

SECTION 2

Stepping Out

Mark Morris emerges as one of the most phenomenal choreographers of his generation.

BY ANGELA BARTOLONE

It was during the preflight coverage of the Tyson-Holmes match that I got this sinking feeling about writing on Mark Morris, whose dance company will perform as part of the Civic Center's "Arts on the Edge" series on Saturday, March 5.

It's fun, of course, and sometimes informative, to contemplate great talent like Tyson or Morris. Yet it is doing so that reveals the gap between commentary and subject. The preflight ritual with Tyson-Holmes was comforting, but never had so many words seemed so superfluous, so mockingly far from capturing anything important. So it is with Mark Morris.

The first time I saw the Mark Morris Dance Group was at the Prospect Park Bandshell in Brooklyn (a strikingly beautiful outdoor performance venue, and free besides). It was the summer of 1985; Morris' press had been amazing, and much had been made of the fact that he was based in Seattle.

The sun was going down behind "Songs That Tell a Story," a trio for three barefoot men in rolled-up blue jeans and denim workshirts that's set to the close country harmonies of the Louvain Brothers. My jaw was on the ground. The dance seemed to integrate the last 50 or so years of dance invention, but also seemed to have nothing to do with any of it. Our visual record of Isadora Duncan is limited, but I thought maybe Morris was coming right out of Isadora. (In the past year I've seen a bunch of Duncan reconstructions and now think Morris owes as much—or as little—to that style as to any other.) If there had been modern dance during the Renaissance, it might have looked like this. This was fresh in a major way.

Also on the program that night was a spoofy ballet duet for two women and "Lovey," a piece that falls into the Morris bag of outrageous camp creations, set to the music of the Violent Femmes. During "Lovey," the bandshell's sound system came unglued. The dancers carried on bravely. The audience was sympathetic. And I knew then that if I wanted to see the Mark Morris Dance Group's series at Dance Theater Workshop in December, I would have to make reservations a month in advance.

Many concerts and one workshop later, I can safely say that I've never looked at dance the same way since the first time I saw Morris' work.

THE FAST TRACK

Morris, like Mike Tyson, has carefully orchestrated his career. From 1980 to 1984, he limited himself to annual New York concerts and spent much of his time teaching and choreographing at the University of Washington in Seattle. The company began touring in 1984, and its New York performances grew in scale, moving from a Next Wave gig to two weeks of sold-out concerts at Dance Theater Workshop to the



Esquire feature article. There are Morris pieces in the repertoires of the Boston Ballet and the Joffrey Ballet, and Morris' piece for the "Dancing for Life" AIDS benefit last fall will enter the American Ballet Theater repertory this spring. Morris was the choreographer for "Nixon in China," the Peter Sellars opera that, some say, was the apotheosis of corporate art. Company manager Barry Alterman says that since 1980, Morris has created almost 60 pieces.

At any given point in the past few years, the dance world and beyond could have been Morris' oyster. And yet, at the very moment one expected to find him on the cover of *People*, he would seem to retreat. Early on, Morris noted that he was in it for the long haul, "not just one fabulous season." His sense of the difference, indeed of the chasm, between genuine artistic growth and the exigencies of the arts marketing industry may be the legacy of his years as a dancer with Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean, Eliot Feld and Hannah Kahn, companies that found themselves all the rage one year and bankrupt and homeless the next.

Thus it is no surprise that Morris will become the artistic director of Brussels' Monnaie Dance Company six months of the year. The opportunities represented by this arrangement, he sagely notes, simply don't exist in the United States.

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Morris (above) and his Dance Group: A voluptuous physicality.

Brooklyn Academy of Music opera house with live accompaniment by St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra.

Morris continued to teach in Seattle and participate in such modest events as the Prospect Park series, summer residencies at Jacob's Pillow and the benefit for the Foundation for Independent artists—the kind of traditional "young choreographer" assignments that suggested Morris might be merely the smartest kid on the block rather than the next Balanchine.

But there was no doubt that Morris was on the fast track, or what was left of it after various unsuitable

choreographers had been pushed into various unsuitable slots, out of desperation and by default. On paper it would be difficult to tell Mark Morris from his contemporaries Karole Armitage or Molissa Fenley—all three have gotten prestigious ballet commissions through the National Choreography Project, television coverage and sumptuous support from the Next Wave Festival.

Morris is probably the youngest choreographer ever to be featured on PBS' "Dance in America" series, and probably the only modern choreographer ever to warrant an

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III. She's Having a Baby (PG-13): Fri. 5:30, 7:30, 9:10; Sat. 1:10, 3:10, 5:10, 9:10; Sun. 1:10, 3:10, 5:10, 7:10, 9:10; Mon.-Thurs. 5:10, 7:10, 9:10
 IV. Vice Versa (R): Sat. 7:10 Sneak preview
Eastgate Cinemas—Hwy. 151 & I-90/94 (241-2099)
 I. Good Morning, Vietnam (R): Fri. 4:50, 7:10, 9:30; Sat., Sun. 12:10, 2:30, 4:50, 7:10, 9:30; Mon.-Thurs. 4:50, 7:10, 9:30
 II. Three Men and a Baby (PG-13): Fri. 5:10, 7:20,

Sat. 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, 9:30
 II. Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll: Fri. at midnight
 III. The Rocky Horror Picture Show (R): Sat. at midnight
 IV. Patti Rocks: Sun. 2, 3:50, 5:40, 7:30, 9:20; Mon.-Thurs. 7:30, 9:20
Middleton—2111 Parmenter (831-4124)
 Throw Momma from the Train (PG-13): Fri. 7:30, 9:40; Sat., Sun. 1, 3:10, 5:20, 7:30, 9:40; Mon.-

Stage Door—121 W. Johnson (257-6655)
 Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done: Fri. 5, 7, 9; Sat., Sun. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9; Mon.-Thurs. 5, 7, 9
Strand—16 E. Mifflin (255-5603)
 Moving (R): Fri. 5:30, 7:30, 9:30; Sat., Sun. 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, 9:30; Mon.-Thurs. 5:30, 7:30, 9:30

I. The Last Emperor (PG-13): Fri. 3:30, 6:30, 9:30; Sat., Sun. noon, 3:15, 6:30, 9:30; Mon.-Thurs. 5:15, 8:15
 II. Ironweed (R): Fri. 4, 7, 9:40; Sat., Sun. 1, 4, 7, 9:40; Mon.-Thurs. 5:30, 8:30
 III. Frantic (R): Fri. 5, 7:15, 9:30; Sat., Sun. 12:30, 2:45, 5, 7:15, 9:30; Mon.-Thurs. 5, 7:15, 9:30

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MORRIS

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HUMAN CURVES

A great deal of Morris' success is due to his audience popularity, and his popularity is due, I think, primarily to his musicality and voluptuous physicality.

Though the anti-audience trend in dance died years ago, much modern dance remained impenetrable to a general audience because of its uncertain structural marriage to difficult music and physical arbitrariness. Some choreographers have attacked the problem by beefing up the costumes and jazzing up the lights. Morris has always been restrained (though charming) in his production values, yet has been at the forefront of those who are reaffirming musical, dance and physical values.

Rhythmically, Morris is the most interesting choreographer working today. Music is his prime directive, as it was for Balanchine. Morris is one of the few choreographers I know whose work is equally inspired regardless of the type of music he chooses, and he works with all kinds—classical, contemporary, pop, ethnic and frequently vocal music in all these styles. I even like Morris' dances set to music that I ordinarily loathe (like German lieder and relentless Tahitian wailing, two examples of which are scheduled for the current tour—"New Love Song Waltzes" and "Not Goodbye").

Visually, Morris' steps and phrases seem to underscore the curves of the human form. Morris himself is a large, dramatic presence and a compelling performer. For the Madison program he was forced to schedule a new solo when two of his dancers were injured, and that's an exciting prospect. After his breakthrough solo at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1984, dance critic Arlene Croce wrote, "Who is this guy? After 'O Rangasayee,' I still wonder at Mark Morris' mystery. But that he is one of the world's marvelous dancers I have no doubt."

Though Morris' dancers are a variety of physical types, they are all able to

capture that quality of seeming to have leapt off the walls of the Sistine chapel. Several of them—most recently, Guillermo Resto and Teri Weksler—have received Bessie awards, the "Obies" of the dance world. (Morris himself has won for choreographic achievement.) They have always danced with generosity and daring, and last spring at the Manhattan Ballroom and last summer at Jacob's Pillow I thought I saw a dramatic animation and authority in them that went beyond correctness and into creative interpretation.

ONE CHARMING NIGHT

In addition to the new solo, the Madison program will provide a good cross section of Morris' work. "Marble Halls," a large ensemble piece set to Bach's Concerto for Two Harpsichords and Strings in C Minor, shows Morris in his Baroque mode, a strain of his work that has made use of Handel, Vivaldi and Pergolesi.

"One Charming Night" is a campy duet accompanied by a Purcell score. Also on the program are the new "Fugue and Fantasy in C Minor" to a Mozart two-piano score and "Strict Songs" with music by Lou Harrison.

The design of the tour program reminds me of Arlene Croce's comment on Morris' last New York concert: that if you liked piece A, you were almost certain not to like piece B, and that Morris had hardly created a safe success for himself. On the other hand, injuries and costume changes often shape programs as much as desire.

One thing that happens when confronting a phenomenon like Mike Tyson or Mark Morris is doubt or denial. You feel you can't trust your sense, your memory. Is he really special? Did I see what I saw? Did I feel what I think I felt? Oh, to be Arlene Croce, who invented a way of knowing for sure: "This mastery of mimetic implication in the logic of forms is a mark of wisdom as rare in choreography as musical mastery. No other choreographer under 30 has it; the few of those over 30 who have it have been great. Like musicality, it is a gift, and it appears right away." ■



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