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Dance: An American in Brussels

Paul L. Montgomery
New York Times Service

BRUSSELS — The American choreographer Mark Morris and his dance company have a triumph in their new role as residents in the Monnaie Theater, succeeding Maurice Béjart.

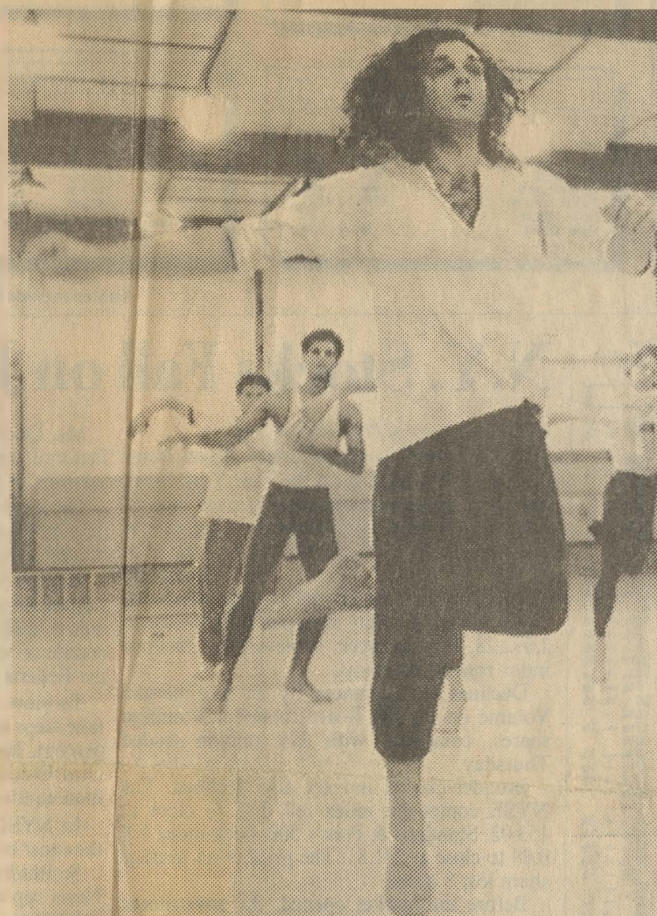
The world premiere of Morris's "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato," set to Handel's music and based on Milton's odes, got long applause and glowing reviews. *Le Soir*, the leading French-language newspaper, compared Morris's arrival to the glittery days when Belgium was part of the Burgundian and Hapsburg kingdoms and the monarch made festive visits to be received by the nobility.

The departure of Béjart last year in a huff for Lausanne, Switzerland was a traumatic event in the cultural life of Brussels. The French-born choreographer and his Ballet of the 20th Century had made a name for the city in the realm of dance from the time Béjart arrived in 1959.

The cause of the departure was a power dispute with Gérard Mortier, a 42-year-old former lawyer who runs the Monnaie Theater. Mortier's opera company has become one of the most prominent in Europe, building on small-scale productions of Mozart.

After the dispute Mortier wooed Morris, offering him Béjart's rehearsal studio, generous contracts for the members of the Mark Morris Dance Group and the opportunity of a full winter season with live orchestral music.

In September Morris, a 32-year-old from Seattle, and many of the American dancers who had been with him during his eight years in New York emigrated to Brussels. Mortier had found apartments for them, given them contracts for at least twice their New York wages (average wages in Brussels are believed to be about \$25,000 a year) and given Morris the security of a theatrical home. Morris says it was the security that made him hesitate, since he says he thrives on risk, but his company manager, Barry Alter-



Jiri Jiru/The New York Times

The American choreographer Mark Morris in his Brussels studio.

he says. The Monnaie, built in the 19th century and recently renovated, has 1,176 seats.

For the 24 dancers in the company it is a different life from New York, not having to call up every day to find where the company is meeting or working in restaurants to make ends meet. "Our opportunities are definitely better," said Ruth Davidson, a 32-year-old New Yorker who has been with Morris since 1980. "But I've been writing home to my parents that this is the Cincinnati of Europe."

Many of the American dancers seem to have seen enough of the city's persistent cold winter rains and provincial attitudes. "I understand now that it's cold and it's gray," said Keith Sabado, 34. "But my French is getting a little bit better and my spousal unit arrives soon and I miss them desperately."

"Yeah," said Morris, an outspoken, welcoming man who wore the pink triangle of the gay activist on his lapel for his first news conference in Brussels, "people are freaked out here. They're not happy every second. But who is happy every second?"

For the preview Morris skipped the champagne reception sponsored by a leading bank to drink beer with his dancers. He already speaks a serviceable French — "I've been to France a million times," he said — and was looking forward to the company's tour this month to Spain, where he studied flamenco as a teenager.

"I don't know, I'm so relieved to be out of the States, with the election and all," Morris said. "It's so depressing there. I'm sure that Belgium will change my work. Indigestion will change my work, if you want to know the truth."

man, says it is nice not looking for rehearsal space the first thing in the morning.

Morris's work is considered more formal and less gimmicky than Béjart's. Morris is known for his adherence to literature and music — he has said he had learned more about choreography from Handel than from other people's dances — and he was uncompromising in his first work.

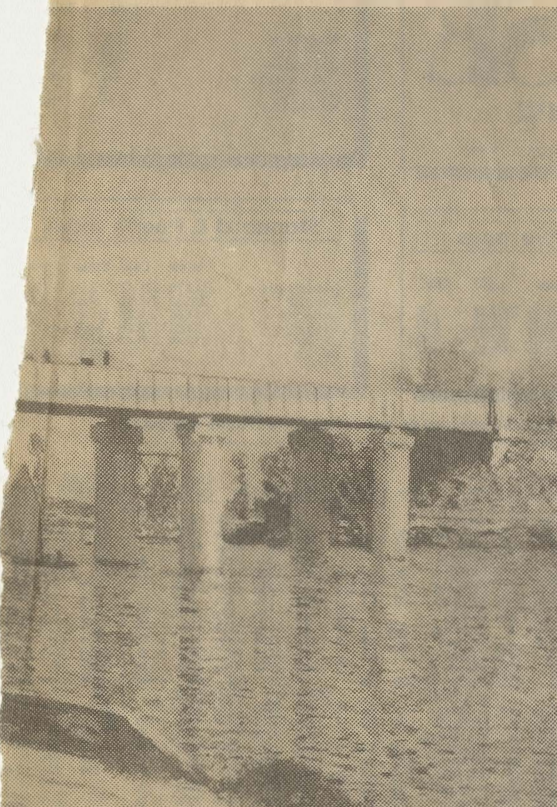
It begins with Handel's Concerto Grosso in B Major as an overture, 15 minutes with the curtain closed and no dancing. When the set is

revealed it is six muted slots on each side of the stage, and a series of vertical black lines behind — like the staves on music paper. Dancers in berry-colored costumes come out leaping singly, in couples and triplets, and other permutations, like notes on the paper. During the 2 hours and 20 minutes of the work there are ensemble sections and something like square dancing.

Morris refuses to discuss the meaning of his work. "Every moment changes your perspective, every seat changes your perspective,"

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percent thanks to the Picasso and the two Monets which accounted for £34.37 million.

A day later it was Sotheby's turn to make the same kind of mistakes. Not having the fortune of counting stars of such magnitude as the 1904 Picasso, they were less successful at keeping up an appearance of victory. In the evening session where sales amounted to £38.8 million, the failure rate exceeded 22 percent in value, with 27 lots out of 96 remaining stranded. Most revealing is the high proportion of failures in the first part of the sale. The pictures came from the collection of the late Gisèle Rueff-Béghin, who passed away in 1983, not from sundry commercial sources. If seven out of 26 pictures were bought in, this can only be a result of the disproportionate estimates either imposed by the vendors or submitted in the course of intense competition.

"Danseuse aux bras levés," by Degas, estimated to be worth £500,000 to £700,000, was unsold at £420,000. With the right leg that looks disoriented and something seemingly wrong in

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