

Mark Morris: Young Choreographer Poised to Soar



Martha Swope

Mr. Morris, at right, rehearsing company members in his new "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano"

By WILLIAM HARRIS

MARK MORRIS STANDS behind Gladys Celeste, one of American Ballet Theater's rehearsal pianists, following the score as she begins playing. Twelve years earlier, he had turned pages for her during an Eliot Feld performance. Mr. Morris beats out the rhythm with one hand, a can of beer in the other. "Do you hear that?" the choreographer playfully shouts out to the dancers. "That's where you make your first entrance." Actually, no one has been able to distinguish one moment in the music from the next. This particular section of Virgil Thompson's piano études is both atonal and relentlessly repetitious.

The overture to Mr. Morris's new

ballet "Drink to Me With Thine Eyes" is a trick calculated to unnerve audiences with expectations that are never fulfilled, since the rest of the music is quite melodic. Theatergoers should also not expect any virtuosic solos from any of the 12 cast members, who include Mikhail Baryshnikov, Leslie Brown and Martine Van Hamel. This is an ensemble piece.

In a field crowded with aspiring choreographers, Mark Morris at 31 has made it. He rarely stops working. His Ballet Theater work, an unfinished version of which was performed at the "Dancing for Life" AIDS benefit last fall, will have its premiere on May 31. His own 12-member company, the Mark Morris Dance Group, is appearing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music for seven performances beginning this Tuesday. They will dance five pieces,

including three not seen in New York before, performing in conjunction with the Orchestra of St. Luke's and the New York City Gay Men's Chorus. Meanwhile, Mr. Morris's production of "Die Fledermaus" for the Seattle Opera is just finishing its run.

To date, Mr. Morris has choreographed more than 50 dances, and while they contain some recurring thematic concerns, there is no identifiable Morris style. "The Death of Socrates," a 1983 group piece for six men, is made up of slow, dignified, formal movements. There are no jumps or contact between dancers. By contrast, the 1984 "Championship Wrestling," a piece for five men and five women, is full of broad, cartoonish physicality: lifts, collisions, crashes to the floor. The fleeting steps in "Stabat Mater," a group work for 12 that was choreographed in 1986, are much more ritualistic. Curiously, this latter dance divided the New York critics, who have been almost unanimous in their praise of Mr. Morris since his first concert eight years ago.

Much has been speculated about Mr. Morris since his company initially performed at the Cunningham Studio back in 1980. This personable, articulate man and his complex dances that look so simple to perform are continually being acclaimed and dissected: his prolific output, his imaginative approach to movement, his feel for rhythm, his sly sense of humor on stage and off, his open homosexuality, his biting opinions of the dance world. Critics have even written about the clothes he wears at curtain calls, as if analyzing his funky wardrobe might provide some insight into his choreographic gift.

What makes Mr. Morris stand out is his interest in classical dance

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His trademarks include sharp opinions and a sense of humor.

values, like structure, narrative and the alignment of music and dance. He is the only choreographer his age to have embraced music so fully, and one of the few who can easily call upon a wide range of techniques. Now, Mr. Morris is expanding his artistic parameters. He's increasingly interested in directing opera, and more importantly, he's relocating his entire company to Brussels, replacing Maurice Béjart as the resident dance troupe at the Theatre Royale de la Monnaie, Belgium's national opera house.

"My reputation as zany or unpredictable or the enfant terrible seems to imply that I'm not serious about what I'm doing, which is too bad," says Mr. Morris, whose ferocious commitment to dance is tempered by light mockery, directed at the world at large as well as himself.

Mr. Morris began studying flamenco in Seattle at age 9, added ballet by 11 and started choreographing student recitals and children's musicals two years later. At the same time, he was dancing professionally with the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble, performing East European folk dances. One of the dances he choreographed as a teen-ager showed up in his first New York concert.

Mr. Morris moved to New York in 1976. Two weeks later, he landed a job with the Eliot Feld Ballet. He left the Feld troupe to work with Lar Lubovitch, moved on to Hannah Kahn, danced as a freelancer for a while, joined Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians, then back to the Lubovitch troupe for a few months, filling in for an injured colleague.

"My attention span didn't go more than a year and a half with anybody," says Mr. Morris, who consciously pursued those choreographers whose movement styles intrigued him. Once having felt he had mastered a style, he would move on. "It's stunning to me," he continues, "that a lot of my

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dancers have been with me for eight years now."

The eclectic performing background of the solid, squarely built choreographer is evident in his work. But what really shapes his dances is music, all sorts of it. During the course of the engagement at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, for instance, the troupe will dance to Mozart, Poulenc, Brahms, Purcell and choral songs composed by Lou Harrison, derived from Hopi Indian chants.

The music is where the choreographic process begins. "I start with sound, records or tapes," explains Mr. Morris, "then I get the score. For some reason, I am attracted to music that's out of print. It's never enough information to just choreograph the sound for me. Looking at a page, you can see the mathematical logic of the piece. When listening, you can't hear every part."



By the time Mr. Morris enters the studio, he has usually conceptualized a dance's basic geometry and traffic patterns, but has made up few steps. That he does in front of the company, dancing solo, which the dancers are then expected to learn. The troupe never improvises. The one time Mr. Morris didn't teach the dance was when he broke his foot in late 1986. What resulted was "Strict Songs," a dance all on one leg, which will be seen at the Brooklyn Academy.

"My tendency is to work very closely rhythmically and phrase shapes from the music," says Mr. Morris. "As a dancer, I don't ever feel I'm listening, because I know the music. It's more like I'm singing. One thing that ties my company together is their ability to hear music how I hear it."

That hasn't been true when working with the Ballet Theater company, a fact that has made the process challenging for both the choreographer and the performers. "I'm doing ballet," says Mr. Morris, "but my rhythms are different. The music is tricky, and it's aerobically quite hard. Everybody does a lot of stuff, everything is petite allegro, and there's a lot of pointe action. If you go to the ballet, you want to see those pink shoes. At least I do."

Mikhail Baryshnikov himself has been delighted by the association. "Mark is an outrageous talent," says Mr. Baryshnikov, who is Ballet Theater's artistic director, "full of energy and enthusiasm. The range of his choreography is astonishing. He reads a score like a musician; he knows every note and where each one belongs on a dancer's body."

Talk to Speight Jenkins, director of the Seattle Opera, and you hear similar enthusiasm for Mr. Morris's talent. Mr. Jenkins took a chance by asking Mr. Morris to direct an opera for the first time, but then again, he had already worked with Mr. Morris twice before, on "Salome" and "Orpheus and Eurydice."

"I had watched him direct singers about how to move, and he was very good," explains Mr. Jenkins of his decision. "With 'Fledermaus,' you need someone with a good sense of humor and enormous musicality. I have known few people in my life who are so inherently musical as Mark."

Mr. Morris expects to work in opera more, especially after his experience choreographing "Nixon in China" for the director Peter Sellars. That may have to wait for a while. It was actually Mr. Sellars who recommended Mr. Morris to Gerard Mortier, the director of La Monnaie. Mr. Mortier flew to Stuttgart, Germany, where the Morris troupe was performing, and essentially offered him a job on the spot.

The offer is enviable. Mr. Morris, who has been given a three-year contract, is being asked to create a 20-member resident dance company with a \$1.5 million annual budget. That sum doesn't include all the extras: Mr. Morris will have access to eight studios, three theaters, a scene and costume shop, a rehearsal accompanist and, best of all, a full orchestra. He is taking along 13 veterans of his company, which is being renamed Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris, as well as his managing director and general manager.

"Mortier and I talked about art and the position I was being offered for eight hours," recalls Mr. Morris. "I thought immediately it was what I wanted to do, then I got really scared. It's a gigantic life change for everybody. I expect to be really depressed for the first month or so.

"But what would I do here?" he asked rhetorically. "The same thing I do and more of it. As role models go, I have Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor for company longevity and perseverance and continued good artistry. But now, I won't have to do this exhausting one-night-stand sort of touring. We'll be respected, have ample rehearsal time and be treated well. My dancers will be paid year-round and get health insurance."

Mr. Morris's opening night in Brussels is scheduled for Nov. 23. He is creating a dance set to Handel's "Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato." But he won't speculate too far into the future after that.

"I can only look at a piece after it's happened," he said. "I try not to change my old dances too much, because that's what I made up then and now I'm making up what I do now. Although my dances don't suit everyone's tastes, maybe not even as much as they used to, they're more like what I want to make up right now. I'm sure those things will change." □