

Dance/Tobi Tobias ACROBATS OF GOD

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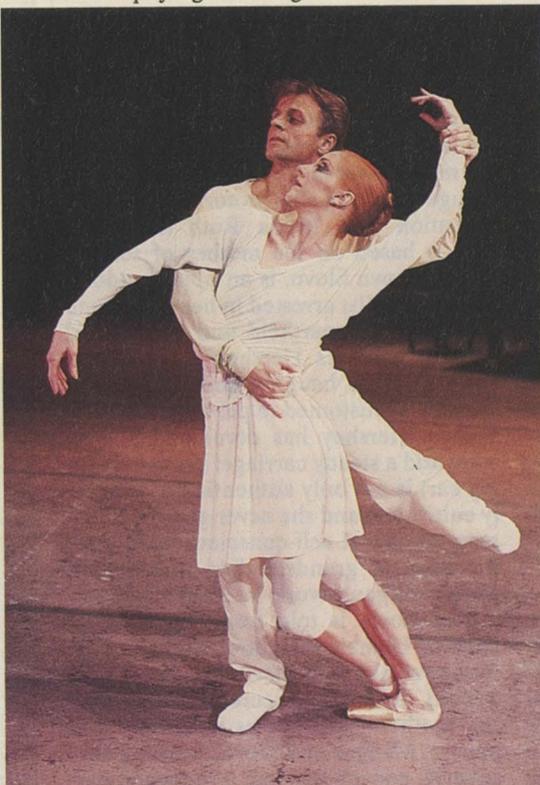
American Ballet Theatre, in residence at the Met, has an exhilarating hit in Mark Morris's *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes*. Set to Virgil Thomson's *Études for Piano*, the ballet is typical of Morris in its complex structure, trenchant musicality, rich dynamic range, and wicked humor (that piano sits smack center-stage). Some of its givens are simple and pristine: Its modest twelve-member cast is chastely uniformed in white—Sunday-best—practice clothes; it forgoes narrative, character, and emotional entanglements. Its extravagance lies in its penetrating examination of the language and conventions of classical dancing and in its surging energy. It's a tidal wave of dancing, with one or two contemplative moments in which the dancers gather themselves in and let the choreographic inventions coalesce.

The love Morris has for dancing as a discipline and for dancers as a holy breed infuses the piece and warms its formidable intelligence. Morris sees the relationship between the pleasure to be had in mastering the simplest school exercises (the feet springing neatly, say, from a closed to an open position) and the ecstasy—part physical, part spiritual—advanced practitioners at the peak of their form can feel when they execute the most difficult figures. His choreography sets that relationship out plain as day and blesses it.

Like many master craftsmen, Morris is at once frugal and ingenious with his material. Each time one of his governing images is repeated in yet another guise, our understanding of it, and of its ramifications, expands. The ballet opens with a woman borne stiffly horizontal, one leg folded slightly as if on the first breath of a forward-curving extension; midway through, we see her, again supported by her cavalier, standing vertically, then swiveled and promenaded in a similar position. Only then do we realize that the configuration originally looked so odd merely because Morris had shifted its customary axis. Other recurring motifs create resonance by referring to ballet history and its implicit life in the dancing present. The arms that

frame the head, crossed at the wrist with the hands drooping softly, recall Baryshnikov in *Les Sylphides* and *Spectre de la Rose* and, through him, Nijinsky.

Morris has peopled his ballet with some of the most compelling dancers in the company—mensches, every one of them—paying little regard to their rank.



MORRIS DANCE: Baryshnikov and Moore of ABT.

Principals, soloists, and newcomers to the corps de ballet participate on equal terms in this ensemble. Baryshnikov is just one of the boys. After he whips through a brilliant little solo sequence of assorted turns, finishing uncannily in a recumbent pose, Robert Hill strolls on and matter-of-factly echoes it, back to the audience, in the upstage shadows. Freed from the stultifying curse of stardom, Baryshnikov looks more engaged and real than he has in several seasons. Another senior performer, Martine van Hamel, whose technique has been unraveling alarmingly of late, dances here with her old plush confidence.

Ignoring the assessments ABT has

made of its younger contingent, Morris has rescued Kathleen Moore from the character-dancer slot to which the company consigned her far too early, and has used Carl Jonassaint for the weighty authority of his presence instead of treating him like just another capable fellow from the corps. Does it take an outsider to inject such freshness and vitality into ABT? The last time the company looked so full of beans was in 1976, when Twyla Tharp gave it *Push Comes to Shove*.

Baryshnikov once called the late Antony Tudor the conscience of ABT, and the company is expending some effort to keep his ballets alive in its repertory. This season saw the revival of the 1938 *Gala Performance*, a gentle satire of ballet style and ballet manners at the turn of the century. The action brings together—first behind the scenes, then before an audience—three reigning stars, each the exponent of a particular school: the Queen of the Dance, from Moscow; the Daughter of Terpsichore, from Paris; and, most imposing, the Goddess of the Dance, from Milan. Their behavior to everyone within spitting distance—partners, ballet master, conductor, corps de ballet, dresser, and one another—is uniformly inconsiderate, but when it comes to dancing, each is awful in her unique way.

The Russian ballerina, a pirouette specialist, is dizzy with self-congratulation. Grinning at her audience through deformed ports de bras, she shamelessly milks its applause. The French danseuse is a piece of fluff, as frivolous as her ruffled pink tutu. She's so busy charming her public with over-the-shoulder *oeillades*, she barely has time to attend to her inconsequential choreography, a flock of jetés and fussy little beats. The Italian diva, whose ostrich-feather headdress adds at least a foot to her height, performs her arcane rites of balance in an atmosphere weighted with solemnity. Only in the finale, when she has commandeered center stage from her rivals, does she manage the ghost of a smile.

In this staging by Sallie Wilson, the cast I saw was uneven in its approach. As

the Russian ballerina (Wilson's former role), Martine van Hamel offered a caricature even the Trockadero gang would tone down. The Italian ballerina was overplayed, too, by Cynthia Gregory, but redeemed by Gregory's basing her mordant portrait on her own formidable stage personality and skills. Alessandra Ferri was just right as the Parisian soubrette—silly as a drunken butterfly. The effect the piece intends (irony rather than mockery) is too subtle for a gargantuan house like the Met, but the ballet still has the power to suggest that every legendary ballerina is something of a *monstre sacré* and that the next generation may well find preposterous the schools of dance we honor today.

THE ART OF THE CIRCUS IS A VENERABLE one that generates its own peculiar glamour. The mystique arises, I think, from the skills involved (and the danger that often accompanies their execution), the combination of rambunctiousness with pathos in the clowning, the grotesque fascination of the sideshows, and the "wild" animals that are "tamed," while their gentler cousins are made to perform absurd tricks. To all this is added the bourgeois spectator's romantic view of circus folk as a troupe of exotic vagabonds whose tawdry life is somehow

more authentically human—earthier, freer, more adventurous—than his own.

Montreal's one-ring *Cirque du Soleil*, which has pitched its tent down at Battery Park for some weeks, has gone to great lengths to swathe its uneven offerings in theatrical trappings: space-age lighting and musical effects (all dated) and a story line in which the members of the troupe are transformed from a pack of cornball tourists to "Arabian Nights" figures before they're allowed to get on with their specialty acts. Nothing could be less conducive to enchantment—or more intrusive upon serious business such as juggling or wire-walking—than their amateurish performance as gaudy spirits. For my money, they could have dispensed with the arty folderol and instead provided animals, "freaks," sawdust, and cotton candy. I'm fully aware of the exploitation that can be involved in exhibiting man and beast, so much so that I quit going to Barnum & Bailey once I'd done my duty by my kids. Still, a circus is a lesser affair without the seals and the tattooed man.

Since I was a child, my circus favorites have been the jugglers and the aerialists, no doubt because they deal in elements central to dancing—rhythm, coordination, daring flight through space. *Cirque du Soleil's* aerialists, a pair called The

Andrews, provide lots of plunging-through-the-air excitement with fresh good humor. The jugglers are even better. Daniel Le Bateleur manipulates three balls as if their weight altered with each shift in pattern, while a trio from Peking does mesmerizing things with badminton racquets and colored rings. Forget the technical miracle; what takes your breath away is the fleeting but impeccably designed pictures in the air created by the objects' blurred trajectories.

As for areas that are not my cup of tea, the contortionist Angela Laurier is certainly proficient; she's got the spine of a snake. Unfortunately, she has the looks and personality of a cheerleader, so her performance lacks the eeriness critical to the work. Eric Varelas and Amélie Demay, who provide some expert hand balancing, make an odd couple, especially when they're mounted scalp to scalp; he maintains his sweet, elfin appeal while she acts as if she's possessed by the Devil. The tightrope walkers, Agathe Olivier and Antoine Rigot, are a pedestrian though competent duo; yet I am grateful for their enlarging the scope of my dance experience. Not even the flashiest of ballet technicians I've encountered has managed to execute bourrées on pointe along a steel rope stretched some eight feet above the floor.

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