



DANCE



Mark Morris' Heavenly Profanity

INDULGENCES OF THE FLESH

by Laura A. Jacobs

MARK MORRIS DANCE COMPANY. Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Premiered in 1982 at Dance Theater Workshop, Mark Morris' *New Love Song Waltzes* was a wildly precocious statement of presence—a "c'est moi!" to the dance world. Most dancegoers were already familiar with the "old" waltzes, George Balanchine's alchemic *Liebeslieder Walzer*, choreographed in

1960 to the same Brahms cycle, Op. 65, as well as its companion cycle, *Liebeslieder*, Op. 52. Morris couldn't have set up a more forbidding comparison—and did he know this title tweaked the master, who himself preferred plain titles but at least left them in the right language? Everything about Morris' dance was plainer: the dancers, the Isadora-ish way of moving, the minimal production values. And everywhere it was extraordinary—as seriously musical, in its way, as Balanchine's work.

Morris' recent BAM program led off with *NLSW*, and though it loses scale and some virility on a larger stage, the dance is as astonishing as ever—in naturalness, in sheer poesy, I'm not sure Morris has surpassed it. Where Balanchine's ballet is taut and intensely focused, a spinning out of fantasy's fine excess, Morris' work is billowy, earthbound, lusty. Midsummer dreams blow through, agitating the dancers, sending them on nightly excursions, felling them into strange arms. No one is idealized; rather, the dancers move with heavy vigor. They're like Brueghel's beery peasants, and Morris arranges their steps with a similar rough precision. If *Liebeslieder* is the troubadour's rose, *NLSW* is the soil, the body.

Indeed, to see Morris onstage is to see a dancer in happy agreement with his instrument. Those dark Rossetti tresses and the Burne-Jones mouth bespeak a hungry sensitivity; yet he's robustly built, with a brindle, monumental chest, and feet that smack

the boards as if they were webbed. In the batty *One Charming Night*, also on the BAM program, Morris' gargouillades are corpulent gusts—they rattle the dance—and you can tell he loves doing them. In fact, *Night* may be about his own appetite for the outrageous. The climax is so outlandishly erotic it's exhilarating—he outsexes sex.

In true modern-dance tradition, Morris is his own best dancer, but, and this is unusual, his particular style doesn't confound his dancers. It's loose and unleavened, with a pushing kind of dynamic that demands languishing weight in strong outlines; quite different, actually, from Paul Taylor, with whom Morris is often and glibly compared. Taylor calls for bristlingly energized forms. His dancers move with ears turned to the rhythm, their bodies instinctively beveling. Taylor's technique has finish; Morris' is fleshy.

That's one reason he can seem old-fashioned. (There are others—fine craftsmanship and respect for dance history.) Morris recognizes flesh in a culture that abhors it. If we forgot that normal human bodies have bulging vulnerabilities, Morris reminded us with last year's *Striptease*, one of three Roland Barthes "Mythologies" that he choreographed (and in which everyone stripped naked). Positioned in the moments where self-sacrifice and self-interest become one, these three dances (especially *Striptease* and *Championship Wrestling*) read as the capitalist counterpart of Morris' similarly



The Mark Morris Company mocks de Keersmaecker in *Fantasy and Fugue*.

positioned "cathedral" wing (which includes *Gloria*, *Marble Halls*, and *Stabat Mater*). That Morris can get such highly articulated dances from such a lowly style is testament to his acute ear and eye. That the dances tug us along as they do is the result, I think, of a streak of ingenuousness (not unlike Oscar Wilde's)—it brings a rococo blush to his cheekiness and gives the spiritual works their free-fall immensity.

This fall Morris is scheduled to take over direction of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. One of his three New York premieres, *Fugue and Fantasy* (to Mozart's *Fugue in C-minor*, K. 401; and *Fantasia in C-minor for Piano*, K. 475) could be a valentine to hot young Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, who will soon be Morris' compatriot. De Keersmaecker ended her last BAM program, the controversial *Elena's Aria*, by seating five women on chairs in front of the curtain where, to a Mozart piano sonata, they performed subtly counterpointed gestures of fatigue, including one of suicide (fingers drawn slowly up wrists). Morris' fugue begins likewise on four chairs, but it is at once aggressive, even beefcake (the dancers wear muscle suits cut off at the

thigh)—he fights despondency and madness.

At first, the fantasy seems sprung from the fugue. It contains overtly romantic gestures (hands on hearts, sacrificial leaps into the air) and some murderous ones. Structurally, however, the fantasy is just the fugue atomized: five dancers attempt to cross the stage *en tableau*, but that counterpointing (still in our ears) drags them insistently back. Morris, of course, is not unaware that Mozart's fantasia is prescient, tipping the way to Romanticism—and so he makes the fantasy an extended heroic gesture. Watching the group cross the stage, we feel the ghost of Isadora-in-her-Chopin on one shoulder, the weight of European howl-into-the-void expressionism on the other.

Like a public fountain that freezes in midair, the *Fantasy* keeps hardening into dogma. *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano*, to Poulenc, is freer, more spacious, less fraught with structure and thus more open to the music's charms. It's made up of long, slender lines punctuated with a gleaming visual motif: that bent-kneed, arms-reaching, hop pose in which art-deco sculptors loved to conceive the faun in bronze. (All the dancers lack are reed pipes and pointy ears.) Phil Sandstrom's dusky lighting ac-

centuates age; it coats the entire dance in a fine layer of dust that you don't want to disturb. Morris, too,

holds the planes of the dance flat, in keeping with Poulenc's calm, often plaintive surface and his own sidelong glances at Nijinsky and Debussy. But the dance is also playful, and Morris places himself wittily in it—he's this troupe's lonely puppeteer and its heavy baggage.

Strict Songs, to Lou Harrison's *Four Strict Songs*, based on Hopi Indian chants, finds Morris empty-handed. It was wrong to include women—they go against the shimmering, river-god current (and don't look happy in their too-hard steps). Yet even without them the dance would be strained, directionless. *Songs* is dedicated to Libera, but it's dispiriting, not right at all. *One Charming Night*—now that's for Libera. ■

MARTHA SWOPE

DANCE AROUND TOWN

Compiled with the help of Robert Sandla.

seating less than plush
Theater Development
Fund vouchers accepted
recommended for children

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE. This week the ubiquitous Mark Morris premieres his new *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes*, to music by Virgil Thompson, on a bill with Leonide Massine's *Gaite Parisienne* and company artistic director Baryshnikov's new distillation of the *Raymonda* "Grand Pas Classique." Two full-length ballets this week traffic in full-blown mid-19th-century exotica: *Don Quixote* (*Kitri's Wedding*) and *La Bayadere*. Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center. (362-6000) MON-SAT: 8 p.m. WED, SAT: 2 p.m. \$9-\$70.

JANE DUDLEY. Works covering 50 years, from 1938-1988. Marymount Manhattan Theatre. 221 E. 71st St. (877-3399) THU-26-FRI-27: 8 p.m. \$12. (M)

MOVEMENT RESEARCH INC. The downtown performance space and workshop celebrates its tenth anniversary with four days of workshops culminating in a

marathon cabaret of new dance and performance. 179 Varick St. (691-5788) SAT-28: 9:30 p.m. \$10.

NEW YORK CITY BALLET. Balanchine's *Jewels* returns to the repertoire. Also this week: Peter Martins' controversial *Ecstatic Orange*, Jerome Robbins' *The Concert*, and an as-yet-unnamed ballet that has survived the American Music Festival. New York State Theater, Lincoln Center. 63rd St. and Columbus Ave. (870-5570) TUE-FRI: 8 p.m. SAT: 2 and 8 p.m. SUN: 1 and 7 p.m. \$5-\$42.

JIM SELF and FRANK MOORE. Choreographer Jim Self and visual artist Frank Moore continue their long-standing collaboration with *Crankhouse*, set in Moore's environment of Lucite logs. Dance Theater Workshop. 219 W. 19th St. (924-0077) THU-26-SAT-28, THU-2: 8 p.m. SUN-29: 3 p.m. \$10. (M) + \$3.

SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY. Graeme Murphy's fresh and adventurous dance theater troupe returns from Down Under. City Center. 131 W. 55th St. (246-8989) THU-26, FRI-27, TUE-31-THU-2: 8 p.m. SAT-28: 2, 8 p.m. SUN-29: 3 p.m. \$15-\$35.

ERRATUM: There was a typo in Joan Acocella's column last week. *Behind the china dogs* features 8 dancers, not 80. We regret the error.