

Mark Morris Group Asserts its Dance Mastery

BY VICTOR VALENTINE

By the time you read this, the Mark Morris dance Group will have begun a circuitous trek from Brooklyn to Belgium, where it will take up residence this fall at the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. If you're a dance fan who did not attend the recent showing of Mark Morris' work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Opera House, May 17-22, call Sabena Airlines for a roundtrip ticket today.

In an exciting and well-balanced program featuring eleven dancers, the Orchestra of St. Luke's, the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, various vocalists, and Morris, the choreographer reasserts himself as a masterful and inventive dance artist.

"New Love Songs Waltzes," set to Neue Liebeslieder Walzer, op. 65 by Brahms, opens with a silent, swaying incantation performed alone, centerstage, by Ruth Davidson. The solemn tone is quickly and irreverently broken when her autistic ritual gives way to cartwheels that summon the company onstage.

What follows is a dawn-to-dusk look into a Morris microcosm: some unearthly place whose inhabitants seem Egyptian at one moment, satyrs and nymphs of an idyllic tale in another, and in the next, simpliminded Venetian masquers revelling in a faded century.

Performed gloriously and hauntingly by vocalists Lorraine Hunt, Marcia Hunt, Jeffery Thomas and Joseph McKee, with piano accompaniment by Robert Wolinsky and David Oei, the Brahms melodies provide Morris a sinister opportunity to parody classical ballet with amusing lifts in which the "lifers" have a rigid, love-doll sort of posture.

The overview of "New Love Song Waltzes" proves Morris a graphic traffic cop: the full company traces pleasing and complicated explorations of the space a la "Busby Berkeley Gone Berserk." Oh, for an overhead camera.

"Fugue and Fantasy" is a premiere piece in which the two parts seem to share in common element of agitated waiting. Mozart's Fugue in C minor underscores Tina Fehlandt, David Landis, Kraig-Patterson, and Teri Weksler—four dancers who could well be waiting at a bus stop at the corner of St. Vitus and Fidget. Popping up and down in a series of brilliantly constructed movement ostinatos, the seated dancers ferishly beat the floor, and "Fugue" is contrapuntally developed into a fascinating, interlocking machine.

"Fantasy" explores a different kind of waiting, to Mozart's Fantasia in c minor for

piano. Ruth Davidson, Susan Hadley, Jon Messinger, Donald Mouton and Keith Sabado appear far upstage right as reluctant, ragamuffin lemmings who band together to face "whatever is Out There."

Their wait is one of childish fear, occasional singular bravery, but mostly, one of group paralysis: the collective inability to work as a cohesive unit to kick the Giant in the shins. Structurally, this is an interesting piece due to the strong plotting of movement on the diagonal spine. It incorporates some very unusual lifts, and a reoccurring mien of kneeling with hand to the throat as if to say, "Uh-oh, maybe we've gone too far. Careful."

The second premiere work of the evening is "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano," performed to the Poulenc music of the same name, and featuring William Blount on the clarinet, with Michael Feldman conducting throughout the program.

COMICALLY UNDERMINED

The curtain rises to reveal a bumblebee yellow-clad Mark Morris dramatically surrounded by his red-legged company members. In that moment, Morris has the epic stature of a Grand Kabuki hero. But, he is comically undermined as the freeze breaks, and he is carried directly into the wings as the dance begins.

The red people frolic but, momentarily, Morris returns. Conspicuous in his presence, he glides sensuously through the denizens of this scarlet place. He seems to be carrying the sadness of a deposed ruler

with the detachment of a visiting firefly. The dancers pick up bits of his idiosyncratic movements, which include gyroscopic turns, and elegant, backwards somersaults (yes, really.)

This "Sonata" contains more Morris humor, a very impressive ensemble dance section of rhythmic and athletic prowess, and of course, Morris himself, who is not your run-of-the-mill dancer type. Stocky,

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with long, curly black hair, he performs with a sense of purpose that vanquishes any fears of this being merely a vanity production.

In his next piece, "One Charming Night," Morris exhibits a virtuoso flair for character work as his red-eyed, funereal personage skulks on to the scene in a black suit. A simple country girl (Teri Weksler) has been cautiously exercising her maidenhood while sticking close to home. The Victorian gives way to the Gothic, aided by four songs of Henry Purcell, interpreted beautifully on harpsichord by Robert Wolinsky, and by countertenor, Drew Minter.

A vampire is amongst us. The chase ensues as the Unholy unsuccessfully springs his ruses, much in the "Curses, foiled again" manner.

Finally dazzling her with a bravura of quirky footwork, he punctures the virgin's bare neck and contorts in orgasmic glee.

Suddenly, in a twist out of the Anne Rice vampire novels, the maiden's lifeless body rises to drink blood from the slashed wrist of her assailant. She, too, shall live forever, and she climbs to the shoulders of her prince of darkness to assimilate europic fight into the night. Weksler is superb in her portrayal of reluctant transformation.

"Strict Songs" is the third premier of the evening. Dedicated to memory of Liberace, the piece is set to music by Lou Harrison based on Hopi Indian chants. Sung dramatically by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, under the able direction of Gary Miller, "Strict Songs" is a more traditional concert piece which is rife with possibilities for socio-political interpretation.

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A striking but formidable image concludes the work leaving all concerned in the misty regions of surreal: dancers suspended horizontally on their supine partners' extended legs, gently waving in the breeze, held in uncertain abeyance.