

DANCE

Recurring Images

After the unqualified success of Mark Morris's *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* which inaugurated the arrival of his new Monnaie Dance Group, the question was, What do you do for an encore? The answer is Vivaldi's *Gloria*, which was the highlight of the mixed programme at the Monnaie last week.

Choreographed in 1984, a work in a completely different vein from *L'Allegro*, this is further proof of Morris's intimate involvement with the music and texts he tackles. A lot has been said about his love and knowledge of music, but the essential point is the power, directness and originality with which he conveys them through the language of dance. The means he uses are simple, almost austere: no dazzling acrobatics, no eye-catching scenery.

The 10 dancers wear plain grey clothes, their kinetic vocabulary is natural, drawn from everyday movements — they walk, run, fall, slide, skip — but the whole of these parts is far greater than their components. They add up to another outstanding work.

After the first orchestral bars of the *Gloria*, the opening image is brief and somewhat mysterious. A man, Keith Sabado, and a woman, Teri Weksler, face the audience side by side. He is lying on his stomach inching slowly forward as though in a ritual of penitence, while she walks stiffly, perhaps searching for her way in the dark. He stands up, leaps in the air, then crashes just as suddenly to the ground. And that's all. The stage is plunged into darkness as the chorus launches into the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*.

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The two movements, the inching forward and the tentative steps recur throughout, seeming to be two aspects of the yearning and groping for the divine. There are other briefly recurring images, like the dancer pressing his outstretched hand against another's forehead in a suggestion of baptism, but whether or not one is as intrigued by Morris's gestural shorthand as I was, what counts is the impact and sweep of the dance as it expresses the range of feelings in Vivaldi's music.

There are beautiful solos: David Landis's moving and emotional dancing to *E in terra pax hominibus*. Teri Weksler looking as lost and vulnerable as a child: Keith Sabado's dramatic moment during the contralto singing of *Donie Deus, Agnus Dei*, when he falls on the stage as if thrown to earth from a great height. There are exultant ensembles, as in *Laudamus te* with the dancers joyously kicking up their heels, and the swift, compelling energy of *Quoniam tu Solus Sanctus*. Morris manages to make the sublime seem uncomplicated, a trait that has disappointed some critics who equate obscurity with profundity.

Frisson to Stravinsky's Symphonies of Wind Instruments is as coolly astringent as the music. It unfolds slowly into geometric shapes and imperfectly held balances, with poses held in profile after the manner of Egyptian friezes or even hints of Nijinsky's *Après un Fau*. It has the elusive charm of those works that are really more interesting to make or perform than to look at.

Ten Suggestion, a solo to Alexander Tcherepnin's piano piece, *Bagatelles*, was our first chance to see Morris on stage and revealed the very special qualities of his own dancing, the unexpected contrast between his bulky, almost threatening, body and the grace it can create on stage. The speed with which he can switch from full power to child-like gentleness and biting irony leaves one astonished.

On a dark stage, as the pianist starts to play, three cones of light from above illuminate a green chair on the left, a hat on the right, and then Morris's entrance with multiple turns. From then on it's a succession of short dances, delightfully bewildering in their patchwork of humour, pathos and mockery. I've never seen anyone who can look so silly in such an intelligent way, and pack so many throwaway choreographic ideas in such a compact space of time. He picks up a child's hoop, but holds it up solemnly as if he were imitating Isadora Duncan; he puts on the hat and becomes a vaudeville actor, yet without stopping long enough for a gesture to turn into pantomime. I would never



Tivoit Morris (centre) takes a curtain call with his dancers at Thursday's dress rehearsal

have thought that anyone with his physique could remind me, with a movement that ripples through his body for no more than a second, of both Chaplin and an Oriental dancer, but in this kaleidoscope of a dance he did it.

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano which Francis Poulenc composed for Benny Goodman, has five couples dressed in black tops, red tights and lemon-coloured gloves, with one leading figure in the reverse colour combination, a role Morris had created for himself but

is now seen with Keith Sabado.

Morris makes repeated use of the canon form and goes for a formality of structure quite different from his other works. The gloved hands describe slowly curving yellow lines against the black tops, an effect reminiscent of the early Alwin Nikolais. But in spite of some lovely moments, the Sonata as a whole did not seem a major work. The musical duo was hauntingly performed by clarinetist Raymond Dils and pianist André Grignard.

Luisa Moffett



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