

ASPECTS OF DANCE

CHOREOGRAPHERS

FOR A YOUNG American choreographer-dancer to be appointed to a top job in Belgian's artistic life is a coup; for his entire company of American dancers to be invited along with him as well is probably a precedent. At least Mark Morris thinks it may be, but then he more than anyone has had cause to reflect on the matter, for last month he took over as Directeur de la Danse at the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels, a position which makes him, in effect, the successor to Maurice Bejart.

Bejart of course departed last year lock, stock and company to Lausanne, and the promise of improved working condition. Morris, whose reputation has been steadily growing in the US during the eighties - Arlene Croce has called him "a dancemaker and a spellbinder . . . transparently a symbol of his time" - has signed a three-year contract with the Theatre de la Monnaie giving him what he believes are excellent working conditions.

Initially he wondered if the invitation was a joke, "and I thought who's kidding whom? Then I heard more about it, and thought how could anyone possibly refuse. I can work with live music all the time, and that's an enormous luxury for any dance company, especially a modern dance company in the States."

We were talking during the Edinburgh Festival, where he had stopped off en route to Brussels for the British premiere by the Houston Grand Opera company of Nixon in China. Morris was the choreographer of this celebrated collaboration with John Adams, Alice Goodman and Peter Sellars.

It signalled a new departure for opera, and the Houston press officer promised that to talk to him would in itself be something of a new departure.

He is tall and large-boned, bright and sparky, casually expressive and bursting with grand scale ideas. His informal gear and shoulder-length hair created an impression that when we got to the studio became incongruous, for he changed into a strict disciplinarian. He gave a ballet warm-up, never relaxing into easy repetitions but setting exercises with a choreographed precision. Lacking a pianist he seized a convenient stick and beat it out on the ground to make sure that everyone shared the urgency of his rhythms - and he

Morris in Brussels

Mark Morris takes a unique opportunity in Belgium

roundly ticked off one dancer for chewing sugar and not concentrating.

The impression of Morris in class was also quite different from memories of his two visits to London during Dance Umbrella Festivals (1984/85) when he and a handful of his (normally 18-strong) company showed a relaxed and witty approach to choreography that flowed with the ease of a doodling pen. He says that it was not a true representation of his work.

Aged 32, he formed Mark Morris and Dancers in Seattle at the start of the eighties, and before that danced with Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Hanna Kahn and Laura Dean, choreographing whenever he could. Over the years he has developed grandiose ideas. First on the schedule for Brussels is Handel's L'Allegro (the premiere is on November 23); Vivaldi, Poulenc and Stravinsky are planned for another programme, and he wants to do Purcell's Dido and Aeneas and possibly dance all the characters himself. He has to present six weeks of work in the theatre each year, and to do some international touring which includes the US (there is money in his new theatre he says). He hopes to start a school, but not for the really young, more of a workshop for dancers of a certain standard, and to provide something for the community as well. He is used to having to rent a costly studio, and to having to work out where the money for his dancers is coming from. Now he has six studios, salaried dancers and luxurious rehearsal periods.

Everything he could ask for is being handed to him on a plate, but he sounds remarkably ebullient and confident about it. "Of course I have doubts every time I make up a piece, but I don't have suicidal doubts." Nor does he sit around waiting for the muse to strike, the ideas are just there, though: "I read some books, I listen to enormous amounts of music, I have smart friends who spur me on, and I have a group of dancers that I think is just great. They're adults they're not clones; they're all individual personalities, many times complicated just like regular people, they're all highly musical and they're all extremely versatile."

He has not had much formal music training. His father was an amateur keyboard player and taught him to read music, he did some theory and some singing as he was growing up and always he listened to music. His homework is musical and geometric - but he is not



Choreographer MARK MORRIS - "a symbol of his time."

averse to jettisoning preparation if a different solution presents itself in the studio.

Even if hours have gone into the planning? "Yes, but it's not like I sit down and work, because I work all the time. My working life is not different from my real life. I don't waste time developing a style, a style is what everybody else sees in common from piece to piece, and I can see some of that stuff, but I want people to be people dancing instead of putting on that dancer mask."

The results have been defined by a critic in San Francisco as a mixture of "sophisticated musicality, bizarre wit and flagrant theatricality". Like Bejart he is different, but there the similarities end, and anyone in Belgium anticipating continuity is in for a surprise.