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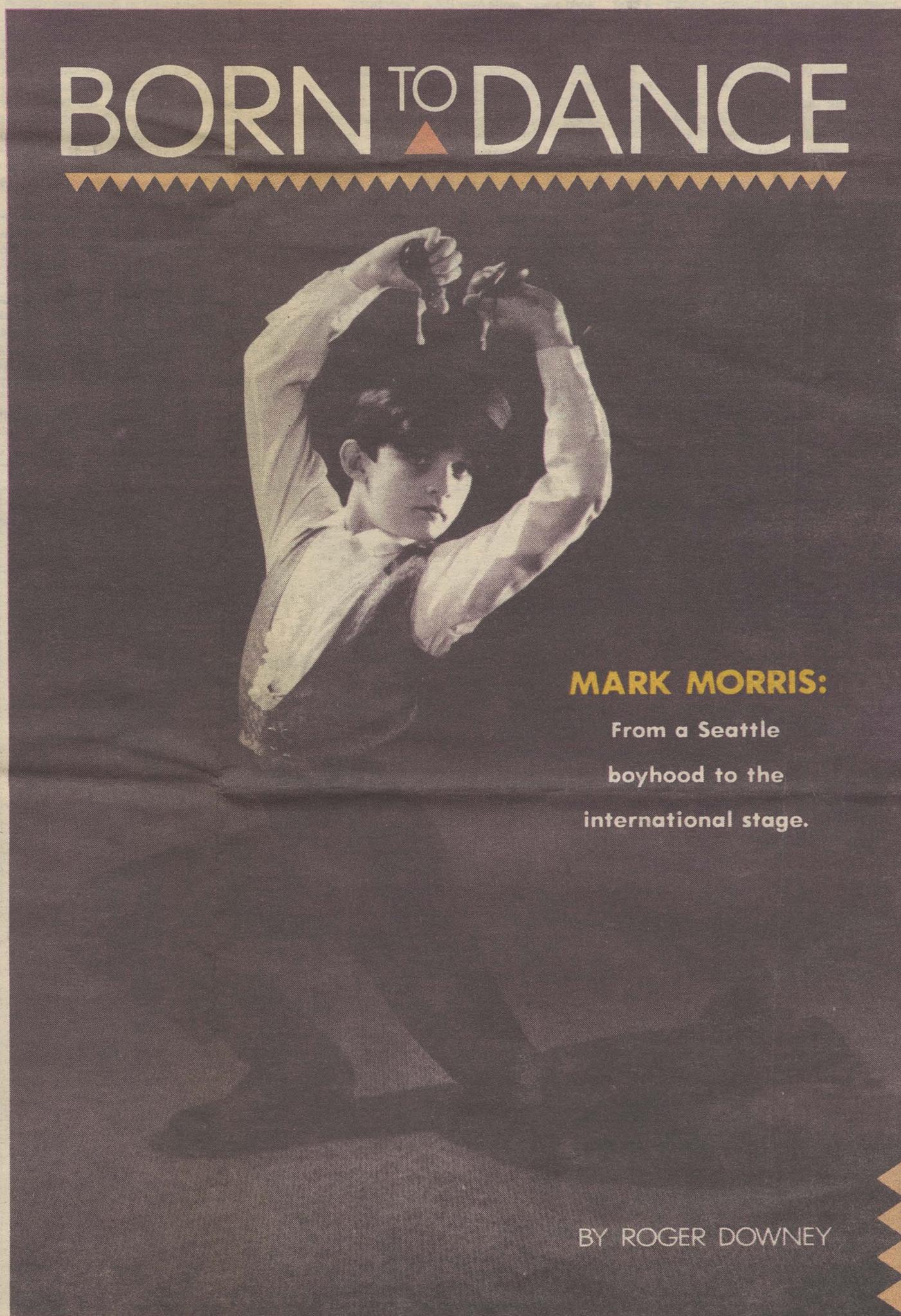
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BORN TO DANCE



MARK MORRIS:

From a Seattle boyhood to the international stage.

BY ROGER DOWNEY

LOOKING BACK AT MARK MORRIS

The choreographer's meteoric career has been boosted
by friends, family, teachers, colleagues:
but not by the town he grew up in.

The waiting room of Verla Flowers' Greenwood district dance studio is tiny. There's just enough room left over from office, dressing area, and classrooms for a sofa where parents can sit while their children are changing, and a stubby-legged, crayon-strewn table with chairs to match to anchor any younger sibs they may have in tow.

There's not much to look at but a wall covered chest-height up with framed pictures of dancers, 50 years' worth: teachers, colleagues, students, distinguished graduates, plus a few of Mrs. Flowers herself costumed for Spanish and peasant numbers.

Over near the office end of the studio, beneath a picture of Francesca Corkle, a Flowers student who went on to embody the perky American-classic style of the Joffrey Ballet in the late '60s and early '70s, Mrs. Flowers calls my attention to a picture of a healthy, perspiring man in late middle age, arms outstretched with an amplitude that would mark him a dancer even if the photo wasn't filled with other cues: a barre, an accompanist, a crowd of prepubescent girls seated behind the master watching the boys take their turn at the barre.

The middle-aged man is Asaf Messerer, a ballet master with the Bolshoi, conducting a children's class in preparation for a performance of the company warhorse *Ballet Academy*. But my attention is on another figure in the composition: a boy of 11 or 12, his back to the camera, his round mop of straight dark hair and childish profile sharply outlined against the studio window.

"The Bolshoi used to recruit the children for the piece in each town they danced in," Mrs. Flowers, standing behind me, says. "It was convenient for them and of course it was great publicity. But they didn't come to Seattle on that tour, so we had to take Mark down to Portland to try out. We didn't think twice about doing it; we were sure they'd take him. I can still remember his mother saying, 'Verla, we just *have* to keep him busy.'"

In the 20 years since that trip, Mark Morris has kept busy: in Seattle, in five years performing in New York and on the road with some of America's leading modern-dance companies, for the last eight years as a performer and choreographer with his own group of dancers. As recognition has broadened, the pace has increased: work for the Boston Ballet, a *Dance of the Seven Veils* for Seattle Opera's 1986 *Salome*, a nationally broadcast television special, dances for the Houston and New York productions of *Nixon in China*, pieces for the Joffrey and American Ballet Theater.

This week Morris makes his debut as stage director with Seattle Opera's *Fledermaus*. And in July, a month or two shy of his 32nd birthday, he and his company become the resident dance artists of the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels, home for more than 20 years of Maurice Bejart's Ballets of the 20th Century and one of the most prestigious venues for dance on the European continent.

After that, if past form is any indication, Seattle will pretty much have seen the last of Mark Morris. The Northwest has produced more than its share of notable dance artists; it's never had much luck or much interest in maintaining the connection.

Such indifference was natural enough back in pioneer days—which in these parts lasted until about 1961; it's harder to explain or accept now that the Northwest, or at least Morris' hometown, Seattle, considers itself a sophisticated, civilized center and a great place for the arts.

In a way it's hardly surprising that Morris is on his way out of town almost before the town realizes what it's losing: his career took shape so quickly that it's outpaced all but the most acute observers. It's not unusual these days for an artist to achieve celebrity while still very young; but Morris' celebrity, though ratified by established specialists in the field such as *Esquire*, *Connoisseur*, and *People* magazines, is of an unusual kind.

For one thing, it's not based upon one or two striking novelties which happened to catch the eye of the press or public, or on an idiosyncratic, easily recognized (and quickly exhausted) "style," but on a large body of work—more than

40 pieces created over more than 15 years—of breathtaking range and seriousness.

Most media-created reputations are inflated; Morris is, if anything, undervalued by the image-makers. Before anyone in the dance press had identified the Morris phenomenon, his concerts were must-see events in the dance community. Reversing the dictum that no man is a hero to his intimates, Morris' reputation as an artist is highest with those who know both dance and him best: with dancers (especially those who work with him regularly), with

other choreographers, with the most demanding critics.

Morris' striking personal appearance, swoony demeanor, and penchant for shocking utterance may enhance the visibility and salability of his work, but they make it easy to underestimate the rocklike solidity of the work he has already created. Dance is a notoriously evanescent art form, and many choreographers greatly admired in their day are now little more than names. Still, if Morris never made another work from this day onward, he already deserves inclusion among the major dance creators of the 20th century.

His inborn drive to dance was so great that he would probably have managed to fulfill it somehow no matter how many obstacles were thrown in his way. But that he has achieved so much so quickly is less a tribute to Morris' talent than to the perceptiveness and wisdom of those who encouraged it from the beginning.

First and foremost among those supporters was Morris' mother Maxine, who still lives in the house in Rainier Valley where Mark and his two sisters grew up. "I started dancing around like all little kids do and made people watch it," Morris recalled recently at a rehearsal break from *Fledermaus*. "I remember I loved watching Bobby and Sissy dance on *Lawrence Welk*. Of course dressing up was a large part of it; lots of fabric—sheets and stuff, towel turbans."

Morris was about six when the 1962 World's Fair changed his life forever, as it was to change, more subtly, the life of the city. "My mother went nutty at the Spanish pavilion and saw fabulous Spanish dancing that she insists that I saw too but I don't remember. But I do remember seeing the Jose Greco company when I was 8 or 9, and that was enough to get me to ask repeatedly if I could learn how to dance like



AT 11 OR 12 WITH A BOLSHOI MASTER: KEEPING HIM BUSY.

Courtesy of Verla Flowers



OLE: LIKE JOSE.

Courtesy of Verla Flowers

BY ROGER DOWNEY



Mike Urban

MORRIS AT A REHEARSAL FOR SEATTLE OPERA'S *FLEDERMAUS*: ROCK-SOLID WORK IN AN EVANESCENT ART FORM.

that. Then somehow my mother found Verla—miraculously.”

Mrs. Morris signed Mark up for a half-hour a week of tuition in Spanish dance. “Most children Mark’s age have very short attention spans,” Mrs. Flowers told me. “Particularly boys. You’re really fortunate if you can keep them focused on the work for 20 minutes at a time. At the end of our half hours Mark was still completely concentrated. And I was exhausted.”

Mark was soon assisting Mrs. Flowers, teaching other, less advanced students castanet technique. But concentrated as he was, Spanish dance alone didn’t satisfy him for long. He used to spend whole weekend days at the Seattle Center, taking part in informal Israeli folk dancing. Mrs. Flowers taught him a Russian number; soon he was “playing second mandolin and singing very badly with a balalaika orchestra so that I could come out later and do my dance.”

At 13 or so “I got mixed up with this Balkan dance group called Koleda, who were considered a very wild bunch indeed. They were all older than I was, some college age, and working with grown-ups affected my attitudes a lot.” About the same time he began creating his own dances; for the Seattle Youth Theater, where he first met Penny Hutchinson, today a dancer in his company, later for other Verla Flowers students in the school’s annual June recitals at the Seattle Center.

Early musical tastes, for pop classics like Saint-Saens’ *Danse macabre* and the *1812* overture, soon gave way to eclectic choices remarkably similar to those that have turned up behind Morris works since: Shostakovich (the same cello sonata that served for his 1984 dance *Vestige* for Spokane Ballet), American cult composer Harry Partch, the pounding Slavic rhythms of Bela Bartok.

Morris’ powerful response to music was probably encouraged by his father, a high-school teacher who regularly supplemented the family income by working part-time as a piano and organ salesman. He also was supportive of Mark’s dancing—though he jibbed momentarily when Mark announced that he wanted to study ballet with Mrs. Flowers as well as Spanish. “He had the same sort of prejudice that most American men had in those days,” Mrs. Flowers recalls. “I had to remind him that boys studying ballet didn’t dress up in tutus. And he never put any obstacle in Mark’s way.”

In Morris’ own mind, there was never the slightest question that dancing would be his career. “In junior high they gave us these career-aptitude tests, which were totally ridiculous: I always came out being a musician or an archeologist, because of course there was no such thing as a *career* in dancing. I just concentrated on graduating as soon as I could.”

At 17, his high-school degree achieved, Morris departed for a European vacation with two female friends, staying on in Madrid to study flamenco when they went home. But, as Morris told *Dancemagazine’s* John Gruen, “I saw that the flamenco scene in Spain had really become quite awful. . . . Anyway, the big decision was whether to become a flamenco dancer or another kind of dancer. Well, I didn’t become a flamenco dancer. . . .”

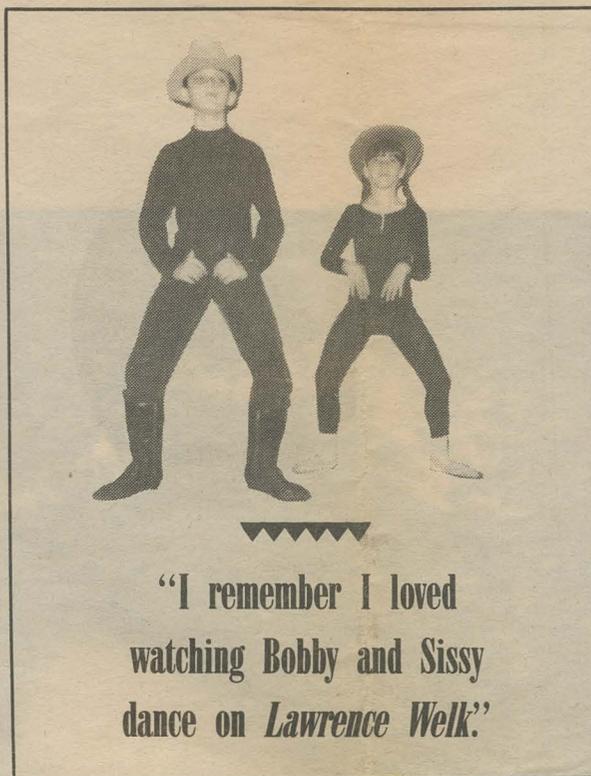
Without really knowing it, Morris had already become his own kind of dancer, forging a personal technique from sources as diverse as Spanish *jota*, Balkan dance, and the strict classic-ballet technique taught by the late Perry Brunson, with whom Morris studied summers during high school and for the year between his Spanish adventure and his departure for New York at the age of 19.

New York is a necessary baptism of fire for any ambitious dancer; Morris’ baptism was characteristically thorough. “I’d been in town for two weeks staying with friends when I tried out for Eliot Feld’s company, just for the experience. He took me, we rehearsed for a month, and we took off on a tour of Mexico, and Central and South America.”

Morris was rarely out of work thereafter: over the next five years he danced with Feld, Lar Lubovich, Twyla Tharp (very briefly), Hannah Kahn, and Laura Dean. When Dean abruptly dissolved her company in 1979, Morris returned to Lar Lubovich, but he’d already decided it was time to strike out on his own. With dancers he’d met and liked in various companies, he put together the Mark Morris Dance Group, which made its modest debut in a concert at Merce Cunningham’s studio in a program split between some of Morris’ teenage inventions and new work.

Response wasn’t overwhelming, but it convinced Morris to persevere. With a new company—very much the same group he still works with today—Morris began a series of annual appearances at David White’s Dance Theater Workshop which rapidly made him the underground crown prince of New York modern dance. The 1983 DTW concert brought Morris his first notice (unfavorable) from *The New York Times*. The Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Liechtenstein, always alert to the throbs of the arts telegraph, offered Morris and his company BAM’s drafty LePerq space for the academy’s 1984 “Next Wave” festival.

Arlene Croce, dance critic of *The New Yorker* and by far the most respected, feared, and powerful dance writer living today, wrote of that concert that Morris “is the clearest illustration we now have of the principle of succession and how it works in dance: each new master assimilates the past in all



“I remember I loved watching Bobby and Sissy dance on *Lawrence Welk*.”

its variety and becomes our guide to the future.”

Croce’s continued attention and praise helped carry Morris over the most treacherous stretch in any New York dance career: the morning-after stage in which yesterday’s adorers awaken, yawn, stretch, and start looking for tomorrow’s novelty. With Croce in his corner, even the trendiest of dance writers haven’t turned on Morris. Croce, indeed, is also Morris’ severest critic; in her December 1986 review of the Morris company’s record-breaking run at BAM, she put her finger squarely on “one of the few weaknesses in Morris’ command of choreographic technique, which is that once he has got hold of a structural device nothing on earth can make him let go.”

The Village Voice’s Deborah Jowitz, another mighty voice in the dance world, is less ecstatic about Morris now than she was four ago, but her cooling off is expressed more through confessed incomprehension of the general enthusiasm for Morris than in direct censure. Otherwise, the worst his work has suffered is the kind of benign neglect usually dished out to taken-for-granted old masters. (*The Voice* managed to put out a 16-page supplement on dance in New York last month and never mention his name.)

Ratification so absolute, and from so exalted a source, has derailed many a talent before now. It seems to have had no effect whatever on Morris. This is due less to his abundant natural self-confidence than to the conditions under which he works. All young choreographers perforce depend on their friends to play guinea pig to their first attempts at setting dances. Morris, to an almost unprecedented degree, continues to depend on and work with friends; people he’s known in some cases for ten years or more.

Today averaging in age around 30, Morris’ dancers have the bodies, faces, personalities of adults. Their individual distinctiveness forms an essential contrast to the razor-sharp formality of much of Morris’ choreography, and Morris knows and appreciates it. Light Morris works like the *Canonic 3/4 Studies* can be and have been danced by all kinds of companies; it’s hard to imagine anyone else dancing works like the three



SWOONY DEMEANOR: VERLA’S LITTLE FLOWER IN FULL BLOOM.

segments of *Mythologies*, hard to imagine even Morris asking dancers he doesn’t know intimately to perform them.

Subtitled “Dances based on the essays of Roland Barthes,” *Mythologies*, never seen in Seattle, begins with *Soap Powders and Detergents*, a mind-bending meeting of modern-dance socialist realism and Balanchinian emotive formalism in the manner of the master’s *Four Temperaments*, set to a cantata by Herschel Garfein with words courtesy of Procter & Gamble. The audience laughs at the first cooed “cleaner than clean” but they don’t laugh long, because *Soap Powders and Detergents* turns out to be a deadly serious dance about, of all things, longing for purity.

Part two of *Mythologies*, *Striptease*, also appeals to a knee-jerk response—in this case prurience—and then forces the emotions generated back upon us. Most disturbing and most complex of all, *Championship Wrestling* takes the gestural elements of its subject with a seriousness beyond straight-faced. There’s no easy mockery: *Championship Wrestling* is a dance about ritualized violence that somehow ends up being more disturbing than real violence, without in the least ceasing to be dance.

Most people who have spent time in close contact with Mark Morris’ work sooner or later have to cope with the dread word “genius.” For me it was a videotape of *Mythologies* that made it inescapable. What other term do you use for a work of art that opens doors into new realms of perception—work that gives gesture the power and logic of articulate thought—while remaining immovably rooted in the aesthetic language of the past?

Other observers have faced up to the G-word at different times, in different ways. For Erin Mattheissen, a dancer currently teaching in the UW Dance Department who has known and loved Morris and his work since before their days together in Laura Dean’s company, it was a Morris solo on one of the early DTW programs. “The company had just done *Gloria*, the first version, and it was huge, there were so many steps you couldn’t even figure out what was going on. It didn’t really work because you couldn’t see it. But then he did the solo *10 Suggestions* to music of Czerny: just him in silk pajamas, and a chair and a ribbon. . . . It was silly, it was heartbreaking, it was beautiful, beautiful in the way that no one dares to be: it was *absurdly* beautiful, you could laugh, or cry, either way, or both. Beautiful and ridiculous, but that’s where true beauty lies. And I thought: this guy, that I know, that I *think* I know really well, is, I don’t know if I said “genius,” but a great gift, like a really precious thing. Partly it’s my responsibility to guard that.

“But the moment of genius? It was when I saw the company rehearsing *Championship Wrestling* in New York a week or two before the BAM performance. I looked at it and I was terrified, I felt like—these dancers who were my best friends—I didn’t know who they were, I’d never seen these people before, they scared the shit out of me. I saw that dance and I *knew*, that was the piece.”

The manager of Morris’ company, Barry Alterman, had a similar experience that led to a similar commitment. “I met Mark because Tina Fehlandt and I were going together and Tina was in Mark’s company and Mark came round one day to see Tina’s new boyfriend. Now naturally, Tina used to drag me to all kinds of stuff, and usually I went “Uchh”; Dance Theater Workshop was me walking out and hanging out at the Donut Shop until the concert was over. But I loved Mark’s work, and soon he was one of my best friends.

“I wish you wouldn’t put the next part down because it’s embarrassing. One night some of us went up to Montreal to the Tangent Dance Festival where Mark was going to do a couple of pieces. It was a small room—tiny, maybe room for 75 people, I remember I sat on the windowsill over a radiator. And Mark did *Bijoux*, the solo he made for Teri Weksler, and that was nice, and then he did *O Rangasayee*, a 25-minute solo to East Indian vocal music. I’ve never had an experience like that in a theater. He finished and the whole place started screaming. It wasn’t even intermission at that point, there were a lot of other people on the program, but I couldn’t stay, I was totally shocked: a major full-blown work of genius and it was like a *friend* of mine who did it.”

Morris didn’t want to get involved in “the business.” In a 1986 *Dancemagazine* interview, he acknowledged that he never wanted a company so much as to “gather a group of friends and put on a show.” “But after a certain point you *have* to get involved in business,” says Alterman. “You can’t just show up at the Opera House Saturday night. So I stopped going to class at Neighborhood Playhouse and serving subpoenas and working as a private detective and became a company manager. There’s this whole obfuscation going on these days about arts management, like it’s something arcane and mysterious and you have to prepare for it for four years in grad school.”

Arts management may not be arcane, but Alterman has had plenty to occupy him since the fairy’s kiss descended upon Morris and company in December 1984 in the form of Croce’s review. The company was suddenly in demand, even while the national dance touring circuit was shrinking. The past two seasons the company topped 40 weeks of employment,

unheard-of totals for all but the most established dance companies, and enough for the dancers to begin living less like starving gypsies and more like ordinary productive citizens. Or, as company member Keith Sabado puts it, "to start getting credit cards sent us in the mail."

Satisfactory as that success was, there was something sad about it as well, because, beyond more of the same, there was little more to look forward to. Morris himself, if his luck held, might go on setting dances on his own and for other companies indefinitely, but short of a miracle there would be no new worlds to conquer.

The miracle came about through the intervention of an unlikely angel: the youthful stage and opera director Peter Sellars, a contemporary of Morris' and his collaborator on the Houston Opera premiere of *Nixon in China*. It was Sellars, visiting Brussels last spring with his production of Sophocles' *Ajax*, who recommended Morris to Gerard Mortier, director of Brussels' Theatre de la Monnaie, left dance-programless by the enraged departure of Maurice Bejart and company for putatively greener pastures in Lausanne, Switzerland.

On Sellars' say-so, Mortier caught the first convenient plane to Stuttgart, where the Morris company was appearing as part of the Festival of Nations, introduced himself, watched the show, and afterward summoned a jittery Alterman to an audience. "We met in this kind of bar affair at the theater, a big ugly concrete shed packed to the walls. As they led me up to him the crowd parted in front of us like the Red Sea. It was like being powered by radiant energy."

There were months of negotiation to follow, but Mortier more or less offered Alterman the Brussels job in that noisy, smoky Stuttgart theater bar. Plenty of American choreographers have worked and are working in Europe. Pacific Northwest Ballet's Kent Stowell and Francia Russell held down the fort in Frankfurt for a while (at a time when dance programs were under the direction of one Gerard Mortier), and William Forsythe runs their old company today. There's nothing unusual about American dancers working in Europe, either. What was unheard of was a European presenter buying an American ensemble lock, stock, and barrel: choreographer, repertory, dancers, manager, and all. Morris' dancers, not yet used to the shiny new plastic money in their pockets, were suddenly offered a chance to work under conditions of comfort and security enjoyed by no North American company, ballet, modern, or what have you.

The Morris company won't be spending all its time in Brussels. Like most cultural assets of European states, it will be sent out on loan from time to time to other countries, part of the ceaseless round of cultural one-upmanship that makes



**Morris' professional
departure from Seattle is
more bittersweet than bitter.**

Courtesy of Veria Flowers

Europe such a paradise for the dedicated arts consumer. The company will also have time to revisit the United States every year, both to perform and to replant their roots.

So joy would be unconfined among Seattle Morris fans were it not for one thing. He will surely return from time to time to Seattle to visit family and friends, but he's not likely to bring his company with him.

Although Morris moved back to Seattle from New York in December 1983 and has continued to live here in his ever-diminishing leisure time, although company members have traveled here (usually at their own expense) to present programs of Morris work, no roots were struck, no connections made. Apart from pieces set on Pacific Northwest Ballet's 1979 summer-school students, a variety of works employing UW student dancers and no longer in existence, and one piece for Seattle's defunct Kinetics Company, Morris set no pieces on resident companies. (I asked PNB's Kent Stowell why Morris had made no piece for his ensemble. "Because we never asked him," he responded simply.) When he's gone, New York, Los Angeles, and Boston, not to mention Spokane, will have liv-

ing souvenirs of his work: his hometown won't.

Could it have been any different? Perhaps not: the ever-accelerating upward curve of the Morris career has caught—repeatedly—caught everybody along it napping, including pilot and passengers. But the effective loss of yet another great native Northwest artist makes the question worth asking: is there any way we could have maintained a connection? Morris himself keeps politely mum. Manager Alterman is a little more forthcoming, pointing to weak attendance in Seattle concerts at a time when not a ticket was to be had for the same programs when they were offered in New York.

Morris' friend Erin Matthiessen, who leaves Seattle himself this summer to join the company for its European adventure, suggests another dissatisfaction, ultimately perhaps more disappointing and damaging than weak attendance: simple artistic incomprehension.

"I think Mark just wants to be taken seriously and appreciated here in the town where he grew up. And they just wouldn't do it: the dance audience, I mean. You know it's true, the second you do something the slightest bit unusual in Seattle on a stage the whole audience starts guffawing like it's the funniest thing they've ever seen. It's not just Mark, it's the same for anyone, Pat Graney or me or Long [Nguyen] or anybody. The dance crowd here is so desperately afraid that they won't get it that they don't wait to see what they're looking at before they laugh. You know, Seattle is responsible for a lot: Mark stopped doing overtly humorous dances because of the reaction that he was getting here. Not only that, but it made him adamant about rubbing people's noses in the seriousness of what he was doing, like 'There are no jokes in this dance.' I mean, if you think about *Lovey*, with all the nasty stuff with dolls, or *Marble Halls*. . . . Mark actually has said he did *Lovey* in reaction to Seattle being so goody-goody. But the point is, Seattle didn't know that, that all the jokes were gone; they kept acting like they were still there, right up to the bitter end."

Morris' professional departure from Seattle is more bitter-sweet than bitter, but pretty final just the same: the Northwest cultural scene has changed a lot since Merce Cunningham, Robert Joffrey, Trisha Brown left the area for good, but it hasn't changed enough to maintain contact with an artist like Morris, who's all but laid his heart on Seattle's doorstep.

Will it be any different in the future? Ten years from now, will Northwest names like Pat Graney, Robert Davidson, Lori Wilson just becoming known on the national scene be long gone from town? Is there, even today, some kid standing at a barre in a storefront dance studio in Tacoma or Bellingham or Centralia who's going to have to conquer the world in order to be recognized, too late, back home? ■

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