

Succes D'Excess



Tom Brazil

Hidebound to please: Rob Besserer peels in *Striptease*.

DANCE

by Otis Stuart

Mythologies
Mark Morris Dance Group
Manhattan Center Grand Ballroom
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The *Mythologies* program of choreography by Mark Morris presented by his Mark Morris Dance Group was a puzzle, a *succes d'excess*. The choreographer's celebrated extravagance was on its best behavior (*Championship Wrestling* and *Soap Powders and Detergents*) and its worst (*Striptease*). On the other hand, there was the setting—the Grand Ballroom of the Manhattan Center on 34th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, a terminally mauve all-purpose auditorium, bathed in coals-to-Newcastle pink gels especially for the event. Its pre-performance effect was inevitably subject-

ive; suffice it to say that the last time this subject saw a set-up as near perfect—absolutely unexpected and with not a detail to be faulted—was Bette Midler's 1983 Radio City Music Hall Concert, when the audience was seated to the *Rite of Spring*.

The set-up, of course, sets up big expectations. The three works on the program are all based on essays by Roland Barthes. The subject matter is at least as unlikely as the setting. Morris's work is first remarkable in that you don't have to feel stupid for not knowing Roland Barthes from Belle Barth, an asset that cannot be overappreciated. Each of the works is built around a central cultural monolith (apparently, this was Barthes's *chose*), and their second, and sustaining, strength is Morris's ability to find motion in the matter. The mobility is complex, contained, and complete, not the one-dimensional repetitiveness of Morris's European contemporaries, such as Maguy Marin, requiring program notes for depth and legibility. The works exist within a context generated by bodies in motion, and that's all you need.

In *Championship Wrestling*, for example, each dancer participates in the omnipresent brutality both individually and

as part of the group. As a result, the seams seem part of the fabric. Each dancer's special signature—great rolling lunges, stomps, slapping finishes—coalesce into a frame for the inevitable confrontations which build toward a megahead-on combat in slow motion: two dancers dummied through a final fight to the finish before precipitating a group collapse. It's visceral, muscular portraiture. Based upon the information about Barthes provided in a program-note insert by Susan Sontag, one suspects that Morris has followed both the spirit and the letter of his subject. The metaphor speaks for itself, and its visual speech is loud and clear and uncluttered.

The contexts were cloudier in the other two works. *Soap Powders and Detergents*, involving the least traditionally theatrical of the three subjects, laundry, is the most visually extravagant. Its very real, very formal beauty finally is defeated by its own overstatement. The company is dressed in white, brandishes sheets, and is sculpted into enormous mobiles of rotary activity. Their reach for the epic is held back by specifics inherent to the subject. The visuals, for all their sweep and splendor, don't achieve either

the autonomy or the tragedy of *Championship Wrestling*, because the metaphor itself keeps identifying the work with the locale. In that respect alone, Herschel Garfein's score becomes intrusive and self-defeating. The text, performed by a quartet of singers, is taken from the gospel according to Proctor & Gamble, and inevitably is too literal for the epic. Four women writhing and wrestling with themselves to cries of "Give us back our Era!" become time-bound commentary.

Even worse, *Striptease* is hidebound in the most static sense. Each of the ensemble is given a maximized sexual stereotype to strut: a devil, a bride, a construction worker, a cowboy. Characteristically, the imagery in each case is wildly articulated. Donald Mouton's hard-hatted pile drive made a retractable tape measure stretched into a many-inch ellipsis disappear down his throat in one swallow, and Susan Hadley's less generic and more gynecological portrait had to be seen to be believed. But the parade aspect, however visually daring, is also structurally defeating. After that build-up, even a cowboy's penis is, at best, anticlimactic, and, at worst, frustrating. A tease gets nowhere. ■