

ARTS • LEISURE

Morris troupe bids US farewell

Mark Morris, one of the most inventive forces in contemporary American dance, moves his company to Europe this fall. In interviews below, the dancer/choreographer and members of his company talk about the reasons. Elsewhere on this page, critics review two of the Mark Morris Dance Group's last US programs.

By Maggie Lewis

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Boston

The Mark Morris Dance Group's recent farewell tour showed once again why the inventive, taboo-busting Seattle choreographer is considered a *Wunderkind* in American dance. In the fall, he and his company will move to Brussels, where they will be the official dance company of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie. They will be supported by the Belgian government for at least three years. This fact may have made the tour performances poignant for fans. But the company danced as if it were business as usual for them — brilliantly, but without farewell gestures.

A 'tremendous opportunity'

Asked why the company is leaving, Nancy Umanoff, its managing director, says, "We're not leaving because this [their situation in the US] is bad, but because it's a tremendous opportunity." If the offer hadn't come when the theater's director met Morris by chance in Stuttgart, "we wouldn't be searching for another one," she said.

The Belgium post will, however, be a change from the company's present situation. "The important thing is the way Europeans see art as a necessity; so it's state supported. It will be less of a struggle for us."

The company will have three theaters to perform in, a permanent home with ample rehearsal space, and, most important to Morris, a live orchestra to dance to. It will grow from 13 dancers, who had been working 30 to 40 weeks a year and making up the balance with unemployment benefits or working for other companies, to 20 fully-salaried dancers. The company's annual budget will be \$1.5 million.

The circumstances around the Boston performance point up the difference between state arts support and the way it is garnered in the US. For these performances, the Morris Group waived its usual performance fee to benefit Dance Umbrella, which presented the concert. Dance Umbrella had not only produced Morris's work early on; it had commissioned "Mythologies," an ambitious full-evening work to a commissioned score.

When no producer could be found to put on "Mythologies" in New York, the company's general manager, Barry Alterman, decided to produce it himself, raising money from friends.

One who came forward was Jeremy Alliger, Dance Umbrella executive director, putting up money from his own savings.



Dancer/choreographer Mark Morris in performance

Morris is philosophical about the financial aspects of producing dance. "I think they have nothing to do with the creative process," he says bluntly and frankly. "They can help or hinder production" of a work, but "in the end you'll do it anyway, whether you have a budget or not."

Asked if freedom from dependence on box-office receipts will tempt him to be less aware of pleasing an audience, he says somewhat indignantly, "I have never worried about marketing. I don't have a publicist, and I don't schmooze with rich people." When he choreographs, "I have me in mind. I like to see shows; I like to see good dancing; I like good music." He attributes his critical and popular success to the fact that "I'm very particular about what I like to see."

Handel oratorio in Brussels

His first production in Brussels will be a work to Handel's oratorio "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed Il Moderato," a full-evening work that had been planned for the Boston Ballet but was later scrapped because Boston Ballet artistic director Bruce Marks felt a new work to start out the year would lose business for the company.

Morris seems determined not to let his good fortune go to his head. He says, "What doesn't change is: It's still really hard to make up a piece."

Blending modern dance with traditional ballet

Mark Morris is the latest of a long line of modern-dance choreographers invited to spice up the repertory of a traditional ballet company. His "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes" for American Ballet Theater surprised everyone at its debut here in New York by not being pretentiously avant-gardish. Morris's own company, which was at Brooklyn Academy of Music in May, is so determinedly trendy, so emphatically anti-heroic, I wondered how he could use ballet dancers at all, let alone stars like Mikhail Baryshnikov and Martine Von Hamel.

"Drink" turns out to be Morris's least self-conscious, most attractive work in any medium. It's as if he'd had a latent affinity for ballet all along, and finally found himself in a position to use it legitimately. I'm not talking about Morris's ability to choreograph, which has never been in question, but about subtler matters of taste, attitude, and style.

What distinguishes Morris's work above all is his formalism. His dances are always based on whatever musical structures accompany them, and are primarily expositions of a predetermined vocabulary. For his own dancers, he imposes odd gestures or poses that suggest an iconography of some kind onto an earthbound, turned-in lower body, and chest and arms so unstressed as to seem habitually inexpressive. Often I've felt the vocabulary isn't interesting enough to bear the repetition and variation to which he subjects it, and his dances end up looking bombastic. Or they stick so literally to the music that they seem hermetic, precious.

"Drink" is as formal as Morris's other work, but somehow it seems freer, airier, and altogether more gracious. Its score, Virgil Thomson's "Etudes for Piano," is a terrific asset, because it's lean, modern, and hasn't been heard a million times. Michael Boriskin is seated center stage at the piano, and plays the first of the 13 etudes most of the way through before any dancer appears. At the last minute, a man walks across with a woman lying athwart in his upraised arms. Just before he reaches the other side, he lowers her to the level of his waist, and she shifts too, in some small way. So the look of the lift changes unexpectedly but without emphasis.

The whole ballet is surprising that way. It doesn't fix itself in big presentational blocks — so many dancers per musical number — the way most ballet-ballets do, or set the stars apart from lesser lights with ballet's usual fanfare. The dancers dash in and out so quickly and unpredictably that you hardly have time to identify them, let alone thrill to their antics, before they're replaced by others. It's an antidote to that kind of obvious, virtuosic showpiece, simultaneously demolishing and honoring the stodgy stand-there-and-dance-till-you-slay-'em formula.

The whole ballet has an air of playfulness that comes not from playful business or mugging, but from a rhythmic freedom and exuberance Morris seldom has shown before.

— Marcia Siegel

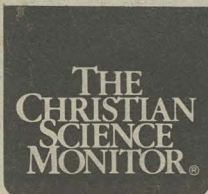
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Choreography for a toy truck

The Mark Morris company's penultimate US performance here in Boston last month moved easily from the ridiculous to the sublime.

"Deck of Cards" showed Morris's penchant for choreographing to odd country-and-western-flavored songs. To the story of a truck driver set up for a jail sentence by a beautiful woman and three men in a Cadillac, a small, remote-controlled trailer truck maneuvered around the stage. Its little headlights seemed to search the half-darkness the way the singer searched for justice.

Wearing an orange dress, Morris danced to a moping song about a woman running all over town. His bushy, shoulder-length curls flew; his five o'clock shadow bristled; and he moved with pathos, contrition, and abandon. It was so touching and at the same time so odd it was disturbing. Finally, a man in under-shorts and a military tunic frantically mimed an explanation of why a deck of

cards was his Bible.

Balanchine once created a waltz for a baby elephant. Morris's choreography for a toy truck was a telling exposition of the spirit behind the song, just as his flounce/galumph in the dress went deeper than drag.

The other piece, "Gloria," was a work of purity, even spirituality. Dealing with resurrection and redemption, it started with dancers slithering across the stage on their stomachs, progressed to upright movement, and climaxed with an ecstatic ensemble whirling and swooning. They landed on their backs with their arms straight out, making a cross shape, but the energy had been so pointedly aimed skyward they seemed to have fallen up. Modern dancers who bother to choreograph resurrection are rare; Morris's use of such a simple image singles him out, as much as his musicality does. These gifts portend a rich future for modern dance, wherever it occurs.

— Maggie Lewis