



Tom Brazil

The Mark Morris Dance Group performs *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano*.

Mark Morris's Magic Mirror

by Patrick Kelly

Mark Morris Dance Group
Brooklyn Academy of Music
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While watching Mark Morris's *Fugue and Fantasy*, the first of three New York premieres recently presented by the Mark Morris Dance Group at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, I noticed an interesting phenomenon offstage as well. While some of the audience sat in solemn wonder, others were laughing hilariously. By the end of the evening, I imagine nearly every emotional reaction between those two extremes had been experienced by someone in the BAM Opera House.

Was any of those responses more valid than the others? I think not. The mirror world of Mark Morris is never flat or one-surfaced. Rather, it is like a triptych. As each dance progresses, the end panels open, slowly and prismatically. No facet is left in the dark, no view untouched until we see our reflected, refracted selves, bounced into eternity. At any moment, Morris's choreography validates any aspect of the emotional self and makes the audience responsible for how much, and in what manner, we choose to deal with ourselves. This could explain why some of the loudest laughter on opening

night came at some of the most solemn moments. Laughter is often the last defense.

Morris's press to date seems to have highlighted his outspoken, flamboyantly gay persona. And why not? It's good copy, and it sells tickets. It also preconceptualizes response. The audience has been told that Morris is funny—and he is. But he is also much more. Morris's image, in fact, is so complete that the choreographer/dancer doesn't have to let us know who is "the fairest of all." He doesn't indulge in judgments because he doesn't have to.

The more recent "Fugue" section of *Fugue and Fantasy* to Mozart ("Fantasy" was done last year) is exactly what its title suggests: the total physicalization of a Mozart fugue. Four dancers (Tina Fehlandt, David Landis, Kraig Patterson, and Teri Weksler) in earth-colored tights are paired with four chairs in a downstage center row. The process is simple and direct; an unspoken question, a glance, a touch become mutual acknowledgments, restatements, more touches toward an eventual final answer: denial. In "Fantasy," five dancers slowly progress a downstage diagonal, reaching to and acknowledging some external force. Fear, intrigue, exasperation, even laughter, are all experienced by the group at one time or another. (The inclusion of a choking gesture almost did me in. Choking and chairs seen to be the motifs of the season.) The individuals always find shelter back in the group, and that dependable focus becomes a reason for all the lost supports. Characteristically, Morris's dramatic content is always evident and, no matter how abstract, it is never impersonal. For all the dramatic resonances in the choreography, it remains strictly adherent to the musical form.

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, to music by Francis Poulenc, is built around one central shape—an open, lunging position

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with the legs spread wide, the arms reaching forward. The image is introduced by a soloist figure in dandelion tights (Morris). An ensemble of ten dancers in red tights huddle around him and then lift him off into the wings; he holds that shape for the rest of the dance. Then, another dancer (Fehlandt) assumes the lunged shape, also for the entire dance. Everyone gathers around her, touching her and pulling away. Repeating the action, she begins to make large, sweeping arcs, embracing the air sensually. A sunburst of bodies form around her. An *adagio* section reintroduces Morris. The dancers walk archaically, scribing archetypal shapes into the space. Morris moves in counterpoint to his dancers. They come to rest in a row across the stage; we see five bodies with 20 arms. Morris continues to move in front of them, making large gestures which sweep the sky, while behind him the 20 arms engage in a gestural *homage* to Vishnu, the Hindu god of preser-

vation. An extremely buoyant section follows; at the moment before the lights fade, Patterson takes the initial shape once again, this time facing in the opposite direction. Morris has carefully and consistently preserved the distinction between the figure transformed and the act of transformation.

The program concluded with *Strict Songs*. Choreographed a little over a year ago, it is set to four Lou Harrison songs based on Hopi Indian chants, which were performed at BAM by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus. The work is dedicated to the memory of Liberace.

The spirit of *Strict Songs* is pure, reverent, and joyful. The dancers run on and burst into the air, leaving questions behind them in our minds. (How do Fehlandt and Hadley get up there? How does Keith Sabado stay up there? How does Donald Mouton come out of the air, stop, and create enough stillness to fill a cathedral?) The answers are in the facts of dancing in this work about loving dancing. "Holiness of the mountain deer and the unscented faun" is heard over an almost glittering Balinese gamelan percussion. The pulse is simple and the dancing reflexive, both predictable and unpredictable. The music and the dancing present a musical common sense and logic, but remain surprising and fresh.

Morris presents us with an offeratory hymn. The words echoed over the stage: "Here is the tenderness of the tree, the fish, the moon..." And it was all there on the Opera House stage: human tenderness drawn by Morris's choreography through the bodies of his dancers—all questions, all answers, no judgments, just dancing. Morris presents his concluding image as the chorus sings "Here is the splendor of the galaxy and the turquoise cloudless heaven." His dancers appear to swim, heads bowed, across the proscenium and into our hearts.

Liberace would have been proud. ■