

Mark Morris, On the Fast Track

The Celebrated Choreographer And His Garden of Dance

By Paula Span
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK
Mop-haired choreographer Mark Morris weaves rhythmically in his folding chair, slapping his saddle shoes against the rehearsal studio floor to keep the beat and pleading, "Softly, softleee. I want a little bit of a blur around the edges."

A blur. Twelve sweaty members of American Ballet Theatre, a day away from the world premiere of Morris' "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," are comfortable with precision, not blur. They are not used to moving the way Morris asks dancers to move; they have been getting aches and pains in unaccustomed places. "He always says our best rehearsals come when we're too tired to really do it," sighs soloist Kathleen Moore.

Morris is gentle but amused. He privately calls the ABT dancers "orchids," raised since youth in the hothouse of dance studios, requiring delicate handling. The less ethereal members of his own sturdy troupe of modern dancers, the Mark Morris Dance Group, he calls "weeds."

And here's the impudent, 31-year-old Lord of the Weeds telling his dozen orchids, including Mikhail Baryshnikov, "More wrist, less butt!"

"Drink to Me Only," set to 13 Virgil Thomson piano etudes, drew shouts of approval from a standing-room crowd at the Met the following evening. It will be performed by ABT at the Kennedy Center Opera House Tuesday and Wednesday (probably without Baryshnikov, who has injured his knee), and is likely to

See CHOREOGRAPHER, G2, Col. 1



Choreographer Mark Morris.

BY ED BAILEY/ASSOCIATED PRESS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Laura Nyro's Captive Heart

The Singer's Return & the Sweet Strains of Memory

By Carla Hall
Washington Post Staff Writer

Where has Laura Nyro been these past 10 years?

Some of you will ask who Laura Nyro is. Let me tell you:

There was a time—in the 1970s—when she was one of the most evocative pop music poets of her generation, a balladeer of songs sweet and bittersweet.

Then, a decade ago, she withdrew from public life, pregnant, labeled somewhere as a recluse, living on a farm in Connecticut, according to one account. She vanished from the concert circuit; her albums were difficult to find.

But now she's back, on a national tour. This past week, she played a crowded Birchmere in Alexandria.

"I'm excited," she says in an interview. "I just turned 40 and I just feel like I'm really happening and the time feels right to go out and stir it up."

That was nice to hear. In high school, Laura Nyro's music and presence were a metaphor of my soul. I knew every lyric and melody and brooded in the romance and the pain and the introspection. In a life of

Catholic girls' school and uniforms and parties where your father picked you up afterward, her music supplied adventure and romance undiscovered in real life.

In a time when I never smiled because of braces, fell painfully short of beauty standards defined by skinny girls in hip-hugger jeans, and cultivated long hair like a hobby, Laura Nyro was someone to identify with. No waiflike pop singer, she clothed her voluptuous figure in black, never smiled (except in a melancholy, aloof way) and wrapped herself in long, dark hair.

The only time I ever disobeyed my parents and lied about where I was—so no one send them this article, okay?—was the night I went with my boyfriend to hear Laura Nyro at the Ravinia park, outside of Chicago. Instead of waiting for the next train back to the city as parentally instructed, we went downtown and had ice cream sodas. We got a ride to the Chicago train station where my parents picked us up, none the wiser.

I will never forget (I was maybe 14) sitting in Chicago's Auditorium Theater hearing her sing "Been on a Train." It starts out slowly and builds to a moment of tension. Suddenly there is



LAURA NYRO

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Mark Morris

CHOREOGRAPHER, From G1

be the last new Mark Morris work that Washingtonians will see for some time.

For in September, the choreographer with the Boy George eyes and the longshoreman's body and the dazzling career is moving his entire company to Brussels for at least three years and possibly for good. Morris' ascent already demonstrates the kind of rewards a hot young American dancer and dance maker can reap and, at the same time, how they're not nearly enough.

He agonized about leaving—"Oh Gawwd, it's a giant life change for everyone. I'm not patriotic in any way, but it's a little terrifying to think of living forever in another country." Morris grew up and still spends part of each year in Seattle.

Yet the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie made him an offer he couldn't refuse, the kind of offer even a very successful modern dance company doesn't get in this country. "It's the tradition of dance being the ugly duckling of the arts world," Morris says. "Well, not the ugly duckling"—that implies eventual swanlike transformation. "The evil twin or something."

In some ways, Morris can hardly complain. With his important commissions, government grants, major prizes and incessant press attention since forming his company in 1980, he's moved well beyond his onetime prodigy status.

Critics rhapsodize about his wit and "musicality." The press treasures his outspokenness. (At last fall's Dancing for Life AIDS benefit, other choreographers warned sternly against implying that the dance world had been particularly devastated by the disease; Morris appeared in a ponytail and chicly baggy suit with a purple lapel pin that read FAGGOT.)

Audiences probably respond, as much as anything, to his unpredictability. The weeds of the Mark Morris Dance Group bear little resemblance to Balanchine ballerinas and their cavaliers. They're in their thirties ("the oldest dance company in the world," Morris calls them). The women have visible hips and breasts; one of the men is losing his hair. "I don't think an ideal woman is bulimic

and never had a period," Morris observes. "I don't think an ideal man is 19 years old and a model for Bruce Weber."

They all have to be extremely strong because Morris' dances can call for women to leap and lift as well as men. He dislikes the word "androgyny"; perhaps it is clearer to speak of possibilities. In Morris' pieces, anyone can partner anyone, anyone can swoon into anyone else's arms; a pas de trois can consist of three women or three men. "Balanchine would never have a line of men holding hands and intertwining," agrees Morris (a perfervid Balanchine admirer nonetheless).

Over the years this ensemble and its dancer/choreographer have performed to Brahms, Vivaldi, Purcell, Yoko Ono, the Violent Femmes, country and western, Thai pop, Indian raga. Morris' works have been inspired by Roland Barthes essays on championship wrestling and laundry days, by vampire myths, by the structure of a Mozart fugue. He has danced in a loincloth, in drag, in the nude.

"Strict Songs," which is set to a haunting contemporary score based on Hopi Indian chants and sung (in New York) by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, is dedicated "to the memory of Liberace." Morris attended what turned out to be Liberace's last set of concerts at Radio City Music Hall. "You go as a partial joke. Half the audience was gay men of my ilk, my age, and the other half was their mothers," he remembers fondly. "And it was great, a fabulous show that everyone loved. It made me so happy."

Morris' own audiences frequently laugh aloud, but also frequently sit in stunned silence when a dance concludes. "If there can be such a thing in dance as giving voice to the inarticulate," wrote Arlene Croce in The New Yorker, "then Morris has done that thing."

Yet maintaining a company and creating new work is "so ridiculously hard," Morris says. Like most dance groups, his derives much of its \$750,000 annual budget from touring the country. The dancers find the traveling exhausting; Morris doesn't get the rehearsal time he wants to create new dances; and the arrangement still pays the dancers' salaries for only 35 to 40 weeks a year. (They collect unemployment the rest of the time.)

"When I feel the least happy is when we're touring, doing repertoire we've done for a long time, dancing for people who don't want to be there," Morris says. "They have a subscription to the theater or something, and they've read that I was zany and shocking."

On tour, furthermore, the Group forgoes live music, "which is awfully important to me and another ridiculous luxury . . . Choreographers and dancers have become accustomed to dancing to bad tapes of bad music." Live musicians and vocalists make for better performances, Morris believes: "You dance immediately, spontaneously, to the music as it happens; you can't memorize the tempi and the pauses."

During a week's engagement at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last month, however, live music cost the Mark Morris Dance Group \$55,000. "You make lots of money on touring so you can lose it all on a New York season; that's a tradition," Morris says philosophically. But the New York gig is a necessity: "The New York press is the reason you get hired on tour."

Unhappy with this state of affairs, Dance Group General Manager Barry Alterman had been casting about for an institutional affiliation, a way of breaking the touring cycle. "There was interest expressed, 'maybe,' 'somehow,' 'don't know,'" Alterman says. "Then out of the serendipitous sky fell this offer, which was exactly what we wanted, only five or ten times better. And it was in Brussels."

As the resident Monnaie dance company, the 20-member Morris Group (replacing Maurice Bejart's company) will have year-round salaries and, for the first time, health insurance. "Which we can't get in the U.S., because [insurers] assume that if you're a dance company everyone will get AIDS and be dead in five minutes," Morris claims. "We're uninsurable." (For the record, Alterman says, no one in the company has contracted AIDS.)

The Morris Group will also have the use of ample studios, a costume and set shop, theaters and an orchestra. ("I'll bankrupt the country," Morris vows lasciviously.) It will tour (New York is on next year's itinerary; Washington is a maybe) when Morris wants to. He'll be able to indulge his growing interest in opera (he choreographed "Nixon in China"). And all will be underwritten, of course, by the government; in effect, the Mark Morris Dance Group is about to become the national dance com-

pany of Belgium. "It's impossible to do in the States, impossible," Morris grumbles. European governments consider a rich cultural life a national necessity, while here "it's highbrow, a luxury, elitist."

Fortunately, though Morris himself circulated through an assortment of dance troupes—Lar Lubo—vitch's, Hannah Kahn's, Laura Dean's, Eliot Feld's—his own company has been more stable. A number of the dancers have been members for five years or more and are friends as well as colleagues, which may cushion the shock of emigration.

Manager Alterman has suggested that some of the Morris Group's decisions—like sinking tens of thousands into vocalists and musicians for one week's performances in Brooklyn—are influenced by living and working in a "plague town." Dancers and choreographers are dying around them; AIDS argues against waiting to do things that are important.

Morris says he's not so sure. "I imagine it affects everything I ever do, but it's not conscious," he says. And, "I'd like to think you'd do that anyway, what you need to do, what you want."

Still, AIDS doesn't always remain a subtext. "Making commissions for '90 and '91 is like a joke to me," Morris acknowledges. Illness never seems minor: "If somebody misses a day of rehearsal with the flu, I get very frightened and upset. If someone tells me someone else is sick, I say, 'You mean sick sick?' We know what that means."

Morris says he doesn't know whether gays are disproportionately represented in dance. "It's just that you don't have to pass as straight. It's a bonus. That's why Sensitive Young Men are drawn to this profession; you don't have to pretend."

And yet, of course, pretending is at the core of what Morris does. He has been making things up since he was a kid, inspired by Jose Greco and twirling about his Seattle living room. The difference is, now he gets paid for it. Come September, he'll get paid to do even more of it.

"It's so cool," he says happily. "It's not easy to make up dances, but it really is. It's difficult and exhausting and mind-altering, but it's pretend. It's play."

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