

the Bulletin

Mark Morris an American in Brussels

New York's most exciting
choreographer
moves to the Monnaie

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THE NEW MAN AT THE MONNAIE

Mark Morris, a big name in New York's dance world, has now moved into Brussels with his company. He talked to Luisa Moffett. Jiri Jiru took the pictures



Mark Morris and members of his company take a breather in the vast studio in the Rue Bara

Aa, I tricked you! Mark Morris shouts cheerfully at the dancers who are still trying out an intricate step and are now looking perplexed. "I didn't show you the end, that's what happened. Okay. Watch." He walks to the centre of the studio, holding on to his large plastic bottle of Spa water, and stands there for a few seconds, concentrating on a spot on the floor. He is a big man with a build that makes him look more like a decathlon champion than a dancer.

Suddenly he lifts his head, his light blue eyes focus on the mirrored wall and he leaps across the studio with unexpected lightness, still clutching the Spa bottle, while the dancers look on, wiping the sweat off their brows. "Got it? Come on, let's see it."

The vast studios in the Rue Bara, which were the residence of the Ballet of the 20th Century for over two decades,



have been empty and silent for over a year, ever since Maurice Béjart left Brussels and moved with his company to Lausanne. Now the floors vibrate once again to dancers' jumps, and the corridors echo to music. David, the rehearsal pianist, has returned to play for these dancers who form Brussels's new resident company.

The Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris is the slightly awkward new name of the Mark Morris Dance Group which Morris headed for eight years in the United States. The company arrived in Brussels less than a month ago, leaving family and friends to follow the man who at 32 is acclaimed as one of the most gifted choreographers of his generation.

"In him American modern dance recaptures its youth," wrote *The New Yorker's* dance critic. The rest of her colleagues agreed. "What sets Morris apart from most of his contemporaries is his extraordinary musicality," wrote *Time*. "Morris has an astounding ability to invent or summon fresh vocabulary for each of his dances. He has, as Beethoven observed of Schubert, 'the divine spark,'" claimed *Dance Magazine*. "Mr Morris is the heir to two great American traditions: classical ballet and modern dance," declared *The Wall Street Journal*.



Morris, Handel score in hand, explaining a movement to his dancers last week

Winner of a Guggenheim fellowship and a Bessie Award for choreography, Morris caused a storm in New York's dance world when the news of his departure for Europe broke this spring. There was bitter regret that America had allowed one of its most gifted sons to be lured away. Many wondered how Brussels had managed to acquire him.

The answer was simple. There had been a rift between Gerard Mortier, director of the National Opera, and Maurice Béjart, head of the Ballet of the 20th Century attached to the Opera. Béjart had left, taking his company with him.

When Mortier went to Stuttgart to see American director Peter Sellars and his version of *Così fan tutte*, Sellars told Mortier about an exciting new choreographer currently performing in the city. Mortier went to see Morris and his troupe perform, and was captivated. He asked company manager Barry Alterman to join him, together with Mark Morris, to "discuss things." In an obscure Spanish restaurant they talked for eight hours, and at the end Mortier formally invited them to move to Brussels. Morris accepted.

As an American magazine commented, "Plenty of American choreographers have worked and are working in Europe. There is nothing unusual about American dancers working in Europe either. What was unheard of was a European buying an American ensemble lock, stock and barrel: choreographer, repertory, dancers, manager and all."

Morris himself, taking a brief break from class, says, "The more we talked that night in Stuttgart, the more the possibility of my settling in Brussels began to seem less unreal and feel more concrete. I was attracted by the sheer, undreamed-of luxury of it all: three theatres for our performances, studios, a permanent pianist and a living wage for my dancers. But what clinched it for me

was what in the United States is beyond any small company's wildest dreams — dancing to a live orchestra.

"For me, music comes first. I have learned more about choreography from Handel than from watching other people's dance. It was an offer I couldn't refuse. Besides," he adds as an afterthought, "I hate New York."

He wasn't sure how many of his dancers would be willing to come with him. "But they *all* came, without a single defection. It's good, because they're all my friends. I told them to be prepared to suffer culture shock for the first month, but in fact they are doing fine." →

COVER STORY: THE NEW MAN AT THE MONNAIE

Besides the 13 American members of his own company, Morris has brought over some dancers who had already worked with him in the States and subsequently joined other companies, plus the ones he picked at the auditions last summer in Brussels and in New York, where no fewer than 500 dancers showed up.

From the 300 who auditioned in Brussels he chose an Italian girl from the Mudra school, a Belgian girl of Indonesian origin, a German boy (both from the Pina Bausch school in Essen) and an American boy working in Germany. The company is now 18 strong, plus 11 dancers taken on a temporary basis for Handel's *Allegro*. Morris himself will be dancing with the troupe, though not in *Allegro*.

During the break between class and rehearsal the cafeteria downstairs is filled with American chatter, a swapping of tales about apartment hunting ("they're so big here"), second-hand washing machines ("they're so small"), and the difficulty of communicating in beginners' French. ("How do you say 'I'll think about it'?") Someone has just received a copy of a New York weekly, and they all stand together reading the review of Morris's latest work for American Ballet Theater, *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes*, which is a rave.

Morris has changed his dark, sweat-drenched T-shirt for a fresh yellow one and heads for the counter. "Anyone want to share an artichoke?" No one does. He settles for an omelette. "The kitchen lady is wonderful," he says, smiling at the woman who has played mother to hundreds of Mudra students and Béjart dancers throughout the last decade. He likes cooking but, "I haven't bought all the stuff for it yet, so I go to the Mort Subite for supper."

The café is his favourite hangout. Two years ago he choreographed a piece for the Boston Ballet with the same name, because while on tour in Paris he had drunk Mort Subite beer and liked it. "The name, not the beer."

Morris is still living in the temporary accommodation the Monnaie found for him when he arrived, but he likes it so much he might decide to keep it. "It's a duplex in an old house in Ixelles. From my windows I can see trees. I like the neighbourhood, it feels real. I often pass by the Horta house, though I haven't been inside yet. I'm keeping that as a treat for a bad day."

The lunch break is short and everyone climbs upstairs to the studio. It's going to be a long day, rehearsing *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* by Handel, after poems by Milton, for the premiere at the Monnaie in November. "We work on Sunday, too, because the piece is two-and-a-half hours long. That's a lot. It's



Mark Morris dances full out to show the dancers, instead of just explaining the steps verbally

hard because it's very good music, and I don't want to do anything stupid to it."

Morris's mother and one of his two sisters are coming from Seattle, Washington, for the premiere and, after the winter season in December, with a mixed bill from the company repertory they will go to Spain together, before Morris gets back to work on his new *Dido and Aeneas* for the March premiere.

"I love Spain," he says. "I lived in Madrid for almost a year after finishing high school. I was studying flamenco, which is how I started when I was a kid. I was nine when my mother took me to see José Greco and I really fell for Spanish dance. So I asked if I could learn it. Another mother would have said 'Yes dear, some other day,' but my mother is different."

After flamenco, the teenage Morris joined Koleda, a folk group which did Bulgarian and Yugoslav dances, a period that left an imprint on him and on his work. "Mastering those fiendish, complex rhythms was terrific training, and dancing with people I liked is something I still need today."

At 19, after a year of classical ballet, he left his native Seattle for New York, where he found a job in the Eliot Feld Ballet, then went on to work with other choreographers, among them Lar Lubovitch and Twyla Tharp, before forming his own group in 1980.

Rehearsals resume. Morris holds the Handel score in one hand, a cigarette in the other and whistles the aria while reading the score, sketching steps that lead to the part he wants to work on today. When he reaches the passage he dances full out to show the dancers, instead of explaining it verbally. It's a strenuous endeavour most choreographers avoid when they can. It's not long before the bright yellow T-shirt is soaked through, too.

Critics have tried in vain to define Morris's style. No sooner have they found a neat way of describing his choreography than he comes up with something different. He has done Romantic dances, humorous dances, neo-classical dances and there seems to be no end to his interests.

At a press conference last week in the studio in the Rue Bara, Morris, relaxed, speaking in English and wearing a pink triangle on his lapel, was asked how he would describe his style and his "philosophy of dance." He answered: "I can't. A style is described by other people. I would say my style is musical, probably somewhat Romantic, at least on a good day."

On November 23, dance lovers in Brussels will finally be able to experience for themselves the elusive Mark Morris style when they see the new resident company in action.