

LEISURE & ARTS

Dance: Morris Making His Mark

By DALE HARRIS

If the New York City Ballet's recent American Music Festival did little enough for American music, it did even less for American choreography, which, as commissioned—and partly created—by Peter Martins, made a thoroughly dismal showing. All the more heartening, therefore, to find exactly the qualities absent from that meaningless celebration in the work recently given its world premiere by American Ballet Theater: Mark Morris's "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes."

In this piece, choreographed to Virgil Thomson's "Etudes for Piano"—finely played by Michael Boriskin—Mr. Morris uses music as the starting point for a serious and exciting exploration of movement. Everything about the work, moreover, bespeaks its American provenance. As a choreographer, Mr. Morris is the heir of two great American traditions: classical ballet and modern dance.

Though its roots are French, Italian and Russian, classical ballet as we know it in this country is the result of redefinition by George Balanchine, who, fascinated by the athleticism of American dancers, extended its range accordingly. Modern dance, on the other hand, originated here; it is an art that descends from the example of Isadora Duncan, the earliest great non-conformist in the field.

While the two traditions are no longer considered antithetical, they retain their distinctiveness. Ballet tends to impersonal beauty, modern dance to emotional resonance; the first to formal perfection, the second to idiosyncrasy, freedom from rules, self-justification. Ballet, in addition, aspires to the aerial. Modern dance draws strength from a constantly affirmed relationship to the terrestrial. An important part of Mr. Morris's significance is his ability to draw from both traditions and, in so doing, to restore their vitality.

In the case of classical ballet, the need for renewal is urgent, too urgent, indeed, to be conceived of in unrealizable, messianic terms. We await not so much another George Balanchine as an influx of dance invention that can take the art forward from where he left it at his death. The choreography that could save ballet from inanition will have to be at once classical in formulation and daring in sensibility. In "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," Mr. Morris uses the classical vocabulary with fluency and eloquence. He also uses it with freedom that comes from his skill in modern dance forms.

Nowhere is his mastery as a ballet maker more evident than in his handling of the music. Virgil Thomson's "Etudes," at once straightforward and complex, gives the dancers impetus, even a sense of style; it does not force them into an inflexible mode of behavior. They take their cue from the music's moods, its ebullience and tender reflectiveness, but in ways that pre-

serve their individuality as performers. With the stage darkened and the piano (amplified) far upstage, the cast of 12 enter and quickly disappear like dream visions. In their dancing, they combine games with the rigors of classroom exercises, revealing not only their physical prowess but also their social and comradely grace. The impression they make is frankly dazzling. There is no finer classical dancing to be seen anywhere today.

For various reasons, the cast has been shuffled around from performance to performance, but never to the ballet's disadvantage. The dancers I saw over the

others—and in the instant before the curtain fell—another rose from their midst, like an assertion of the individual will.

In "Fugue," set to Mozart's Fugue in C minor, K.475, two men and two women wearing old-fashioned swimsuits perform a dance of comic desperation while seated on chairs lined up across the front of the stage. The chairs save them from complete disintegration. Though as their emotions intensify they get to their feet and move, often convulsively, around them, they continually return to their seats. If, as seems likely, the piece was designed as a satire on a certain kind of currently fashionable, *Angst*-ridden European choreography, it is less concerned with mockery than with the close observation of basic human feelings—such as anger, apprehension, jealousy—which it both enlarges and intensifies. It is also concerned with the violence implicit in Mozart's music and the highly wrought formality that at once controls and expresses it.

The only good news about European choreography is the fact that, next September, Mark Morris and his dancers are going to move their operations from Seattle to the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels, where they will replace the company of Maurice Bejart. One has but to think of the debased state of dance over there—William Forsythe in Frankfurt, John Neumeier in Hamburg, Rudolf Nureyev in Paris, David Bintley in London, Pina Bausch in Wuppertal, not to mention the egregious Mr. Bejart, now in Lausanne—to understand what the move could mean for trans-Atlantic dance. Meanwhile, though, we may ask what will happen to dance back here, where the facilities Brussels has offered Mr. Morris, including a \$1.5 million annual budget, are apparently not to be thought of. Clearly, some reordering of our priorities is called for.



Baryshnikov, Kathleen Moore

course of three evenings were all excellent: Cynthia Anderson, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Shawn Black, Julio Bocca, Deirdre Carberry, Robert Hill, Susan Jaffe, Carl Jonassaint, Lucette Katerndahl, Kathleen Moore, Isabella Padovani, Keith Roberts, Martine van Hamel, Robert Wallace and Ross Yearsley. When Mr. Wallace took over from the temporarily indisposed Mr. Baryshnikov, there was no loss of brilliance or charm, only an intriguing change of focus. Obviously, all ABT needs to make it look like a great company, as it emphatically does in this ballet, is choreography that takes the dancers seriously.

Mr. Morris has been doing just that with great frequency of late. During the intriguingly diverse program given last month at Brooklyn Academy of Music by the Mark Morris Dance Group, the emphasis was very much on the modern. The performers, strong, athletic, widely divergent in body type, were barefoot, thus establishing their fundamental connection with the earth even when in the air. At the end of "New Love Song Waltzes," set to the second set of Brahms's "Liebeslieder Walzer," all of the dancers were clustered together on the floor, with one dancer in their midst swaying like a plant under water. As she sank slowly down to join the