

# MARK MORRIS

## The Enfant Of Dance Terrible

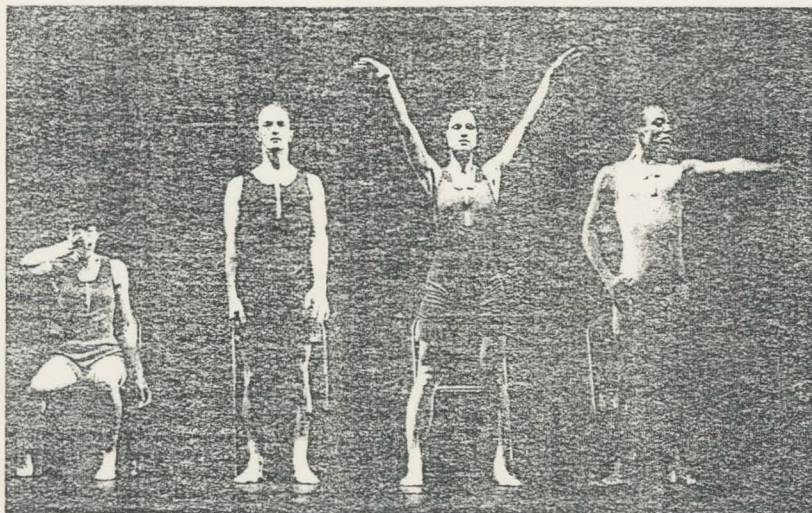
BY CHRISTINE TEMIN

# A

NYTSY BITSY REMOTE CONTROL TRUCK ZIPS across the great big stage, its headlights little beacons in the dark. After a while, a couple enters the scene. One wears a snappy army uniform, correct

in every detail except that the trousers are missing. The man in his underwear mimes the words to the song by T. Texas Tyler about the relationship of a deck of cards to the Bible, a song that finds a resemblance between the 10 cards and the Ten Commandments. The other character wears a garish orange dress, spews cigarette smoke, and quivers as if he had an overdose of caffeine.

The guy in the orange dress is Mark Morris, dancing in "Deck of Cards," one of



Globe staff photos/Wendy Maeda

Members of the Mark Morris Dance Group, above and opposite top, in rehearsal at Brooklyn Academy of Music studio

the goofy, poignant works that have made him the *enfant terrible* of American choreography.

Morris, who's 31, is soon to become the big cheese in Belgian dance. As of this fall, he will be the official choreographer of the completely — and lavishly — state-supported Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. But first, he'll make a brief stop in Boston.

The Mark Morris Dance Group will perform a program

of Boston premieres in the Opera House tomorrow and Saturday — "Deck of Cards," "Gloria," "Strict Songs" and "Fugue and Fantasy."

"Gloria" is glorious — an exultant, religious work set to Vivaldi. "Strict Songs" is dedicated to the memory of Liberace. "I had seen a show of his at Radio City just before I did the piece," Morris remembered recently. "I admire him. He was who he was for so long, so unapologetically and successfully."

"Fugue and Fantasy" is set to the Mozart C Minor fugue and fantasy, and Morris describes his choreography in Balanchinian terms, as an exact representation of the music.

The Opera House performances are both benefits for Dance Umbrella, one of the country's major producers of contemporary dance and an organization whose executive director, Jeremy Alliger, supported Morris strongly when it counted — before he became modern dance's most sought-after choreographer. To show their appreciation, Morris and his company are doing the Boston performances for expenses only, waiving their usual fee.

In keeping with Dance Umbrella's populist thrust, the Opera House performances will not be the sort of high ticket benefits that are staged by other arts groups. Prices will range from \$14.50 to \$18.50. For tickets, call Teletron at 720-3434.

Alliger first brought Morris to Boston three years ago when the choreographer made a hit in "The Vacant Chair," a solo in which he wears only his underpants and acts out the sappy lyrics of Joyce Kilmer's poem, "Trees." The young man with the long, curling locks of a Renaissance saint and the tee hee hee giggle of Tiny Tim was instantly popular hereabouts.

So Alliger brought him back the next year, this time taking an enormous risk of producing the premiere of the most ambitious work in Morris' career, the evening-length "Mythologies" based on essays by the French literary critic Roland Barthes.

Alliger had to get the stage in Northeastern University's Alumni Hall padded for one section called "Championship Wrestling." He also had to rent bubble-making machines for the "Soap Powders and Detergents" section in order to produce an effect he labeled "just like Lawrence Welk." The

"Striptease" section, though, was a piece of cake, requiring only G strings.

Half the New York dance world shuttled up to Boston for "Mythologies." It was a critical success here though Morris couldn't find anyone brave enough to produce "Mythologies" in New York. So his company manager, Barry Alterman, decided to produce it himself, a decision that led to panicky pleas for money from friends.

One of the best friends proved to be Alliger. Alterman said in a recent interview. Alliger emptied his own savings account to help "Mythologies" happen in Manhattan. No wonder Alterman lauds Alliger. "Jeremy plays the same role in Boston that other presenters play in other cities, but he's the most adventurous of all of them," Alterman says. "And he has the most taste."

□

Morris is a true individualist, heir to the self-made, pioneering spirit of America's early modern dancers such as Isadora Duncan, Ted Shawn or Ruth St. Denis.

Morris was born and raised





in Seattle, thousands of miles from New York, the center of the dance world. As a teen-ager growing up there, he joined a local Balkan folk dance group. The wholehearted stomping that occasionally erupts in his dances seems a reference to that early training.

Then he spent six months in Madrid, studying flamenco. On his return to the United States, he flitted from one company to the next. His affiliations included the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians, and the Eliot Feld Ballet. He never stayed with any one company long enough to absorb a style completely, and when he started creating his own dances, his work didn't have the hand-me-down air of fledgling choreographers whose careers have been dominated by a single strong influence.

Like Balanchine, Morris is influenced more by music than by other styles of dance. Unlike Balanchine, Morris' taste in music is catholic: He's used everything from raga to rock to landel.

Morris formed his own group in 1980, and some of his

current dancers date from that era. He has also made dances for many companies besides his own, for small regional groups and, recently, for American Ballet Theater. In Massachusetts, he's worked for the Jacob's Pillow Dancers, Concert Dance Company of Boston, and Boston Ballet. The Ballet premiered his "Mort Subite" ("Sudden Death") in 1986. It may be amusing that the title is also the name of a Belgian beer Morris favors, but there is nothing amusing about the dance itself.

The work's insidious horror instantly squelched any stereotypical notion of Morris as a choreographer of camp. "Mort Subite" featured dancers disappearing into a void; some people thought the ballet was about AIDS.

"Mort Subite" was a success, and Boston Ballet planned an even more ambitious collaboration involving Morris, his company, and the Ballet, all performing in Handel's oratorio, "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed Il Moderato." But the Ballet got cold feet, and "L'Allegro," originally scheduled for last fall, will now have its premiere in

Brussels this November.

The move to Belgium was the result of one coincidence after another. Maurice Bejart, whose company had been in residence in Brussels since 1960, suddenly fled to Switzerland last spring, leaving Gerard Mortier, the director of the Theatre Royal, without a resident dance company.

Meanwhile, Morris was exhausted from the rigorous touring that all American modern dance troupes must do to stay alive. Mortier happened to see and like a Morris performance in Stuttgart, and negotiations began.

No other American choreographer has ever had the working conditions Morris will enjoy. He'll have eight studios to use if he wants them, and three theaters of different sizes and shapes. He can bring all his own dancers with him, and add as many as he wants to his company. He has already increased the group from 13 to 20; the new recruits include Dan Joyce of Concert Dance Company of Boston.

A similar situation "just couldn't ever happen in the States," Morris sighs, "because



#### Choreographer

Mark Morris, above,  
rehearses with dancer  
Teri Weksler.

of the way arts are viewed here, as a luxury. Over there, the arts are a necessity."

Is he concerned that the Belgian public, accustomed to the bombast of Bejart's epics, might reject his witty, chamber-sized pieces? "Hey," he says nonchalantly, "I do what I do." □

Christine Temin is a member of The Globe staff.