

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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Direct an opera? Irrepressible choreographer's taking the leap

By Patrick Stults
Special to the P-I

Mark Morris lives up to his reputation for being bombastic. He bounds into a room, his long curly hair all aflop. He cracks insults and jokes with the non-chalance of a teen-ager cracking gum. Outspoken and erudite, he volunteers unsolicited opinions, peppered with expletives and contemporary vernacular.

"Mozart at the Met? What a joke," he says.

He races through his bounty of words, fidgeting and gesturing, feigning emotions for effect, making the most of each moment.

"Yeah, I say what I think. So what?" he says indifferently. "What's going to happen to me? Nothing so far."

Of course, much has happened to Morris, as a result of, or in spite of, his confident defiance and flamboyant manner on and off stage. Since his start some eight years ago as a choreographer, he and his company, the Mark Morris Dance Group, have become celebrities in the world of modern dance.

Now Morris, whose fame has spread from dance columns to Time, People and Newsweek, wants to make his mark on the world of opera.

Morris has been in and out of the Seattle Opera House door almost as much as any singer the past few years. He made his opera debut choreographing Salome's notorious dance, "Dance of the Seven Veils" in Richard Strauss' "Salome" two years ago. In January, he returned with his company to choreograph and perform in Seattle Opera's new production of the French version of Gluck's "Orpheus and Eurydice".

Tomorrow night at the Opera House, he makes his debut as stage director of Johann Strauss' "Die Fledermaus."

It's a big leap for the 31-year-old choreographer. But Morris says he is "as qualified as a lot of creeps out there directing opera."

"I guess Speight (Jenkins, general director of Seattle Opera) could be putting out his directorial neck with this, but I don't think so," Morris says. "It's all going OK."

Morris, a Seattle native who divides his time between his hometown and New York when he's not off on a project in Europe, has strong credentials in the world of dance.

A recipient of numerous awards and grants, he has worked with major American companies, first as a dancer (Eliot Feld, Twyla Tharp, Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean) and later as a choreographer (American Ballet Theater and Joffrey Ballet). In 1978, he contributed a dance to Pacific Northwest Ballet as a part of its Summer Invention Series, a series devoted to young choreographers.

This fall Morris and his



KURT SMITH, P-I

Mark Morris: "There is a lot of drinking and cheap physical humor in 'Die Fledermaus,' and I use it, exploit it for what it's worth."

Preview

Seattle Opera's production of "Die Fledermaus" opens tomorrow night at 7:30 in the Opera House. Principals include Beverly Morgan, Kathryn Gamberoni, Emily Golden, Dale Duesing, Erich Parce, Joseph Wolverton and John Del Carlo. Hermann Michael is conductor; Mark Morris is stage director. Through May 14. The first five performances are sold out, tickets still available for May 18. Tickets \$17-\$48 at 443-4711.

company become the resident dance company of the Monnaie Theater in Brussels, a position vacated when Maurice Bejart and his Ballet of the 20th Century left Brussels for Lausanne, Switzerland. In 1990, Morris will choreograph a work for Paris Opera Ballet.

Morris views a good share of the dance world as dismal. "I hate so much of what I see. My work is quasi-reactionary I guess, so I make up something I want to see."

"Fledermaus," in Morris' eye, is a step in that direction. He loves "shows."

One such production was Houston Grand Opera's world premiere last fall of "Nixon in China," by John Adams. Morris choreographed the dance sequences. Stage director was another wunderkind, Peter Sellars, someone Morris admires and considers eminently musical.

Morris also admires the work of the late Charles Ludlum, who staged the same Zack Brown production of "Fledermaus" being used here for Santa Fe Opera. That production was first done in Houston.

Morris believes the skills of a good choreographer and stage director are related. Therefore a good choreographer should be able to stage an opera.

"I can," he exclaims.

However, Morris admits he doesn't know everything and asks for help when he needs it — from "a really great bunch of singers"; "a fabulous assistant Roslyn Bis-kin, who keeps track of those thousands of champagne glasses and doors"; and "Hearmahn. (Morris drags out the name of German conductor Hermann Michael.) He's a doll! We're so kinesthetically correct together."

Can one expect the unexpected in Morris' "Fledermaus"?

"I don't know what the audience is expecting so how can I do the unexpected? Sure, I like passion but that doesn't mean copulation on stage. What you've decided to see, it either happens for you or it doesn't."

"There is a lot of drinking and cheap physical humor in 'Fledermaus,' and I use it, exploit it for what it's worth."

"I don't have to add anything really. All that high-brow stuff, the language, we've cut it. (The Viennese operetta will be performed in English with super-titles.) It was boring and didn't do anything to advance the drama. I think it's clearer. I'm not doing it in Vietnam or anything like that."

"I'm trying to allow the music to happen, to make sense of what is obvious in the score."

His favorite practice at the moment is to start a scene, build it up to the grand entrance with the pianist pounding, the conductor flailing, and just when the singers take a big breath, yell, "Wait, wait. Stop. I've got another idea."

Morris beams, "It's so much fun. I love it, I just love it."