in this case by four marvelous opera singers. Actually, though, it is what's sung. It is ridiculous. "Fab makes cleaning a snap," croons a velvety voice,

Meanwhile, the 10 dancers (Morris sat this one out), wearing white sweats and moving against a blueish backdrop with a few white flecks, agitate their arms and legs as if they're the works of a washer. Yet they also look terrific because we know that these are arms and legs, not machinery, moving in intriguing unity and esthetic harmony.

Later, the dancers churn one arm as if in a water ballet, and we feel the currents. Then they get caught up



Rob Besserer, carrying Donald Mouton in 'Championship Wrestling'

with big white sheets, and it's splendid. One minute the dance looks like Doris Humphrey's classic "Soaring," with its parachute silks. The next, the sheets are ropes for a maypole dance.

Suddenly one dancer is wrapped in sheets. She becomes a 9-foot-tall sheet monster, being importuned by a pitchman to give up her Era. She refuses. We can tell because she's shaking her sheets; the sheets fall to the other dancers, who tumble them around as if they're in a front-loader at the Laundromat.

It's rare to see a dancemaker who can slide so easily from beauty to humor and back again.

"Striptease," the second of the three pieces inspired by Roland Barthes' book called "Mythologies," a collection of essays, succeeds along similar lines. Like its namesake entertainment, it adds an element of suspense, of near-dread: Everybody, including the audience (metaphorically) gets naked.

We are watching eight wildly diverse characters, each inhabiting

his or her own world, defined by the costume, including a bride, a she-devil, a biker in black leather, a carpenter, a cowboy. And most of the costumes have an appropriate prop, usually phallic. As the costumes are slowly removed — and they're in multiple, hilarious layers — the tension in the audience grows. As the dancers become not only physically exposed, they have their roles stripped away as well. With nothing left to hide behind, the characters are no longer caricatures. Stripped of stereotypes, they take on human dignity.

Morris, after flamboyantly shedding his cool-guy suit and revealing his overblown-cherub contours, glances out at the audience with a little shrug as if to say, "What did you expect? I'm the same as you."

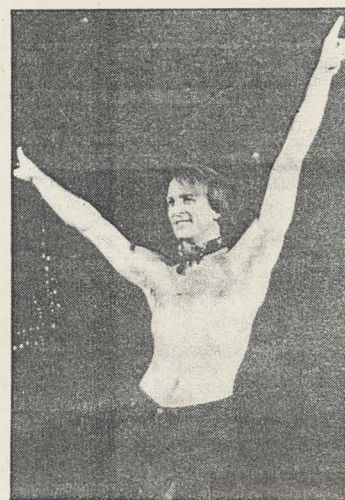
Morris' "Championship Wrestling," which completed the show, is an extravagant intermingling of dance and athletics, to say nothing of endurance. The company's dancers are a perfect match for Morris' brash beauty. /II

The 10 dancers, wearing white sweats and moving against a blueish backdrop with a few white flecks, agitate their arms and legs as if they're the works of a washer.

DANCE REVIEW



Janice Berman



Photos by Tom Brazil

Besserer in 'Striptease'