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DANCE / Roger Downey

# Morris in excelsis

The 'Wizard of Seattle' takes the world dance spotlight

L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato  
Theatre de la Monnaie, Brussels  
November 22

**H**AD THERE BEEN NO PROTEST, THAT would have been a surprise. Belgium is not a rich country, and its French- and Flemish-speaking citizens are jealous enough of each other when it comes to sharing out the funds the state devotes to culture. And here, in the national temple of art, was a production budgeted in the millions of francs, created by an American unknown in Europe, performed by a virtually all-American company of 24. Half an hour before the curtain rose on the premiere of Mark Morris'

latest work, as the first furred and Hornburg'd invited guests arrived in the Place de la Monnaie, they were met by two dozen or so determined but soft-spoken young people, offering to each a red carnation and a handbill calling upon the management of the Monnaie and the national cultural authorities to "accord a real opportunity for the development of a dance reflecting our national cultural sensibilities."

A visiting stranger can wish the young protesters well of their cause without being inclined to bet on its success. Brussels is no longer just the capital of Belgium, but the home of NATO and the seat of the annually more powerful parliament and administration of united Europe. The director of the Monnaie, the intelligent and ambitious Gerard Mortier, intends his house to be an international force in music, opera, and dance. And that is why an American dance troupe that a year ago was living hand-to-mouth in Seattle and New York finds itself today a certified Belgian national treasure, with all that that entails.

Among the things it entails are: the services of a full orchestra and resident professional chorus; an enormous studio building comprising a spacious suite of offices, five large rehearsal rooms, a costume shop, vast storage bays, a garage, and an in-house commissary; a publications department capable of producing a 60-page bound souvenir program printed in three languages with 14 four-color illustrations (among them four reproductions from William Blake's hand-printed, hand-colored *Milton*, courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library), and a full-time administrative and technical staff of 14, not to mention the support of the 1,100-seat Monnaie itself, with a staff of 400 or so.

A lot of similarly "established" artists around Europe labor mightily to maintain their artistic bona fides by producing vehemently anti-establishment work. Had Morris wished to identify himself with them, he could have opened his company's tenure here with his *Mythologies*, a three-part shocker based on philosopher Roland Barthes' essays on such phenomena as soap commercials, television wrestling, and the art of striptease. Instead, given the angst- and aggression-ridden tone of most contemporary European dance, he has created something far riskier: an hour-and-45-minute plotless celebration of civility, tranquility, and joy.

George Frederick Handel's 1740 setting of John Milton's paired "pastoral epos" *L'Allegro* and *Il penseroso* is one of the German composer's most ebullient works, an expansive sequence of tone-pictures of dawn and birdsong, peasant merriment and moonlit solitudes that seems almost designed to accompany a suite of contrasting dances.

Morris makes plenty of use of this aspect of the score: a male soloist (Donald Mouton and Jon Mensinger alternate the role) emerges from a swirl of swallows "to come in spite of sorrow/and at my window bid good morrow"; two girls flee through a mobile forest from mounted riders, snuffling dogs,

and hyperactive huntsman (Keith Sebado); three graces and nine-muses trip "in a ring/and round about Jove's altar sing."

But for the most part Morris draws upon Milton's imagery indirectly. The poet's "wand'ring moon," his slow-swinging, sulken-roaring ocean, even the youths and maids dancing in the chequer'd shade are represented by groupings and sequences of gesture that transcend illustration.

In his opening night review in Brussels' *Le Soir*, Charles Philippon captured perfectly the "corporeal sculptures comparable to Botticelli's paintings of mythological subjects; pastoral scenes from some Boucher, or, again, the movement and natural grace of Fragonard; a hunting scene stamped upon a Gobelintapestry, evocation of *basses-danses* of the middle ages; Renaissance court ballet, stylizations of village rounds and popular dances."

But no quantity of such references, however beautifully conceived and executed, could hold an audience's interest for close on two hours. Morris, like Milton and Handel before him, sustains his polychrome surfaces upon an almost subliminal unity of texture that becomes legible only upon close examination. On a second viewing I was just beginning to identify the tissue of gestural themes of which the whole is composed, and I would need several more visits to be confident I understood the way in which they are wreathed together in the constant flow of the dance.

As always, it is this grand momentum combined with effortless mastery of space which places Morris among the very finest choreographers living and dead—and, of course, his musical sensitivity, which often conveys the feeling that he has found his way into the very mind and soul of the composer. At no point during *L'Allegro* does one for a moment lose contact with Handel or Milton. Somehow the choreography remains transparent to the music while asserting its own identity. Adrienne Lobel's lovely, chaste geometric designs, like Barnett Newman colored by Rothko, and James Ingalls' lambent lighting—silver, pewter, gold—enhance the atmosphere of the piece, as do Monnaie costumer Christine van Loon's understatedly elegant costumes. But these dances could be presented on a bare stage in rehearsal clothes or no clothes at all without losing an iota of their genial force.

Despite the immense expenditure and effort involved, Morris' *L'Allegro*, like Milton's and Handel's, makes the effect of utter simplicity, of self-evidence. Like the pastoral genre itself, whose conventions are a good 2,000 years old, it invites us, through the most sophisticated means, to celebrate our common humanity.

The United States will not see *L'Allegro* until the fall of 1990 at the earliest; unless extraordinary sources of funding should develop, it won't be seen there at all. This is regrettable. But had Morris and his company remained in the United States, it would never have come into existence in the first place, and that would have been more regrettable still. ■