

DANCING

Vivamus Atque Amemus

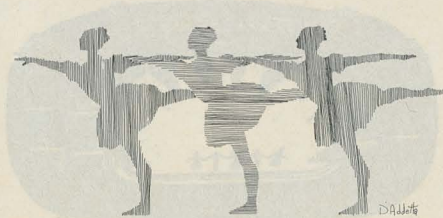
THE dances Mark Morris makes are not about his own life or loves; all the same, it seems to me that he is dance's Catullus. The direct intensity of feeling and the elegant mastery of a variety of compositional forms remind me of that great bad-boy poet; and then so do Morris's ability to depict loves gay and straight without strain and without meanness, and his deep concern with what it is to be male and/or female. He can adopt the idioms of previous choreographers, making *hommages* and translations—as did Catullus with Sappho and the Alexandrian poets—without ever losing his openhearted immediacy. His sensibility is utterly of our day.

This May, he gave a week-long season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Though I'd seen Morris and some of his choreography before, the five works shown there were new to me, and it was this season that finally convinced me of his stature. And then, on May 31st, American Ballet Theatre gave the première of his "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes"—a marvelous work, to music by Virgil Thomson. That he is one of the world's most entrancing dancers, that his work often demonstrates both remarkable structural ingenuity and an extraordinary range of style and drama, I had felt since first seeing him and his company, in 1984. Moreover, if anyone could tell in dance the overwhelming tale of self-castration, frenetic Cybele worship, and sex change that is to be read in Catullus' Attis poem, it's Mark Morris: so "Deck of Cards," "Jealousy," "Lovey," and "Songs That Tell a Story" have shown in previous years—with their uncanny command of narrative, histrionics, travesty, and emotion. Still, I'd been uneasy about his musicality, which seemed at times—in the Beethoven "Minuet and Allegro in G," for example—weightedly and tightly step-for-note Disneyish in timing. Why is it that this season I didn't feel that once? I can explain it only by suggesting that the phrasing and accentuation to be found in the American modern-dance tradition, to which Morris so clearly belongs, can be as hard for a newcomer to adjust to as the off-the-beat exaggerated legato

characteristic of much Soviet ballet. The coursing rhythm and the full-bodied tone that mark the dancing of Morris and his colleagues are descended primarily from Paul Taylor—and thus take their place in the genealogy that leads back to Isadora. Morris is the heir who restores the family fortunes. With almost everything he showed this May, he had me hovering between laughter and tears, shock and wonder. In him, American modern dance recaptures its youth.

"One Charming Night" is Morris's variation on the subversive erotic fantasy of Romanticism. The ballet "La Sylphide," in which the sylph of the hero's dreams enters his waking life, was a sex reversal of the scenario of Charles Nodier's (pre-Du Maurier) novel "Trilby," in which a male sprite haunts and possesses a Scotswoman. But while the changes that have been rung in dance on the theme of "La Sylphide" are beyond number, few of them have gone back to the "Trilby" idea of a woman haunted and excited by a male apparition; the most celebrated such example is Fokine's "Le Spectre de la Rose." In "One Charming Night," Morris is no androgynous rose-ghost; the frisson of the piece is that he's a vampire in cleric's clothing. No man has made this kind of demonic-fascinator role for himself since Jules Perrot in the eighteen-forties. It's just a duet, and it never takes itself too solemnly: Morris enjoys the absurdity of melodrama, and yet he makes it persuasive. We see first a girl (Teri Weksler) waiting, yearning feverishly, restless with desire; the spook (Morris) arrives; he enchants and possesses her; and it is not, after all, a dream—he carries her off.

But that's only the surface of it. The real twist lies in Morris's treatment not of male and female but of the music. He uses four Purcell vocal pieces, and I relished the first stages of the story



while the countertenor Drew Minter sang—beautifully—"Be Welcome, Then, Great Sir," "One Charming Night," and "Hark! The Ech'ing Air." There's a sensuous elegance in the dance that Morris conjures right out of the music. The seduction's climax, however, is set to the longest of the Purcell works: a recitative, aria, and finale. And as this started, with the words "Lord, what is Man, lost Man, that thou shouldst be so mindful of him?," I was suddenly torn two ways, for it is music I've loved since my religious teens.

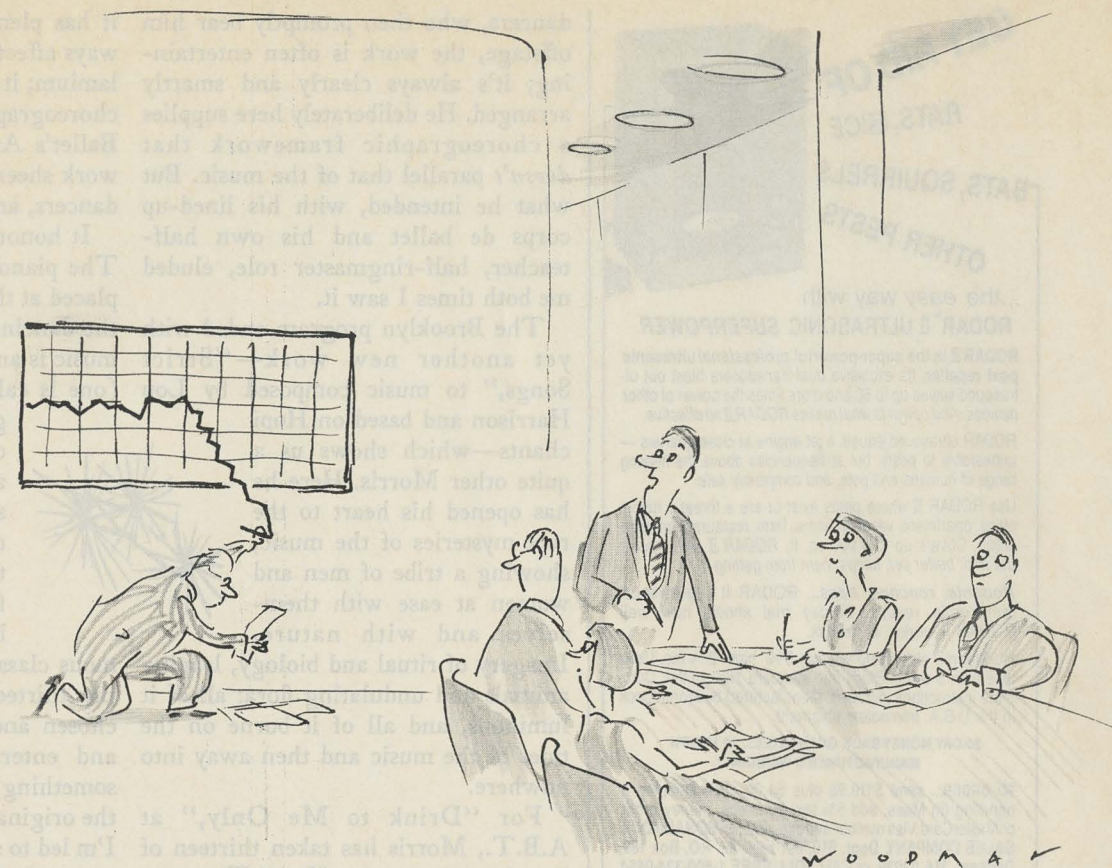
Torn, but held. Who would not be astounded by the strength of Morris's gesture as, standing behind Weksler, he runs his hands down her torso? Or by the sensual snarl with which he plants the love bite on her neck? One doesn't see physical acting of this calibre in Dracula movies or plays. Or such good comedy: he is the most fleshy and lewd and unctuous of fiends. His voluptuous power and mock solemnity, the woman's giddy fluctuations of emotion—we're shown these in a seamless flow of mime and dance. And it is Weksler's performance, blunt and abandoned, especially in the way she grows enfeebled by her own passion, that makes the piece so alarmingly real. Yet, meanwhile, the words sang on of how "the Son of God forsook His glory, His abode, to become a poor tormented man." When the bitten Weksler dances in new unity and rapture with Morris, it's to Purcell's repeated "Hallelujah's."

Seeing the piece a second time, I found myself seduced utterly; and the use of the music no longer seemed impious. Morris doesn't ignore the words; they're the sermon he himself preaches to the girl, the deluding message this Elmer Gantry uses to take final possession of his already captive audience. Feelings both religious and erotic are confused in her affliction. "One Charming Night" lasts just fifteen minutes, but—like the "Stabat Mater" Moses Pendleton made for Pilobolus in 1983—it's a horrifying little vignette of the psychopathology of religion. And sharply, gleefully told: I blame none of those who chortle in watching it.

I see why they laugh happily during "New Love Song Waltzes," too. So deft is the timing of Morris's choreography in this lush, extravagant 1982 work for ten dancers that the tone is

always pithy and light. It fills the Brooklyn Academy stage handsomely: hard to imagine that it was ever performed in the much smaller space of Dance Theatre Workshop. Here, again, Morris shows audacity in his choice of music—the Brahms "Neue Liebeslieder," which many consider to be Balanchine music. As it happens, "New Love Song Waltzes" reminds me a good deal of Taylor's "Esplanade"—which dared to commit a parallel sin, by using the "Concerto Barocco" music—and, in particular, of its fourth movement, with its series of loving couples, the women hanging fondly around their male partners' necks. One watches both works with an unclouded brow and a full heart.

One could watch "New Love Song Waltzes" with a full brain, too. It's a work whose references range back through the colloquial look of apparent improvisation used by Twyla Tharp in the seventies, by way of Isadora, to old Greek chain dances; and it presents its dancers' numerous ripe, amorous encounters with vigor and intricacy: one could analyze its workings as those of a finely wrought drama. But it took me back to that state of innocently mystified admiration which one experiences less and less frequently as one follows any art form more. Within the first minute, it has taken from its music a sense of love's grip; love is the mesh in which all the characters are caught. "New Love Song Waltzes" doesn't try to give us a world of the nineteenth-century waltz and of Romantic expression, as does Balanchine's "Liebeslieder Walzer;" its treatment of the music is of and about our time, and part of Morris's skill is that this never looks anachronistic. Male couples, female couples, male-female couples: the ease with which Morris sets these alongside each other without making any issue of gender is quintessentially eighties (datable even as *early* eighties, but not dated). And it fits right in to the use of



"Thank you, Bentley. We get the picture."

male and female voices in Brahms' score. Morris's subtlest feat in "New Love Song Waltzes," however, is the way he blends love's sincerity with love's transience. We see dancer after dancer moving from one partner's arms to another's; but the work isn't flip-pant, nor is it a study of promiscuity. Men and women, held rather by tender emotion and physical desire (and by their need for those things) than by any specific relationship—we're shown this in all its human truth.

In his Mozart "Fugue and Fantasy" Morris pays his dues to the Denishawn-Humphrey tradition of music visualization, and he handles simultaneously a quite different, contemporary choreographic idiom, in which obsessive gestural behavior is ordered in accumulating choreographic patterns. He's not the first to put this kind of movement—standing, sitting, slapping oneself, waggling feet above the floor—to an eighteenth-century fugue; but has anyone else made so persuasive and firm a picture of racked, driven, self-torturing, getting-nowhere gestures? And who else save Balanchine can have illustrated a musical fugue so

judiciously? Time and again, especially with those waggling feet (which match a trill in the music), a touch of comedy suddenly slices through the bleak, schematic ensemble. Here Morris is like the Mozart who used dramatic situations as opportunities for compositional virtuosity—as in the developments of sonata form found in the sextets of "Figaro" and "Don Giovanni." Equally Mozartian is the work's second, Fantasy section, an exercise in sustained melodramatic tension. Although we can laugh at each of its sudden, individual gestures—among the most prominently recycled motifs are a collapse to the floor, a hand clasped to the throat, a fall backward into another dancer's arms—and although we can smile at how all concerned fix their eyes on the Offstage Object, the inexorable mechanics of the whole keep us attentive, and even aghast.

Having praised these pieces, I must say I just don't get another new work by Morris, "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano," to Poulenc. From its opening, in which Morris himself is held aloft, as if on a rostrum, by a cluster of co-

