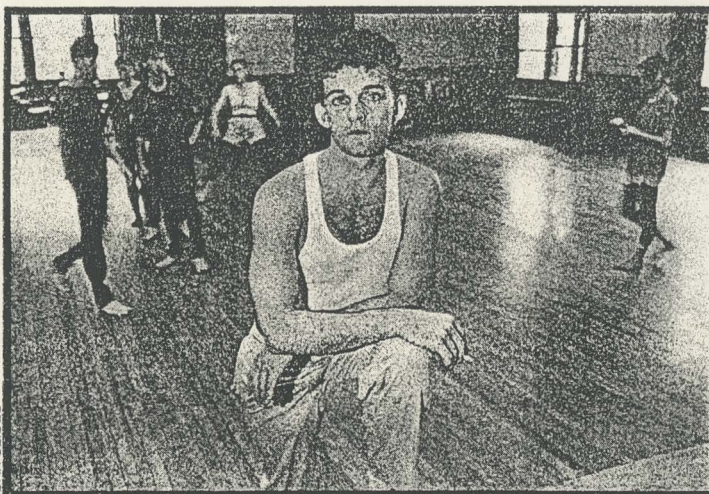


Mark Morris: Hail and farewell

by Lisa M. Friedlander

For many years New York has been the Eden of dance, the garden for its Adams and Eves and their progeny. Now, in the '80s, that provincialism buried by the AIDS crisis and the threat of nuclear war, they're finding that the Big Apple isn't the only one worth biting into. Producers of dance festivals are drawing on artists from the Orient, from Europe, and from Africa; choreographers are melding their dance works with music of other countries or developing hybrid movement vocabularies. Regardless of why his Dance Group was chosen to replace Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century as official dance company of Brussels's Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Mark Morris now totes the critical baggage of further defining dance as an international, global arena of interchange and expression. So it's appropriate that the four Boston premieres Morris's 12-member company performed at the Opera House last



Morris: honoring our most idealistic notions of what is human

of the curves of his arms, traces of the circles he places like horseshoes around the nails to which his losses have been hammered. He puts on more than the shell of this woman. From the weighty bending of his knees, he has surely borrowed all the earthly sorrow that her soul has bared. His is a laugh-through-your-tears comedic force.

And Donald Mouton carries it through, taking his orders as a half-dressed soldier (uniform jacket over boxer shorts). Through the lyrics in the song he enacts, he explains why it's all right to open his deck of cards instead of his Bible. The cards are Bible and prayer book: one for God, two for Adam and Eve, three for the Trinity, etc. At times he nearly mimes his plea of innocence with exaggerated gestures and a mechanical march. His plea is half-baked innocence and partial savvy, for which his costume is metaphorical. When Mouton, Morris, and truck unite at the end, they are a strange trinity of knave, queen, and king (of the road).

Fugue and Fantasy (set to Mozart's *Fugue* in C minor K.426 and *Fantasia* in C minor K.475) also offers essential Morris. The successively entering voices that echo core melodic themes, and their continual interweaving, define the fugue as a structure. So there is lots of thematic repetition in the movement of the per-

formers within a changing context of temporal and spatial relationships. For Morris, repetition is not an end in itself (as it can be for Laura Dean); neither does it represent the kind of narcissistic self-absorption of which the Belgian Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker is a master (her *Rosas danst Rosas* is filled with onanistic litanies). For Morris, it all has to do with musical structure, with phrasing that has the punch, stretch, and recuperation of breathing, of emotional tension and release, of singing (hail to Vivaldi's *Gloria*). But if there is no rejection of musical tradition, there is certainly a loving disregard for the postures, lines, manners, and images with which much of the music on this program is traditionally associated. Thus music and dance meet as strangely poetic bedfellows, the shared rhythm of their encounter even illuminating their stylistic differences.

The four seated dancers in *Fugue* circle their torsos, grab at the air, pummel the ground with their feet as in a tantrum, raise those feet and clap them together in childlike applause. All their movement is initiated from the centers of their bodies, so that the full weight of their beings makes that movement look ineluctably committed. Morris's is not a light feathery touch. Eventually they

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take the themes and somersault them farther from the chairs, pulling at the cord that binds them to the piano score until at the end they all separate and lay: (skin. This fresh movement erupts as a passionate but attracting opposite to Mozart's refinement.

The *Fantasy* breaks free of the *Fugue*'s boundaries, yet the five dancers, dressed as hillbillies, cling to one another as if freedom were an illusion — or a death sentence. They'll drop or droop onto the backs and shoulders of their fellows, struck like chords; and like chords they clot, occasionally releasing a single note. The vertical distance between pitches is fully expressed in the rising and falling of the dancers, and when they begin to move through a series of tableaux, they seem inextricably linked. Holding hands, at the end, the dancers ooze forward amoebically, their surrounding membrane as compelling and fragile as fantasy.

Dedicated to the memory of Liberace, *Strict Songs* (set to a choral score based on Hopi Indian chants) begins with increasing numbers of dancers skipping and leaping across the stage, entering and exiting, appearing and disappearing in that metaphorical arc between life and death. This thought is eclipsed by the circling they create, the community they form, as in a folk dance — and the incorporation of folk-dance ideas is something for which Morris is noted. The community subdivides, finally, into five duets; these engage in increasingly intimate ways, their legs entwining as they sink toward the floor, and

weekend, as a benefit for Dance Umbrella, reveal a kinship of the graceful and the gawky, the sad and the funny, the polished and the raw — elements of playful intelligence that honor our most idealistic notions of what is human.

Deck of Cards, a three-part piece set to C&W songs by Jimmy Logsdon, George Jones, and T. Texas Tyler, is performed by Morris, Donald Mouton, and a toy trailer truck. The truck, in darkness but for its headlights, hits the stage for the first song, becoming the trucker's life: his lodgings, his lunch, his lady, his legend. Typically, Morris creates poignance through humor and warmth; yet he wears a poker face and his dances are rarely spoofs or caricatures. So when he appears bedecked in a red dress, with earrings, and exhaling a puff of smoke at the opening of the second number in *Deck*, the lovesick strains of the song seem to emanate from the emptying-out

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finally in stiff flying-angel poses, their swan song to Liberace.

Morris's multi-movement work *Gloria* deserves more than the abbreviated rendering it got here — indeed, it would be well-served by multiple viewings. Neither innocent nor knowing, in shades of gray, a couple enter. Her stiff-knobby steps suggest bound feet. A serpentine advance on her belly is equally constricted. Yet both journey forward into the darkness that falls on them even as Vivaldi's *Gloria* overwhelms the darkness with celebration. Throughout the dance the men can be seen, their arms elbowing up like those of grasshoppers, bellying across the floor. The women extend their legs and turn as if seeking balance, or even a safe perch. The dancers' arms arc angelically, cutting and spiraling halos around themselves; but what makes the dance resonate so emotionally is, again, the way the movement is motivated from the centers of their bodies — they throw themselves into those circular pathways with all their earthly weight.

As if overwhelmed, they begin the fourth section with their wrists limp, swaying their arms side to side. The sense of vulnerability to powers greater than the self continues as, in the fifth movement, a couple face off while, like a ticker-tape parade, the other dancers walk, simply, across the stage, as if to state that we are all going somewhere, all just passing by ... in transit. At the end, two lines of five dancers pass between each other, then turn and fall. Morris suggests that we bisect each other's paths, spin our wheels, crumble and fall. Like Edna St. Vincent Millay's candle lit at both ends, all this may not last the night, but it does shed a lovely light. □

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