

Mark Morris

THEATRE DE LA MONNAIE, BRUSSELS

For more than a quarter of a century, Maurice Béjart and his Ballet of the Twentieth Century were the pride of Brussels. Two years ago, after disagreement with the administration of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Béjart and his dancers took off for Lausanne, leaving what must have seemed a gaping artistic void for the Belgian public.

It is vastly to the credit of Gérard Mortier, director of the Monnaie, that he should have invited Mark Morris and his troupe to replace Béjart as the opera house's resident company, for there could be no greater contrast with the messages and philosophising that are Béjart's stock in trade than the musical sensibilities and choreographic inventiveness of the young American creator.

Morris, New York's darling, was admired in London during the Dance Umbrella seasons of 1984 and 1985. It was significant that one of his works shown then was *Songs that tell a Story*. The title was indicative of creative procedures, as the words of songs – ranging from Vivaldi arias to pop – fired dancing both ingenious and elegant. In his setting of Handel's ode *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato*, which has just started his first Brussels season, the images of Milton's verses, their resonances and musical repercussions, are central to the choreography.

An excellent programme note by Roger Downey discusses the score's origins, in the idea of Charles Jennens, Handel's collaborator, to interweave Milton's two pastoral

odes as a dialogue, with Jennens' own feeble verses for *Il Moderato* reconciling the poet's joyous and contemplative views. Morris explores both Handel and Milton in an evening-long span of fluent, beautiful dancing that gives us a third layer of meaning to the music and poetry. Sometimes his manner seems simple, as when the phrase "smoothing the rugged brow of night" gains immediate gestural realisation in a duet between a man and woman. Sometimes, as in "Haste thee, nymph, and bring with thee/Jest and youthful Jollity," the dance bubbles with humour: three men sport and fall about, and the corps de ballet follows suit at the choral reprise of the words. Sometimes, and here Morris touches greatness, the dance opens up enormous vistas on to the European pastoral tradition: the aria "Mirth, admit me of thy crew/To listen how the hound and horn . . ." occasions a hunting scene so potent in realisation as the dancers impersonate the hunt and its setting, that eye and mind crowd with allusions. We are aware of images owed to Renaissance festivities, to many centuries of such scenes in painting and literature.

The choreography is everywhere responsive to Milton's mind as to Handel's forms, moving from ring dances to friezes of action, playing with ideas in happiest and most adventurous fashion, showing us the moon sailing through the night sky, "or birds in flight, or the slapstick of "the well-trod stage." Morris has,



Scene from *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato*

indeed, created a form of dance-drama wherein the play of language and music is mirrored for us in another and no less apt medium.

With dance as pictorially, dynamically rich as this, stage decoration has to be minimal. Adrienne Lobel provides a succession of gauzes, admirably lit by James Ingalls, to create a world for Morris's choreography, and Christine van Loon dresses the dozen couples of the cast with comparable economy and elegance. The evening is unalloyed delight, and a triumphant vindication of Morris's right to be in Brussels.

What Morris is doing in *L'Al-*

legro and certain other works begs comparison with those "music realisations" which are part of his ancestry in the early days of American Modern Dance. Then, with the Denishawn troupe, or even with Isadora, the dance spoke innocently about the music. Morris's response to his scores can seem both the most innocent and the most sophisticated. His second Monnaie programme last week brought pieces already created in New York. *Frisson* was set to Stravinsky's wind symphonies, the cast moving and posing with rigid arms and extended legs like frozen blocks of activity.

The Poulenc clarinet sonata occasioned a response difficult to grasp as a male soloist and five couples signalled unguessable feelings at us.

Morris's own solo appearance in *Ten Suggestions*, using Cherepnin's piano bagatelles, was witty but more than a little ambiguous. A generous figure in pink satin pyjamas, he flicked dance aphorisms at us, yearned with a hoop, and could not stop me thinking of Isadora in her later years.

The most considerable piece of the evening, the Vivaldi *Gloria*, was as unexpected in its response to the text as Kenneth MacMillan's use of the

Poulenc setting. Morris offers a vision of suffering mankind in quest of forgiveness and mercy for the indignities of the human condition. Grey costumed figures drag themselves over the stage, rear up, and seem unmoved by others' anguish. It is far from conventional in its piety, and in its starkness comments upon the need for the prayer itself. Like everything in these two evenings it was danced with tremendous physical clarity. Brussels has reason to be proud of the new tenants at the Monnaie.

Clement Crisp