

SECTION 2

Covering the Arts In and Around Brownstone Brooklyn

Invitation to the Dance

The World is a Stage for a Brooklyn Dancer as Her Company Gets Set to Head Abroad

BY GREGORY CERIO

Sitting on the sunny, breeze-swept roof of her Carroll Gardens apartment building with the towers of the Financial District across the harbor as backdrop, Susan Hadley, hostess, is the picture of relaxation: crossed legs, arched eyebrow, grin and barking laugh.

Her work reveals a different person, Susan Hadley, dancer, is a study in concentration and control.

Rehearsing with the Mark Morris Dance Group for its performances coming next week at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, her eyes narrow and her forehead furrows as she works to tame motion with precision, to make difficult, much-practiced moves seem effortless and liquid.

This change in personality says as much about dance as it does about Hadley.

Dance is about change, imposing order on the random kicks and twitches of casual human movement. It is an art that can turn a hand into a butterfly, legs into rippling stalks of wheat, or a crowd of strangers into clowning lovers. Change is also integral to dance as whole, which, like the proverbial shark, must keep moving or die. With his daring and witty style, and accomplished, individualistic dancers such as Hadley in his company, Mark Morris has moved to the forefront of innovative American dance.

His pick-up company packing the small house at the Dance Theater Workshop with every performance, Morris became a sensation among the dance cognoscenti after his appearance in BAM's 1984 Next Wave Festival. His solo performance in "O Rangasayee"—a piece set to Indian music, with Morris clad in a loincloth and with red-painted hands—sealed his reputation for surprising boldness. After an acclaimed run at the 1986 Next Wave series, featuring works as diverse as "Pieces en Concert," a comic pas-de-trois with Hadley and Rob Besserer, and the solemn, religious "Stabat Mater," Arlene Croce, dance critic for The New Yorker, hailed him as "Choreographer of the Year."

RESIDENCE IN BRUSSELS

Such is the continuing regard for the Mark Morris Dance Group that in August they will leave the United States to take up residence as the official dance company of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels.

Though Morris initially resisted forming a permanent company—a commitment that carries any number of thankless responsibilities—his notoriety has grown to such a point that, as Hadley explains, "booking the group is often just a matter of answering the phone." Morris is now seen as the heir-apparent to the leadership of American dance, breathing life into an artistic body that many feel has grown flabby and tired since the groundbreaking heyday of Martha Graham, Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham.

What arrests audiences is Morris's disdain for complacency and convention, his willingness to take risks that fly in the face of conventional formulae.

DEDICATED TO LIBERACE'S MEMORY

His dances are witty in the senses of both humor and sharpness, and lyrical without being maudlin. The music Morris sets his work to, many times as the jumping-off



The Mark Morris Dance Company's Susan Hadley on her Carroll Gardens rooftop. (Phoenix/Sullivan Photo)

point in the design of a given piece, is diverse and idiosyncratic—ranging from Brahms to, say, The Fleshtones. "Strict Songs," which will receive its New York premiere at the upcoming BAM engagement, typifies Morris' eclectic musical choices. Dedicated to the memory of Liberace, it features songs based on Hopi Indian chants with music by Lou Harrison, performed by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus.

Even the Mark Morris dancer has a special look, which is to say, no special look at all. Unlike the sylph-like creatures of classical ballet or the ascetic dancers of the Karole Armitage group, Morris's company are real people. They aren't stamped out of a mold, aren't all the same size and shape, don't have perfect bodies. An audience ends up identifying with persons who look the same as they do (though perhaps mystified

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as to how such similar bodies can be as graceful as a falling feather). The Morris dancer is a strong individual, strong both physically and in character.

DIVERSE GROUP OF PEOPLE

"You couldn't pick a more diverse group of people. Twelve different movement styles, 12 different approaches to choreography, 12 different ways of being on stage," says

Hadley, herself refreshingly zaftig.

A member of the Morris company, Hadley suggests, sees the creative process as an ongoing thing, watching "a choreographer developing his own vocabulary of dance out of his imagination." Though modestly admitting to feeling "fortunate to work with so many great dancers" in the Morris group, Hadley is widely praised as a standout talent.

Working in conjunction with her husband, composer Bradley Sowash, Hadley is also acknowledged as a fine choreographer. Together, the pair creates works that Hadley described as both "dramatic" and "political." They start with a theme—sometimes ideological, sometimes concerned with human relations—and then construct music and movements designed to draw the theme out.

WANT TO TOUCH PEOPLE

"Our work reflects our concerns as people living in this country now," says Hadley. Her hope is that their work can "influence people's life choices" because "the choices you make about your personal life are political." But in all her work, Hadley says, "I want to touch people. I want them to come away moved and . . . pondering."

After taking her Master's degree in dance at Ohio State and a lengthy stint with the Senta Driver Company, Hadley joined Morris in 1985, just as the choreographer was forming a permanent company and his fame was spreading. Hadley credits their good name for the relative ease with which the group operates.

"You never make much money," she says, "but you do get a lot of opportunities, which is what all dancers are looking for. You want to be on stage."

Hadley also considers the company all the more fortunate since the onset of the Reagan Administration's budget cuts for the National Endowment for the Humanities:

"A lot of people have suffered over the last five years. And we answer the phone and have our year booked."

Like many other artists, Hadley decries the government's seeming indifference to the arts and the coolie-scale wages most artists are paid. The percentage of the Gross National Product we spend on the arts is embarrassing," she says. "And there are people with advanced degrees working in the arts just barely above the poverty level."

SUPPORT FOR 60 PERFORMANCES

Indeed, much of the attraction of Brussels is the extraordinary amount of support the Morris group will receive. Under a reported three-year contract, all that is required of the group is that they hold 60 performances. Because the company will not live and die by the size of the box office receipts, Morris will have complete say over what his group will perform, may hire as many dancers as he likes, and will have three theaters of different shapes and sizes to choose from. The Belgian government will pick up the tab.

"The amount of support that they are not simply willing to give us, but assume we need, is so much higher monetarily and in many other ways than you could even dream of in the US," says Hadley. "And



Susan Hadley (left) in performance with Mark Morris and Rob Besserer in Morris's "Pieces en Concert" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

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