



Members of the Mark Morris Dance Group.

The very idea of Mark Morris dedicating a dance to Liberace forms a sort of apotheosis of camp.

DANCE

Pillow Talk

by Robert Sandla

Mark Morris Dance Group
Ted Shawn Theater
Jacob's Pillow
July 3

In 1933, when modern dance pioneer Ted Shawn began presenting performances at Jacob's Pillow, a farm and dance school he owned in Lee, Massachusetts, one of his aims was to promote dance as a distinctly masculine art. Shawn and his men dancers sought to shatter what they perceived as the stereotype of male dancers as effete and epicene, and instead create blunter, more vigorous, more accessibly "American" archetypes. Shawn and his Men Dancers were out to prove that dancing was something men can do without the least hint of androgyny.

Over the years, Jacob's Pillow has grown from an obscure experiment into a prodigiously active, internationally

recognized summer dance and music festival, one which still retains its rustic appeal. One measure of just how far Jacob's Pillow and sexual roles in dance have come was the Mark Morris Dance Group's recent appearance there. In *Deck of Cards* (made in 1983), the tall, broad-shouldered Morris portrayed a sneaky, lustful vixen, clad in shiny cocktail dress, two-tone pumps, and clouds of cigarette smoke. (His mouth was a cruel, scarlet gash.) At the July 3 performance of *My Party* (1984), a dance for four men and four women, Susan Hadley replaced Guillermo Resto with no loss to the dance's meaning. In *New Love Song Waltzes* (1982), to music of Brahms, some of which was used by George Balanchine in his seminal 1960 *Liebslieder Walzer*, five couples switch partners—and sexual roles—with a tender intensity. And not the least of Morris's comments on sexuality is the new *Strict Songs*, dedicated to the memory of Liberace.

Despite its frivolous title, *My Party* is as shrewdly schematic as a printed circuit board. Solo violin music by Jean Françaix accompanies four couples who move through clearly delineated exigencies of formal patterns and properties. Morris sets up problems and then goes on to solve them. One section works through the possible permutations for couples and an ensemble linked arm in arm. A later section presents the cast linked by hand, like so many cut-out paper dolls, led by a woman who beats out the meter like a kid playing at being a conductor.

The company plays with advance and retreat, skips and swings, and the crossing diagonals of square dancing. Morris sends the cast ricocheting off each other off the beat, and then pulls things together for a mock chorus line of unison high kicks, right smack square on the beat.

Morris is a sly showman. Having shown a piece of virtually academic craftsmanship which follows logical progressions and legible patterns, Morris gets low down. *Deck of Cards* starts out as a dance for a radio-operated toy truck, a miniature version of those enormous semis seen on various Interstate highways, carrying who knows what. In a drawling voice-over (music was by Jimmy Logson, George Jones, and T. Texas Tyler), a trucker relates the saga of his betrayal by a duplicitous woman while on the road. Meanwhile, that little white semi stops and starts, careens and swoops about in a parallel of the trucker's tale. It's very silly, but the truck gets—and deserves—a big hand on its final exit.

Morris slinks and prances about as the quintessential sleazy Southern she-devil with a Cass Elliot hairdo, the kind of white trash who gets all dressed up in a party dress but does not wear any underwear. Later, Donald Mouton appears in a solo as a soldier who recounts how his deck of cards approximates the Bible. Mouton mimes the incidents and religious attitudes a voice-over recounts, repeating the whole sequence with each additional card. Mouton's concentrated

activity is like zooming through a deck of cards in the dance equivalent of a rapid shuffle. *Dance of Cards* is not exactly major Morris, but its blithe disregard of gender and its densely organized moves for Mouton make it transcend gimmickry.

The very idea of Mark Morris dedicating a dance to Liberace forms a sort of apotheosis of camp. In *Strict Songs*, however, there's nary a flickering chandelier nor a glittering pinky ring in sight. Much like *Soap-Powders and Detergents* (presented by Morris and company in New York during the first week of May), *Strict Songs* bears a resemblance to the movement studies of Doris Humphrey, who was herself a student of Shawn and his frequent dance partner Ruth St. Denis. (Isn't it reassuring when these historical lineages work out neatly?) *Strict Songs* has a score by Lou Harrison, and was commissioned by the Seattle Men's Chorus (presumably they were heard on the recording). The dance is abstract, drifting, and mysterious. Much of the individual movement is based on the *chassé*, the forward and sideways slide/skip characteristic of ballet, so Morris's usually more solid dancers look lighter, more delicate.

Finally, the ten dancers suggest the ethereal, but in a determinedly realistic way (part of Morris's appeal is that he makes oxymorons work). Movement gradually ceases, and one by one, in sequence, dancers perch on the upturned legs of their partners, balancing and drifting gently three feet above the floor. Morris announces his effect, you watch the effect take place, and still it is magical.

Bijoux, a 1983 solo performed here by the luminous Teri Weksler, reveals the diversity within the individual, yet sedulously avoids the sappy "Many Moods of Love" tone of similar works. Dressed in salmon satin, Weksler moves alone to delicate, mildly dissonant music of Eric Satie. She proceeds through a series of choreographic and emotional miniatures, changing guise with quicksilver speed. Weksler moves from blithe skips to grand gestures to Isadora Duncan-like extravaganzas to balletic demureness to an enraged struggle up from the floor. The whole thing is kept from looking like a bunch of mildly psychotic bagatelles by Weksler's achieved individuality and Morris's clarity of organization.

It would be nice if one could say, all these years after the groundbreaking efforts of Shawn and others to establish dance as a masculine art, that there is now room for great diversity within iconographic images of masculinity. But that is still not the case in dance. Merely consider the articles and television stories showing that dancers are just plain old crotch-scratching guys like baseball players and related jocks. (Critic Arlene Croce once complained that New York City Ballet principal Christopher d'Amboise was so busy being the normal guy next door that he neglected his dancing; he acted as if "real men don't point their feet.")

Mark Morris is less concerned with establishing masculine or feminine archetypes *per se* than with issues of identity and sexuality. The witty range of possibilities Morris demonstrates on stage is both a deliberate political choice and a theatrical one: Crossed genders make provocative theater. The crude swaggers and sullen stares of women in *Championship Wrestling* (also performed in New York in May) are not the stereotyped aggression of butch lesbians; it is all ugly behavior, whether performed by men or women. When Morris gets gussied up in drag, or when his dancers shift from partner to partner in a restless amorous urge, regardless of gender, he gets at the essential humanity beyond gender.