

piece called "Mythologies" in New York for the first time. "Mythologies" is a curiosity, even for Mark Morris. The unusual setting (the Manhattan Center, newly refurbished and regilded, is on the site of the old Hammerstein Opera House) matched the nature of the work.

"Mythologies," a trilogy, was suggested by the writings of Roland Barthes on popular culture which were published in a book of the same title in 1957; a translation appeared in 1972.

Barthes wrote, as only French intellectuals can, about the iconography of soap powders and detergents, the ritual of the striptease and the wrestling match, and other pop phenomena. In adapting Barthes's themes to the theatre, Morris and his composer, Herschel Garfein, have evolved their own iconographies and rituals. In "Striptease" and "Championship Wrestling" they extend rather than illustrate Barthes's point. In "Soap-Powders and Detergents" they are elaborately beside the point, but they make such a ruckus that we're entertained anyway. Garfein, who got Morris interested in the idea of using Barthes's essays, composed a predominantly percussion score for "Striptease" and a tape collage for "Championship Wrestling." But for "Soap-Powders and Detergents" he created an oratorio for a quartet of vocalists and a thirteen-piece orchestra; the words are those of Fab and Era commercials. I think Garfein wanted to catch the spirit of Barthes's essay more than he wanted to deal with it directly, but the mock-heroic treatment is too pushy, and the lethargic pace makes the score undanceable. Every time the momentum dies, though, Morris revives it with some new twist and carries on. His choreography is a mélange of vintage modern-dance attitudes and postures; it's "heroic" in the manner of post-office murals—nothing "mock" about it. And it's as richly amusing. "Mythologies" doesn't represent the elegantly lyrical side of Morris's talent; it shows instead his gift for detached observation and impersonal satire. When he gives us quivering bubbles and regimented wavelets in "Soap-Powders" (the piece goes straight through the wash cycle), he isn't being unfair to Doris Humphrey's "Water Study"—he's just being the Spirit of Modernism. When big white laundry sheets keep parting and revealing figures frozen in poses, one doesn't respect Martha Graham's "Clytemnestra" any the

THE Mark Morris Dance Group gave its only New York concert of the season a few weeks ago in the grand ballroom of the Manhattan Center, on West Thirty-fourth Street. The show was on the stage, with half the audience seated at banquet tables, the other half on bleachers. On both sides of the ballroom, bars had been set up, and there was cabaret entertainment, unrelated to the Morris event and otherwise dispensable, before curtain time and during intermissions. The Morris group was presenting a

less. The use of fabric is Morris's main design element, and it's pure Denishawn, just as the abstract groupings in serried Art Deco formations are pure post-Denishawn.

But Morris is only coping in "Soap-Powders and Detergents." In "Striptease" and "Championship Wrestling" he is at or near his peak. I wrote about the latter piece when it had its première, at the Brooklyn Academy, in 1984; as a cartoon of violence, a slapstick "Guernica," it is still matchless, a one-of-a-kind creation. Morris doesn't stylize wrestling the way stage fights stylize fisticuffs; he gives us the same brutal, exaggerated nonsense we see in the arena, the blows invisibly deflected so that the dancers don't get hurt. When he overstylizes, as in the hilarious slow pummeling sequence, he hasn't left the arena—only switched to slow-motion replay. "Championship Wrestling" takes wrestling on its own terms as the theatre Barthes said it was. "Art" meets "sport" on the same phony turf. You can't believe that Morris could be getting so much out of this one-on-one overlay, or that, having succeeded here, he could possibly do it again. Yet "Striptease" goes beyond "Championship Wrestling" in explicit representation.

Between a Morris parody of a sensational or obscene spectacle and the spectacle itself there is often a very fine line. Morris doesn't just allude to stripteasers or wrestlers—he drives us to confront the harsh physical facts. But his arrangement of those facts is such that we are absorbed and enlightened by what we see—never cheaply implicated, never dehumanized, and never immunized, either. I don't know which I admire more—Morris's refusal to play down to his material or his refusal to play up to his audience. He uses trash fastidiously. In this he reminds me of Bette Midler or Joe Orton, artists who practiced outrage and placed themselves at great risk of being misunderstood. To keep on doing this, you have to have a sturdy sense of self, as well as a precise and flexible sense of where reality ends and parody begins. (I deliberately put Bette Midler in the past tense because, alas, after years of keeping her balance on the fine line she now seems to be losing it.) There's no hostility in Morris; he's much too various and large-spirited for that. In "Lovey," a piece seen here a couple of years ago which dealt with murder and child molestation, he took us to Hell laughing all the way,

and brought us back crying. Now, in "Striptease," he and his company of dancer-mimes go to Nighttown. There are four female and four male strippers (including Morris), and they're so far off balance for so long that they seem to be out of control. Then, in the last thirty seconds of the piece, they make the miracle that transforms scabrous entertainment into a work of art.

This is a remarkable company. I saw "Lovey" with rotating casts; it was always extraordinary. For "Striptease" the cast is set; each dancer plays a character of fantasy or one with strong fantasy overtones, and each character—cowboy, she-devil, motorcyclist, bimbo, construction worker, Oriental fan-dancer, bride, punk—is fully worked up in terms of drag and shtick. These are star turns. Rob Beserer, Ruth Davidson, Tina Fehlandt, Susan Hadley, Donald Mouton, Keith Sabado, Teri Weksler, and Morris come at us one at a time, strike a pose, remove a bit of gear, flaunt a piece of anatomy, and stride off. On the next round, they carry the process a stage further. (You think they can't, but they can.) Morris is the sleaziest of all; wearing a black suit, a dangling earring, and ringlets falling over one bloodshot eye, he oozes and jerks his way down to the footlights like an ejaculating jellyfish. He gets down to skin. They all do. There is a silence as they hold themselves in character, strutting in a red light, freezing in silhouette. Then, suddenly, the show is over and we see them having to pick up their clothes and get off the stage.

In the declension of the striptease, Barthes said, we see that nudity is not the point—dressing up (and undressing) is. Nudity has levelled all these raging individualists; it has cancelled the process of revelation. If Morris had pulled the curtain at that point, he would simply have succeeded in putting on a strip show, but, like Barthes, he has produced an essay on stripping, and his sad little anticlimax is the ultimate comment on truth games in the theatre. You think he can't get beyond stripping, but he can.

—ARLENE CROCE

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