

LEISURE & ARTS

Soap, Sex and Wrestling From Mark Morris

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New York

"Mythologies," the evening-length triptych by Mark Morris recently presented at the Grand Ballroom of the old Manhattan Opera House on West 34th Street, is subtitled, "Dances Based on the Essays of Roland Barthes." Initially intimidated by the very idea of semiotic choreography, I found Susan Sontag's contribution to the playbill, despite its brevity, reassuring, even bromidic. In the only opinion she ad-

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"Mythologies: Dances Based on the Essays of Roland Barthes"

vances, she concludes: "Roland Barthes would have liked Mark Morris' brilliantly American version of his 'Mythologies' very much." Andy Warhol could hardly have put it more soothingly. In the event, "Mythologies" made Ms. Sontag's assumption about Barthes seem eminently reasonable. It's difficult to imagine anyone, even a semiologist, who could fail to enjoy dances that combine observation and inventiveness so wittily.

Mark Morris, however, is less judgmental than Roland Barthes, to whose searching examination of mundane topics such as detergents, the striptease and championship wrestling the choreographer has turned for the nominal themes of "Mythologies." Barthes, a critic, is essentially an ironist, his purpose being to surprise us with the solemn truths that hide behind banal, everyday appearances. Mr. Morris, an observer, is essentially a celebrant. His methods are those of drama rather than analysis. For him, appearances are not the mask of truth but its actual face. While the Frenchman is aphoristic and laconic, the American is expansive—once or twice excessively so—lyrical, and often very funny.

In his essay, "Soap-Powders and Detergents," Barthes takes pains to get at the

general principles that underlie his subject ("Foam can be the sign of a certain spirituality, inasmuch as the spirit has the reputation of being able to make something out of nothing . . ."). In his piece of the same name, Mr. Morris shows not the slightest interest in the metaphysical significance of these matters, whether in reference to dirty laundry, suds, or the happy housewife. Clearly aware that dance is by nature a richly symbolic language, he simply uses his choreographic gifts to demonstrate his fascination with the rituals of cleanliness.

As is only fitting, much of Mr. Morris's imagery in this work is drawn from the world of television commercials. The music, especially written for "Soap-Powders and Detergents" by his close collaborator, Herschel Garfein, makes amusing—and, by implication, satirical—reference to the wonders of today's most frequently advertised cleansers. Meanwhile, the choreography offers a visualization of the processes involved in their use: soaking, agitation, rinsing, spin drying, tumbling. Clever and funny as these references are, they add up to something more than parody. What makes the piece worth watching is its integrity as dance, its formal coherence, the sense of beauty that informs the situational joke.

In "Soap-Powders," rhapsody is more important than satire. The most striking feature of the piece, which opens the triptych, is delight in movement. Deploying the huge sheets that represent the weekly wash, the dancers both extend their physical range and transform the nature of their environment. At times, they look as if they had grown wings, at others, as if they were gambling in the ocean. In one vivid sequence, they create a series of booths, whose flaps open up to reveal wildly different kinds of behavior—an ancient and funny vaudeville routine that becomes a vivid metaphor for the variety and unpredictability of human behavior.

In "Soap-Powders," Mr. Morris also refers to the heritage of modern dance, and in particular to those arty numbers made familiar by the votaries of Denishawn in the years after World War I, like Doris

Humphrey's "Soaring." In the latter, four virginal maidens wearing Mary Pickford curls frolic around while floating a large, diaphanous shawl above their heads, their primary aim being to exemplify feminine grace in its most spiritual guise. The contrast of this image with the rest of the work is at times amusing, at others moving. On the whole, however, its visionary beauty overwhelms the satire.

The image certainly lingers in the mind during the second part of the triple bill, "Striptease," in which four women and four men dramatize the sexual appetite. In "Striptease," each of the participants plays a role that answers to a specific erotic need: the shameless whore, the demure bride, the mysterious Oriental, the raunchy jock, the greaser, and so forth. The comedy these characters create as they leer at the audience, feel themselves up, lewdly waggle their tongues, or treat ordinary objects like penises, is both bitter and tender. These grotesquely pornographic gestures are amusing, but they also embarrass us as we recognize their power over us.

Our increasing sense of mortification derives from our increasing awareness of the strippers' humanness. In the early stages of "Striptease," they have the invulnerability of the dehumanized. As they take off more and more, they begin to lose their impregnability, and their hold over us grows progressively weaker. By the time the totally nude figures pick up their discarded clothing and amble off stage in silence, they have shamed us into pity. By the very nature of things, the titillation is self-exhausting, a performance that ends when there are no more promises to be made.

Performance is also the key to the final part of the triptych, "Championship Wrestling," but in this case performance that implies fulfillment. In the words of Barthes: ". . . the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him. . . ." These rituals of aggression Mark Morris choreographs with an unerring eye for gesture and pace. I can hardly wait to see what he will come up with next.