

# Choreographer keeps his dance troupe on their toes

Mark Morris Dance Group at the Opera House last night and tonight. Presented by the Dance Umbrella.

By IRIS M. FANGER

MARK MORRIS, choreographer of the moment and enfant terrible of the dance world, chose to make his only appearance last night in the costume of a drag queen, his shoulder-length bushy hair flung out behind him like a crumpled banner. His solo, an extravagant, ecstatic swooping and twirling around the stage, served as a reminder of how far his generation of dancemakers has come from the American dance pioneer Isadora Duncan, who also swooped ecstasy, but how close it remains to her insistence on freedom of expression.

The solo by Morris could be read in a number of other ways as well, chiefly as a spoof of the public persona he has become, openly gay, often outrageous and so sure of his ability that there are few taboos he dare not break. The solo formed the center portion of a work entitled "Deck of Cards," opening with an orange toy truck with lighted headlamps wheeling over an invisible highway and ending with Donald Mouton as a soldier-boy in half-uniform over his undershorts, twitching in time to a country gospel song about the Biblical connotations of his "deck of cards." The truck joined Morris and Mouton for the curtain call.

Morris began and ended the two-hour-long concert with works for his full company of 10 dancers without him: "Strict Songs," dedicated to the memory of Liberace; and "Gloria," set to Vivaldi's "Gloria in D." "Strict Songs" picks up a combination of images from the West — the music by Lou Harrison is based on Hopi Indian chants — but the space consuming skip of a Plains animal, the gestural symbols of sun and moon, and a beautiful hand signal of shooting arrows are embedded in a circular rush of pure dance. With Morris' works, you can look for ideas or just give in to the cornucopia of movement.

"Gloria" is somber and weighted without losing Morris' viewpoint that any theme can be wrapped into a work but need not dominate it. There are hints of struggle and pain, bodies that twist in distortion or

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drop to the ground, yet, overall, the construction mode of triads and the sweep finish with the music triumphs over any specifics.

"Fugue and Fantasy" are two separate works joined only

by the music of Mozart. "Fugue" is a spare dance version of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." The quartet of performers, planted in chairs facing the audience, can do nothing but pass a variety of spastic hand movements from one to another.

"Fantasy" looks like a resolute in-joke on the penchant of certain modern choreographers to make works of social protest. The quintet is dressed in slum-garb and moves on a diagonal toward Destiny which is clearly placed downstage left. They reach it at the end, but not without an excess of histrionics.

By the end of the full evening, the final impression is that of a master at work. However, you can't be sure he won't add a mustache under the nose of his Mona Lisa.

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As an employee of the Belgian government, Morris, 31, will enjoy working conditions and a degree of freedom that do not exist in the United States, in either modern dance or ballet. "The pinnacle of your career in the US is to be invited to BAM [the Brooklyn Academy of Music]," said Morris over the weekend. "You get two nights there and if you're not a hit, you don't get invited back." In Brussels, Morris's three year contract will allow him to do as he pleases, as long as he gives 60 performances a year there. He will have at his disposal six studios, which Alterman calls "pretty gorgeous," and he can start his own school if he wants to. He will have three theaters of different sizes and configurations, including a winter circus arena, in which to stage any sort of work he wants. He can hire as many dancers as he is likely to want — Bejart had 80 — and the State will pay their salaries. Those dancers need not be Belgian: Morris said recently that he plans to hold auditions in New York, Brussels and perhaps Paris. He will have no financial worries. His company's existence will not depend on box office business, and his dancers will be decently paid by Belgian standards. His company will always dance to live music. He will be able to rehearse a production for months if he wants to, and will have two to three weeks of rehearsal onstage. Most dance companies in the United States consider themselves lucky to have one or two stage rehearsals. Alterman characterized conditions in Brussels as "groovy."

If all goes according to plan, in November, 1988, Morris's company will make its Brussels debut in Handel's oratorio, "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed Il Moderato," a project Morris was originally supposed to stage this fall with Boston Ballet. Craig Smith, director of Boston's Emmanuel Music, will conduct the Brussels production. (Smith is expected to be named principal guest conductor of the Monnaie in an early announcement). Instead of rehearsing "L'Allegro" in Boston now, Morris is in New York working on a new dance for Mikhail Baryshnikov and American Ballet Theatre.

Boston Ballet artistic director Bruce Marks said, "Oh, shoot!" on learning the news that Brussels would host the "L'Allegro" premiere. Marks said he had been forced to abandon the ballet's original idea of doing the oratorio at The Wang Center for the Performing Arts this month because "our subscribers are used to our opening the season with a full-length classic. We could have lost half our audience with such an

Liz Thompson, executive director of the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, where Morris has choreographed and appeared for the last five summers, said of Morris's move, "It sounds like a remarkable opportunity. But it's curious. You wonder why they didn't pick someone like Paul Taylor," the distinguished choreographer with decades more experience than Morris.

It was Peter Sellars, the controversial director with Boston roots, who suggested Morris's name to Mortier. In June, Mortier journeyed to Stuttgart to see Sellars' production of Mozart's "Così fan tutte," and Sellars suggested that Mortier stay on to see Morris's company which was also performing in Stuttgart at the time. Mortier met Morris, and the two began talking about Morris going to Brussels. "It was totally out of the blue, surprising and shocking," recalled Alterman, who added that the timing was perfect. "I'd stopped booking the company as of July, 1988," he said, "because all those tours of one-night stands are so hard — especially for mature dancers." The age range in the Morris company is 29 to 37, making it old as dance companies go. "I was trying to find some kind of base for the company, so Mark could have time to make new pieces."

One possible base was Massachusetts. "Boston is our favorite town," Alterman said. Boston's Dance Umbrella first presented Morris in 1985, before he was the hottest thing in American choreography. The next year, the Umbrella commissioned Morris's full-evening trilogy, "Mythologies," which brought a large share of of the New York dance community on a pilgrimage to Boston. Also in 1986 Boston Ballet commissioned the highly successful "Mort Subite." (Morris said it was mere coincidence that the title is the name of a Belgian beer he favors.)

Dance Umbrella Executive Director Jeremy Alliger said he still hopes that Morris will visit Boston regularly. Alterman seconded that hope, adding that Morris will probably spend only eight months of the year in Belgium. Because Morris appreciates Alliger's support, he has offered to dance for free in a performance to benefit the Umbrella in Boston next spring. But the Umbrella is currently without a home theater, and while Morris will soon have the luxury of virtually limitless time in three theaters in Brussels, Alliger may not be able to find or afford one theater for one night so that Morris can dance in Boston again.