

REVIEWS

DANCE

Tripping the Light Fantastick

Whatever his merit, almost any new choreographer would have found it hard to exorcise the ghost of Maurice Béjart the artistic figure who dominated the Belgian dance scene for nearly three decades. But at the Monnaie last week, **Mark Morris** and his **Monnaie Dance Group** succeeded with astonishing ease in capturing the approval and affection of the first-night audience. Spontaneous applause greeted the end of the very first movement and kept breaking out all during the performance.

L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed il Moderato, based on poems by Milton set to music by Handel, is a full-length work which revealed to a public as yet unacquainted with the Mark Morris style the reason why so many of his compatriots believe that he is the most original American talent to have emerged in years.

The two poems by Milton, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, were divided into

short sections in contrapuntal fashion by English author Charles Jennens who structured the libretto as a dialogue between one who extols joy and delight and the other who muses about melancholy and poetic gloom. *Il Moderato* was Jennens's own idea, his resolution of their differences.

There is no story, only a constantly changing landscape of moods. They give Morris the opportunity to choreograph a string of dances that follow one another without necessarily being a visualization of the words. Here lies the greatest charm of this triple layer of words, music and movement: Morris's treatment of Handel's treatment of Milton. The unpredictability of the choices is what makes the work so enchanting.

When the curtain goes up after the overture, the stage is divided in depth into five receding frames that repeat the proscenium stage. The coloured lighting on the five luminous frames, the changes of tone brought about by de-

scending and rising scrims, from gold, scarlet and emerald through many half-tones, are the only scenery and the only props. They are used with great skill by designer Adrienne Lobel and light engineer James F. Ingolls to create endless variations of atmosphere.

The barefoot dancers enter running diagonally across stage, reaching upward, the girls dressed in floating chiffon dresses, the boys in wide-sleeved loose gauze shirts (by Christine Van Loon), a crowd of creatures in woodland colours — russet, dark green, earth browns, muted blues — turning rapidly as though riding with the breeze. Then three girls and two boys dance together slowly, pensively, with recurrent arms patterns, the bodies of the girls bending gently backwards as they are lifted high into the air, finally running back into the wings at the end of the sequence as though swept by a strong wind.

It's a short movement but it contains much of what one later realizes is so emblematic of Morris's style. First of all the simplicity, the way of moving with the body instead of against it, of letting the dancers' sensibility come through



The dancers: each one of them has a distinct personality, a sense of freshness and wonder that makes every movement shine

instead of demanding union as in a corps de ballet, his very personal way of weaving in and out of the rhythmic pattern as opposed to the one-beat, one-step school, the alternate use of identical movements for men and women.

As the tenor sings the Allegro's invitation to "Jest and youthful jollity," three boys accept and launch into a very funny dance, swinging, sketching a Charleston step, careening over on their backs, kicking up their legs in a friendly contest with the singer's words, "Sport, that wrinkled Care derides, and Laughter, holding both his sides." As the Chorus joins in, so do all the girls, mirroring the boys' antics.

To the Penseroso's aria for soprano and harpsichord that follows, Morris has his dancers simply walking slowly, almost ritually, in parallel lines in opposite directions across the stage, the first row in the dark, their black profiles silhouetted against the scrim that separates them from the other rows in the light, while a boy and a girl wander through the lines of dancers searching for each other. It is simple, yet incredibly effective.

There are parts that recall the timelessness of folk dances as when the chorus sings, "Join with thee Peace and Quiet" with two lines of men linked as in Macedonian dances, or "Let the merry bells ring round" near the end of the first part when all the dancers holding arms form patterns of rows, circles and squares.

At times, Morris can't resist the temptation to make up fanciful stories to accompany the text as in the delightful hunting scene to "Listen how the hounds and horn/Cheerly rouse the slumb'ring morn," with some dancers pretending to be trees, others a pack of hounds while a hunting party keeps strutting by trying to look regal and two girls (vixen or deer?) barely manage to escape.

I admired the freedom and skill with which Morris handles the tempi, sometimes opposing total immobility or a slow motion to a fast flute solo, other times competing with the trill of the coloratura soprano, and the seeming ease he displays in handling solos, small groups and the entire ensemble. While his care for detail is remarkable, he can also make 27 dancers look as if they were 72. On the whole, I can't help feeling that the work would gain in effectiveness if some movements in the second half, such as the gymnastic pas de deux, were eliminated and if the production could be seen without the interval.

All choreographic considerations aside, it would be unfair not to praise

the dancers for their musicality, intelligence and stamina. Each one of them has a distinct personality, yet they have in common a sense of freshness and wonder that makes every movement shine. Watching them relate to one another, one senses their wholehearted joy in dancing.

Luisa Moffett

Marcel Croës writes: We are so accustomed to seeing dance performed to taped music that it came as a pleasant change to hear a live orchestra accompanying the Monnaie Dance Group, even if the local ensemble was not quite up to the stylistic demands of Handel's pastoral ode.

The overture, a Concerto Grosso from op. 6, sounded laboured and dull. Later, despite some good contributions from individual players (the flute solo in Philomèle's aria, the oboe in Part II,

the cello throughout), it felt as though the Monnaie orchestra was unfamiliar with Baroque performance practices. The five American singers, three sopranos, a tenor and baritone, ranged from barely satisfying to faultless. The best moments came from soprano Jeanne Ommerlé and baritone James Maddalena.

Only the chorus (and their masters Johannes Mikkelsen and Guido Vermandere) deserves unqualified praise. Their perfect intonation and excellent musicality provided the most thrilling moments of the evening. Craig Smith is an experienced conductor, who has often been associated with Peter Sellars's American productions of Handel and Mozart. To judge him fairly, we should wait until December when his own Boston ensemble joins him in Brussels.