

Dance/Tobi Tobias

RITES OF PASSAGE

"...It's the images that are unforgettable, creating a primal world in which bodies articulate the only things that need to be known..."

Mark Morris DOESN'T MUCH USE THE word "choreograph" when he talks about what he does; he calls it "making up dances." The childlike locution is apt, because he has the readiness and amplitude of fantasy that characterizes the very young and, of course, great artists.

This fecund imagination is the quality that strikes you first on watching his wonderful *Strict Songs*, a paean to living things and their kinship, which had its local premiere during his company's recent week at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Set to choral music by Lou Harrison based on Hopi Indian chants, the dance gives rise to image after potent image, as if it were an organism growing according to a mysterious, inevitable pattern determined by nature.

A tribe of ten, in dark bathing suits accented with turquoise, traces fugitive patterns across the stage with variations on a light, bobbing run; they're like riders who are one with the animal ridden. Periodically, some of them halt to make sharp, angular moves that might be the ritual language depicted in sand paintings. Then a powerful, lushly built woman (Tina Fehlandt), echoed by a small band of her sisters, slowly and weightily traces ovoid shapes in a sequence that suggests life being spawned from the sea. Later, the ten dancers couple like figures in an archaic frieze, weaving their limbs into intricate cross-hatchings, individual desire subsumed by eternal design. Finally, one partner in each pair lies supine, legs thrust skyward to form a pillar of flesh and bone on which his or her mate floats trustfully in the darkening space.

As with most of Morris's work, there is much to admire in the structure of this dance—the complex, strict patterning, for example, which uses asymmetry to achieve a more exquisite balance. And Morris uses this objective rigor as a guard against sentimental excess. It's the

images, though, that are unforgettable, creating a primal world in which bodies articulate the only things that need to be known.

The distant connection that *Strict Songs* has with *Primitive Mysteries*, Martha Graham's Indian-inspired masterwork of the early thirties, is not accidental. Morris has long had a fierce attachment to early

the slow movement—performed in the gloaming against a tackily generic starry sky, with the ensemble making totemic designs and Morris, as Group Leader, assuming the air of ecstatic self-importance that sometimes afflicted the matriarchs of modern dance—the choreography teeters perilously on the edge of the beautiful. Once or twice it tumbles straight in and wallows there briefly, as if in a bath of sublimity. Like Paul Taylor, who may be counted among his forebears, Morris is an adept at simultaneous mockery and adoration.

His new two-part *Fugue and Fantasy* is drier, with each section not much more than a one-liner. (Admittedly, a one-liner from Morris has more wit than many another fellow's full-evening discourse.) Overloaded with journalistic attention that—when not preoccupied with his maverick personality and wardrobe—attempts to pin down his gift, Morris has decided to counter with some homemade analysis. Okay, he seems to be saying, you guys label me

"musical," I'll give you musical. He plunks four performers down on folding chairs and has them execute—to Mozart's *Fugue in C minor*—a progressively accumulating series of unrelated moves, apparently to the several voices of the music. Since Morris can track the intricacies of a score far better than most dance critics, he deftly leads us into the matrix and lets us get lost. The gestures—by turns childish, melodramatic, and banal—are executed with gleeful relish, as if putting paid to the damn music once and for all.

Morris's response to Mozart's *Fantasia in C minor* for Piano is a spoof of music visualization—a deadly choreographic method in which each note is painstakingly accounted for with a step, choreographic pattern mimicking aural pattern. Balanchine's most sensitively musical abstract works have been dismissed as no



ETERNAL DESIGN: In *Strict Songs*, Morris uses asymmetry to achieve balance.

modern dance. He decided to become a choreographer at the age of nine, he claims, upon seeing José Limón's group. A number of his dances reflect the work of Doris Humphrey, performed so infrequently in Morris's time that he must have absorbed her ideas by intuition. Another recent Morris creation, *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* (named for its Poulenc score), is the descendant of all those carefully constructed, spiritually earnest sub-Humphrey group affairs that littered college dance studios in the fifties, even to the pre-stretch-fabric tights, slightly baggy at the buttocks, with little wrinkles at the knees.

If Morris starts out satiric, pointing out the simplistically plotted comings and goings of those communal forays, before long he's recognized their homely value and given them just enough variation and adornment to render them fascinating. In

more than this, and the device was, indeed, a curse of the early moderns'. Morris offers us a quintet in pedal pushers and sloppy plaid shirts as intrepid pioneers venturing steadfastly along the diagonal to confront invisible demons in the Fateful Corner (a site familiar from modern-dance geographies). The choreography, built from a series of gauche, murderous gestures and moves, spells out its inner workings so clearly only a fool could fail to catch on and, at the same time, so adroitly you can't help being impressed.

In September, the Mark Morris Dance Group leaves for Brussels, where it will spend eight months of each year, lavishly accommodated, as the resident company of the Théâtre Royale de la Monnaie. Of course there will be New York seasons, but the fact that our own country could not offer the one major choreographer to emerge in this decade the resources he needs should give us long pause.

ANYONE STILL DOUBTING GOD'S CAPACITY for irony should have been at the Juilliard Theater for the recent *School of American Ballet Workshop Performances*, a showcase of pre-professionals headed for the New York City Ballet and other distinguished companies. Some seventeen to twenty years ago, when the Deity was blessing several of these new souls with an extraordinary gift for classical dancing, (S)He said, "Well, they can't expect everything," and assigned them bodies far from ideal for the work.

Today's standards, based on Balanchine's taste, call for a slender, long-limbed body, a small, feline head atop a willowy neck, and well-arched feet. Sherri LeBlanc, who provided the most breathtaking dancing on the program—doing the Waltz in Fokine's *Les Sylphides* and the ballerina role in Balanchine's *Square Dance*—contradicts this model from head to toe. She has a broad, heavy-boned, Slavic face oddly coupled with wispy-looking limbs, and tiny feet without even the hint of a curving instep. No matter; her dancing is a miracle. She reveals each step in its academic purity, and moves from a center of calm that makes shapes and rhythmically formed phrases look suspended in time. Her attack is soft and graceful; her manner, modest; her authority, unmistakable. Not yet old enough to vote, she has the maturity and finish of a dancer with a decade of professional performance behind her.

If some of this sounds familiar, you may have seen her elder sister, Tina LeBlanc, quietly but radiantly asserting the claims of classicism over at the Joffrey. Thank God for two such dancers and, while gratitude is on the agenda, thank Marcia Dale Weary, of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, who was responsible for the better part of their training.

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