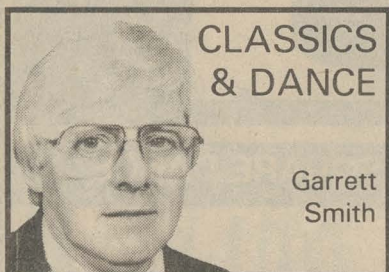


Morris makes merry



CLASSICS
& DANCE

Garrett
Smith

Mark Morris and his dance company are in residence this week at the Spa Little Theater on the grounds of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

After watching him finish a rehearsal in which he fit one of the company's most famous pieces, "Gloria," to the Little Theater's small stage, we spoke about his work and phenomenal success in the dance world.

"Gloria" is set to Antonio Vivaldi's "Gloria in D." The piece, like all of Morris' work, is tightly choreographed to the music. The dance is full of the ecstatic movement that has become the choreographer's trademark. Arms sweep skyward, dancers "fly" in from the wings and bodies fall flat on the floor, recovering to an upright position with split-second timing.

The piece, originally choreographed in 1981, was reworked by Morris in 1984.

"It needed simplification, so I cut a bunch of stuff. Sometimes when you look at a piece, you see too much action for one idea. When I see that, I cut."

When Morris starts a new dance, he always begins with the music.

"I work with the music for a long time. Most of my preparatory work is with the score. Gradually I begin to fit in the movement. The action is really suggested by the music. As I listen, one section of the score may feel like turning to me; another may seem like running.

"Once the action is set up, it tends to repeat itself, sometimes with a different rhythmic connection and sometimes on different people."

Not all choreographers are so sensitive to the scores they set. George Balanchine, founder and principal choreographer of the New York City Ballet, was known for his ability to tightly choreograph his dance to a chosen piece.

"Whatever Balanchine did to make a giant corps look as if they were dancing musically was great, because I don't believe they all were. He somehow tricked them with the material to look like they were hearing the whole score.

"People have different ways of dealing with music, but it's not always given priority status. Merce Cunningham is fabulously musical. I don't always like what I hear when I'm watching, but he is always true to the score.



Mark Morris

"More often than not, music is treated as backup. I don't work that way."

Morris uses a varied group of composers from Vivaldi and Brahms to Stravinsky and Satie. He has a particular fondness for Baroque composers. His newest work is being set on a Handel oratorio.

"Baroque music is strict but has a great range of drama. You have to listen to a lot of good Baroque music to know that. If you listen to a lot of badly performed Baroque, and much of it is, it all sounds the same. Yet it has a wonderful dramatic range.

"Baroque is not all I do, but in the last few years it's what I do a lot. In recent years I have worked with many Baroque composers. My first piece in Brussels will be on the Handel. I'm hoping to purge myself a bit of my Baroque fit, it's habitual."

Morris is going to move his company to Belgium. They will leave shortly to take up residency at the Grande Thatre de la Monnaie in Brussels, where they will replace Maurice Bejart and his Ballet of the Twentieth Century.

How did all this happen?

"It was simple, really. Bejart left; there was a job open, and I took it. For three years, at least, we'll get to work with live music. We have beautiful theaters and studios; we're really looking forward to the experience."

Live music is a real priority for Morris' company. His performers particularly need the freedom live music can give to a dancer. Regardless of the intent of the movement, serious or comedic, the dancer needs the breathing room only live music can provide.

Morris is often surprised by

the humor an audience will see in one of his pieces.

"Humor is often seen in movement that takes an unexpected turn. The juxtaposition of graceful and awkward, for example. When one moves quickly into the other, it can be funny, but it's not necessarily set up to be humorous."

Though he disclaims for the most part the idea of choreographing comedic material, some of the company's material is extremely funny. "Canonic 3/4 Studies," one of the dances being performed in Saratoga, looks like a misfired ballet class.

"I had no idea of 'Canonic 3/4 Studies' as slapstick comedy until it was performed and people roared with laughter. I still don't get half the jokes."

Morris is the third modern dancer to bring his company to SPAC this summer. Like most choreographers, he has great respect for Balanchine's work. He believes Balanchine was the greatest modernist ever.

"Balanchine pieces like 'Agon' not only set a very high standard, they also prepare the audience for a different style of dancer, like Paul Taylor. It's really not that big a leap from classical ballet to modern dance."

A big leap, however, is often seen by the audience as dancers interchange male and female roles.

"My position is less one of sexual politics than it is to allow a wider range of movement for everyone. All my dancers can lift each other. They don't always have to lift each other, but they are able to. I think it should be that way."

The company is performing two programs in Saratoga. I watched the first program Monday evening, and it was wonderful.