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MARK MORRIS
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Morris Dances

A postmodernist with a difference, Mark Morris is an exemplary appropriasionist whose dances are about the great themes—love, death, hope, despair—but also about the choreographer's challenge of pulling energy into order.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Just as "modern dance," in its classic phase, was never really modernist, so "postmodern dance" is not analogous to postmodernism in art. However many things postmodernism may mean in the art world—whether the historicism-cum-popular appeal formulation of architecture, or the many competing formulae in the visual arts—it does usually involve a turning away from modernism. But 25 years ago, when Yvonne Rainer and her friends at Judson Dance Theater put together what they called postmodern dance, it was not modernism they were turning away from, it was modern (not modernist) dance of the Martha Graham variety: narrative, affect laden and, in the view of the Judsonites, corny and operatic. In the words of Rainer's 1965 manifesto:

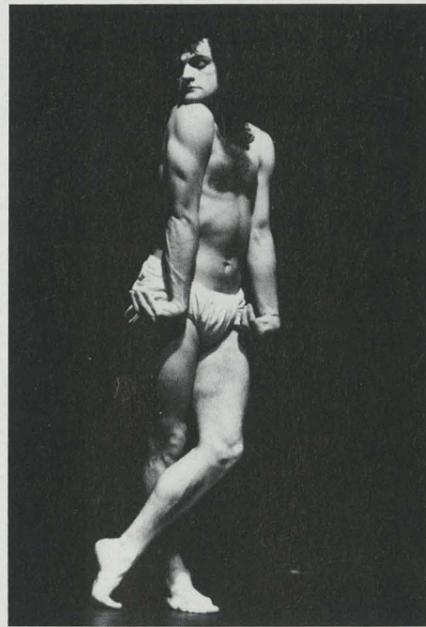
NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe . . . no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving and being moved.

No, in other words, to theatricality, that linchpin of postmodern art. Insofar as postmodern dance of the '60s ran parallel to any movement in the visual arts, it was to Minimalism, its exact contemporary.

Not until the mid-'80s, when the East Village irony shops were already closing down, did dance adopt the ambiguous tone and the pop-cum-history-of-art profile of postmodern art and architecture. Curiously, though—and this shows once again that dance, for whatever reason, is the art least likely to cut a path parallel to the others—the choreographer whose work is most comparable to postmodern art, Mark Morris, is also the most "sincere" artist on the experimental dance scene.

Morris was born in Seattle in 1956. His father taught high-school English; his mother was a secretary in the county engineer's office. He always liked to dance—dress up in a sheet, do a show in front of the mirror, make the other kids do it too. At age eight he was taken by his mother to see José Greco, and his future was decided: he would become a flamenco dancer. His obliging mother (she gets a credit line in all his programs) found him a teacher of Spanish dance, Verla Flowers. Later he added ballet, and at age 13 he joined

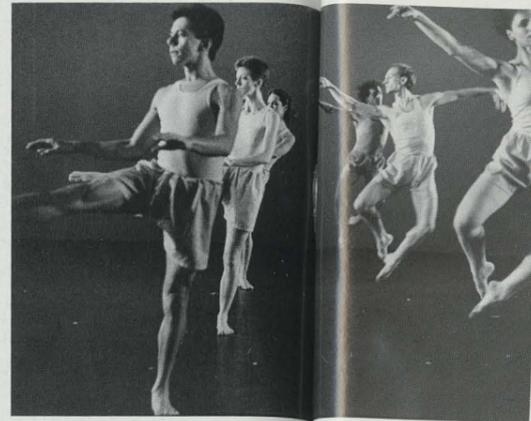
The Mark Morris Dance Group's 1987 performance of Soap-Powders and Detergents from Mythologies. Photo © Tom Brazil.



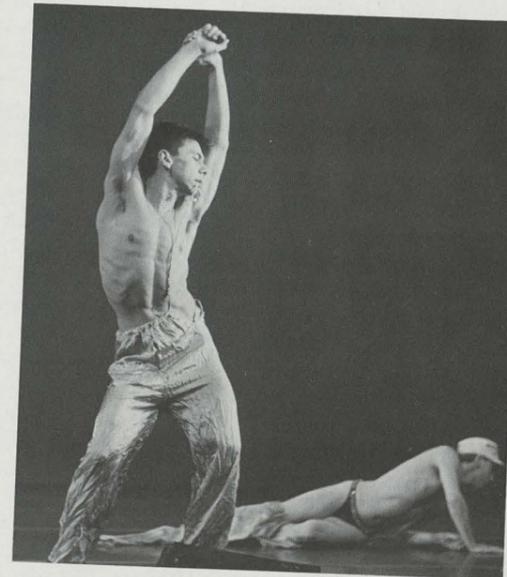
Mark Morris dancing his solo *O Rangasayee* at BAM in 1984. Photo © Beatriz Schiller.



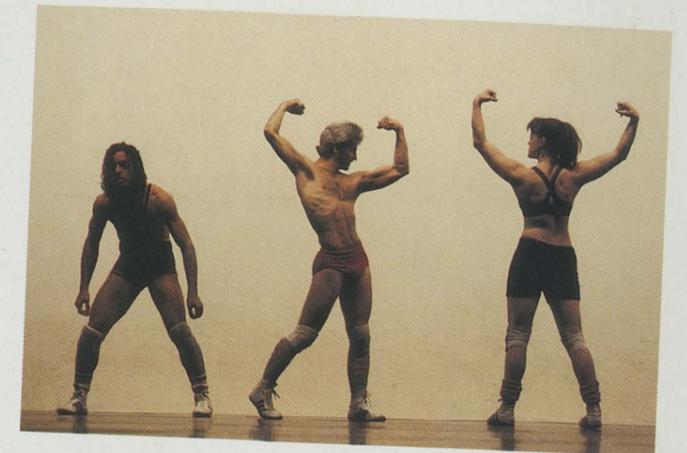
Scene from 1986 performance of *Stabat Mater*. Photo © Beatriz Schiller.



Scene from *Marble Halls*, 1985, with Keith Sabado and Tina Fehlandt in foreground. Photo © Tom Brazil.



Keith Sabado (standing) and Donald Mouton in *Striptease* from *Mythologies*. Photo © Tom Brazil.



Championship Wrestling performed in 1986; from *Mythologies*. Photo © Beatriz Schiller.

the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble, a semi-professional folk dance group. Together they got drunk on slivovitz and did Bulgarian and Yugoslavian dances. At age 19 Morris came to New York, where he danced for a succession of choreographers—Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn, Laura Dean. Finally in 1980 he got together a group of friends, rented a studio for two nights and put on a show of his own work under the name Mark Morris Dance Group.

Thus began an amazing trajectory. Every year since 1980 Morris has given another New York concert. In 1984 he won a Bessie (New York Dance and Performance Award), in 1986 a Guggenheim. Also in 1986 PBS devoted an hour-long program to his work, very unusual for an artist not yet 30. He has choreographed dances for several operas, including Peter Sellars's *Nixon in China* [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '88] and himself directed a production of *Die Fledermaus*. He has made ballets for Boston Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet and American Ballet Theatre.

Recently Morris changed his base of operations. Last year, Maurice Béjart, king of kitsch, walked out of Brussels' state-supported Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, where he had been installed for over 25 years, and moved his company to Lausanne. The vacant post was offered to Morris, and he took it. He can now double his company and pay them well. He will also have access to six rehearsal studios, several different theaters and a symphony orchestra. This is a remarkable elevation for a company that has had touring status for only four years. In the words of Barry Alterman, Morris's manager, "We're only four years old, and already we're the national ballet of Belgium." As for Morris himself, he's only 32 and he is unquestionably one of the most important young choreographers on the international scene.

In part, this is because Morris fits. As I said, he's the first choreographer to look genuinely postmodern, in today's sense of the word. No one is more knowing than he, no one broader in range

of reference. He has made dances to Satie, to Poulenc, to Brahms, to Vivaldi, to Bach, to Handel (Baroque music is his favorite), to Yoko Ono, to Victorian parlor songs, to the Louvin Brothers (Country and Western), to Indian movie sound tracks (*The "Tamil Film Songs in Stereo" Pas de Deux*), to the Violent Femmes, to roller-rink music, to a score by Lou Harrison derived from Hopi chants and involving bowls of water (*Strict Songs*, in memory of Liberace). In other words, he is an exemplary '80s appropriationist. History is his pond; he swims in it. He can make a rose-patterned chaconne that looks like something from 1750, as he did for the Seattle Opera's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, or he can make a Chinese Cultural Revolution agit-prop ballet, as he did for *Nixon in China*, or he can make an attractive solo for a remote-controlled toy truck, as he did in *Deck of Cards*.

Morris also has the sheer nerviness of the post-punk world. The piece that he made to Victorian parlor songs was a solo for a man in his jockey shorts (usually Morris) with a brown paper bag over his head. *One Charming Night* is a duet of great emotional and sexual intensity in which a vampire seduces a little girl to the tune of three lovely songs by Purcell. Watching the climax—as the singer hits the crest of his divine hymn ("Oh for a quill plucked out from thy wing to write the praises of eternal love"), Morris, the vampire, clamps onto the neck of Teri Weksler, the girl, for a passionate suck—you cannot not be taken aback. *Lovey*, in which four dancers in graying underwear dry-hump an equal number of plastic baby dolls, also makes a strong impression. In a small theater—I saw it in New York's Dance Theater Workshop—you can hear the audience shifting in their seats, breathing fitfully. I have asked Morris whether he enjoys offending bourgeois respectability. "Yes," he answered.¹

But in the end the thing that is most iconoclastic about Morris's work is the dance style, the actual quality of the movement. Though his dancers have hard and complicated things to do, the look is one of ordinary movement: matter-of-fact, unmannered, with full weight,

as if these people were running to catch a bus. Morris then pushes the low-glamour look even further by suppressing sexual differences. He tends to pick small men and large women—"My guys are articulate, and my gals are brutish"—so that everyone can do everything, and everyone can pick everyone else up. The look is so profoundly unisex that when the action is too—in *New Love Song Waltzes*, for example, the dancers on the floor roll in and out of one another's arms without respect to gender—you're not surprised. Men and women are there on the stage, unmistakably, and also masculinity and femininity, but Morris vastly stretches the boundaries of the two categories, thus blunting their contrast.

This maneuver, however, is less radical than the refusal of ease. Mark Morris didn't pioneer the ordinary-movement look—Judson Dance Theater did—but in none of the work of the post-Judsonites (Trisha Brown, David Gordon) do you see movement that is as frankly effortful as Morris's. When the dancers are doing something tricky, they try their foothold, test their balance. When they lift one another, they don't mind hoisting. When they do a somersault, you look at their asses.

This may seem natural, but it's not. In a theater, it's no more natural than nudity. Like doll-molesting, it's misbehaving; it's anti-bourgeois. Keep in mind, also, that it's being deployed alongside highly elaborate artistic elements—Baroque music, for example. So the "naturalness" is not being placed before us as an ideal state. On the contrary, it is a cannily used formal device, there to set off the "art-hood," the "made-ness," of the choreographic and musical designs. Never has a chaconne looked more like a chaconne—a specific, worked-up thing, with a prescribed pattern and rhythm and set of manners, and a prescribed place in art (in the 18th century a chaconne came at the end of a ballet)—than when Morris placed one at the end of his ballet for the Seattle *Orpheus and Eurydice*. The dancers, in their colored jerseys, hurled themselves into the lovely rose pattern in a way that spoke not just of grace and freedom and

the triumph of love (it did speak of them) but also of 1988 and life in the city.

Thus we see the chaconne form itself more clearly than ever. And by comparison with modernity, we see its pastness. And by comparison with vernacular modernity (the T-shirts, the hop-kicks), we see its high tone, its artificiality. And so we have the postmodern experience: the retrieval, the juxtaposition, the irony, the experience of distance, the meditation on representation.

And then we don't have it, for it doesn't take long to realize, watching this dance, that Morris is not making a simulacrum. He's really making a dance, just as the balletmaster for Gluck's original, 1774 *Orpheus* made a dance, and he expects people to watch it for the same reasons: because it reveals the structure of the music, the liveliness of the dancers, and hence the beauty of life. This is the critical point about Morris, what makes him so curious and so precious: that whereas he has, in abundance, the same kind of knowledge that led to the various painting-is-dead formulations of the '80s, he somehow grabbed onto a branch while the others went over the falls. For him, dance is not dead, and the art of making it is not naive. It is a big, thrilling job of pulling energy into order—the order, usually, of the music. There's something childlike about Morris, and his dances are like games. He listens to the music, feels what it means to him and figures out its structure. Then he makes a dance accordingly. Bach calls and Morris answers. Eighties or no '80s, not too much comes between these two actions.

Which brings us to the matter of content, on which Morris has old-fashioned views, closer to Martha Graham's than, for example, to Merce Cunningham's. Dance may look abstract, he argues, but it is an abstraction from something. "Abstraction means the same thing as realism. You're telling the same stories. Whether they look like Red Riding Hood and the Wolf or not, they're still the same characters." He means this fairly literally. Nor does Merce Cunningham's



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use of chance techniques to derail linear narrative seem to him to do the trick. If something doesn't add up linearly, Morris says, "That doesn't mean it's abstract. It means that real life doesn't stack up linearly: things happen in the wrong sequence, or in an exaggerated way, but they're still those things happening." "Everything's about something," he says.

And what Morris's work is usually about is the great human themes: love and death, work and fellowship, hope and despair. This is true even of his most flippant-seeming dances. Indeed, it was the humanism of his out-and-out "coolest" concert, the 1987 *Mythologies*, based on the work of Roland Barthes, that made this fact finally and undeniably clear. In New York, *Mythologies* was performed in the Manhattan Center Grand Ballroom on 34th Street, a coffered-ceiling, dance-of-all-nations-muraled affair that normally plays host to fashion shows and beauty pageants. In these funky surroundings, Morris staged three works—*Striptease*, *Soap-Powders and Detergents* and *Championship Wrestling*—based on Barthes's semiotic analyses of these phenomena. Of the three, the lightest and sweetest was *Soap-Powders*, with the company enacting the vicissitudes of the wash cycle (soak, rinse, spin) to a Herschel Garfein cantata inspired by television commercials for Fab, Era and Lava. The dance is full of historical nods—for example, exalted drape-trailings and sheet-billowings borrowed from Ruth St. Denis and Doris Humphrey. And framed within them is a little pop drama: the anguished internal struggle of Mrs. R. Michaels of Joliet, Ill., who is being offered \$100 if she will give up her Era.

This is *echt* postmodern funny—the past and the present, the noble and the fatuous—but at the same time it carries a little stab of pathos. Mrs. Michaels once had whiteness, purity, self-respect. Now they are gone. ("My wash was once so bright, my friends would tell

me. Now, it's like day and night; they never even mention it.") She is not so different from Job, or Gretchen at the spinning wheel.

More to the point, Mrs. Michaels is not so different from Tina Fehlandt, the central dancer in *Strict Songs* (1987), when Fehlandt stands alone in a dark corner of the space and, with feet flexed, goes down in a slow, stiff, painful split. *Strict Songs* is about death, and that is what is happening here. Fehlandt splits and goes down. Life splits; we go down. The image is both modest and bald—no pointed feet, no dying swan—and therefore horribly poignant.

Strict Songs ends in the same mood. Five dancers lie on their backs and, sticking their feet into the air, hoist five other dancers, who then float there horizontally, above the earth, as the curtain comes down. Are they angels? If so, they're very businesslike ones, who take the time to adjust the placement, against their stomachs, of the other dancers' feet before they let themselves be lifted. Asked why he gave the dancers such a hard lift and thus delayed them with engineering problems at this critical moment, Morris replied, "It's because I'm embarrassed enough about my religious feelings . . . and also, I like to see a bigger spectrum of action."

Spectrum or no, Morris usually likes, when he has something, to have its opposite as well. When he makes a piece about religious anguish—*Stabat Mater* (1986), to Pergolesi—he places his dancers against backdrops, by Robert Bordo, that look as though they were bought in a religious articles store in Spanish Harlem: a cross in orange flames, a cross in a field of violets, a cross that changes colors. When he makes a dance, *Dad's Charts*, that is about the death of his father—William Morris died of a heart attack when Mark was 16 (charts = hospital charts)—he sets it to roller-rink-type organ music.

This could be tiresome, but it's not. It's a way of rescuing seriousness in a time when seriousness is a hard pose to strike. "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" asks Eliot's "Gerontion." Having swallowed all of history, how do artists find again the narrowness, the innocent purpose to make something beautiful or moving? Innocence they won't find, so improvised solutions are in order. Morris's tactic is to locate a membrane between the noble and the not-noble, and then to press hard on both sides at the same time. For me, the membrane never breaks; the two elements never blend. In *Stabat Mater*, when the dancers drop one another—smack, splat, on the floor—as an image of betrayal and loss, I am conscious of the TV-land brutality of the action, and I see it as a sort of challenge to Pergolesi's tender cantata, a test of it. I feel this doubleness in everything Morris does.

So do others, and not necessarily with pleasure. Certain critics see that splat-fall and its analogues as a joke—indeed, to judge from their tone, a joke on them and on liberal values. (And they also want to know why we are seeing a dance about Jesus's wounds in the first place. This looks to them like an affectation.) In their view, Morris is just a smart ass. In truth, he is a master, the first one in dance in a long time—but his detractors are right to fasten on opposition as the essential quality of his work. This is Morris's language, so much so that he has forgotten he uses it. (He says he doesn't understand why the audience laughs so much.) It's the dialectic, the test, the ritual two-step that permits him to vault his way into the sublime with no hint of falsehood. □

1. This and all following quotes are from an interview with Mark Morris which took place on May 26, 1988.

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Opposite, scene from *Strict Songs* showing Jon Mensinger hoisted into the air.

This page, Ruth Davidson in 1986 performance of *Striptease*. Boston. Photos this page © Tom Brazil.

