

d a n c e

Morris' 'L'Allegro' a masterpiece

Monnaie Dance Group / Mark Morris
In "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso Ed Il Moderato," by Georg Frideric Handel, after poems by John Milton. At the Theatre de la Monnaie, Brussels, Belgium, through Dec. 21.

By Christine Temin
 Globe Staff

BRUSSELS — With his first work made in his new home, Mark Morris has demolished the myth of the American artist who, spurred on by hardship, outstrips his pampered, state-supported, unmotivated European peers. Within three months of becoming state-supported himself — in September he transplanted his American company to Brussels, where they are given salaries, studios, theaters and a full-time masseuse, all at government expense — the 32-year-old from Seattle has created a masterpiece whose scale and ambition far exceed anything he's tried before. Indeed, his 2½-hour, 24-dancer setting of Handel's pastoral ode after poems by Milton stands to become a modern dance landmark.

And "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso Ed Il Moderato" is emphatically a modern dance, reaffirming values that began with Isadora Duncan. It is performed barefoot, by dancers who use gravity rather than defy it, who aren't afraid of their own weight. "L'Allegro" is, of course, the work Morris was supposed to do with Boston Ballet, until, after a year of planning, the ballet abruptly canceled the premiere that was to have opened its 1987 season, choosing instead to play it safe with a revival of "Giselle." Everything turned out for the best. Ballet dancers never could have performed the very different work Morris subsequently created, and that work, in its current form, is majestic. It also retains strong ties to Boston: It is being conducted by Craig Smith, music director of Emmanuel Music in Boston, and the five soloists, Lorraine Hunt, Jeanne Ommerle, Jayne West, Frederick Urrey and James Maddalena, sing often in Boston. Two of Morris' other collaborators, set designer Adrienne



Photo © Klaus Lefebvre

A scene from Mark Morris' "L'Allegro."

Lobel and lighting designer James F. Ingalls, are in the orbit of Peter Sellars, the Harvard-trained theater prodigy.

Seeing "L'Allegro" twice was not enough, given its complex interweaving of music, movement and text. George Balanchine trained American audiences to understand how closely music and the vocabulary of classical dance could work together. Morris, the most musical choreographer since Balanchine, does something similar, but with an idiosyncratic vocabulary that incorporates everything from somersaults to shivers. In "L'Allegro," though, he goes one step further, layering in Milton's words (and those of Handel's librettist, Charles Jennens, who resolved the extremes of Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" with his own "Il Moderato," which is part of the text both Handel and Morris used). Anyone lucky enough to see "L'Allegro" half a dozen times or so would, I imagine, come away with a heightened awareness of how intimately words, sounds and choreography can intermingle.

Baroque music sometimes inspires pseudo-historical curlicues in both dance and design. Morris reads the music more deeply, and the curtain opens — after a 15-minute overture that proclaims

Morris' commitment to the supremacy of the score — on Lobel's bare stage framed in severe gray and white that suggests the matting for a photograph. Then the dancers claim the deep space of one of Europe's most glorious opera houses, rushing in long diagonals over a dark and shadowy stage, eventually gathering into formations suggesting a temple's pediment frieze. "Hence, loathed Melancholy," begins the text that banishes sadness and continues with three sister Graces who leap, crouch and yearn. Morris proclaims his literal attitude toward the text early on, with, among 100 other examples, a spread-fingers-over-head gesture that accompanies the words "ivy-crowned Bacchus."

An apparent — and thoroughly deceptive — simplicity reigns. Christine Van Loon's costumes are plain silk dresses for the women and tunics and tights for the men. The set is a series of rectangular scrims, rising and falling, in different colors. Lobel, like Morris, is literal: A slice of blue is meant to be sky, and green is grass.

Morris' fresh vision dazzles. Take the movement to the jubilant line "Haste thee, nymph, and bring with thee/ Jest and youthful jollity." The dancers appear to be

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Mark Morris' 'L'Allegro' a masterpiece of modern dance

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cross-country skiing their way toward the audience, and as fast as possible; the exultant gesture is startling in its oddity and rightness. A laugh in the libretto is echoed by the dancers' heels; as the laughter grows, the dancers roll onto the floor, so tickled they can no longer stand. "To hear the

lark begin his flight/ And singing startle the dull night" is matched by a man strutting and balancing on half toe, his head cocked in a listening pose, a chorus of dancers peeking out at him from the wings.

No one in "L'Allegro" has an uninterrupted solo. A lone dancer downstage will be shadowed by

one in the deep recesses of the space, or chased offstage by a charging horde. One piece is nothing but entrances and exits, and some entrances die aborning, with dancers retreating into the wings they've barely left. The dancers are not only the people in Milton's odes, but the animals and landscape as well: Dancers on all fours are dogs; clumps of dancers form a forest. Morris conjures up complete scenes using only dancers and a bare stage, a strategy at once ultra-sophisticated and as sweetly innocent as a children's Christmas pageant.

The Monnaie's enlightened and all-powerful director, Gerard

Mortier, did the right thing in asking Morris not only to move to Brussels himself but also to bring along his irreplaceable company, some of whom have worked with Morris since he founded his group in 1980. These are utterly individual dancers, ranging from the tiny, breakable looking Teri Weksler, who makes an exquisite nightingale, to the solid, square-jawed Tina Fehlandt, who can be as ferocious as a Fury on a rampage. Morris temporarily expanded his company to 28 to create "L'Allegro," and one of the supplementary dancers is Dan Joyce, who used to be with Concert Dance Company of Boston.

Morris' American admirers already knew his capacity for movement invention. What no one could know, until now, was how brilliantly he could deploy a big company of modern dancers on an opera-house stage. His ability to create poetic geometry — weaving lines, forceful diagonals, circles that stand for peace and brotherhood without a trace of corniness — is in the tradition of Petipa and Balanchine and Doris Humphrey. There is, in "L'Allegro," one profoundly satisfying line dance whose pared-down choreography consists of dancers holding hands and bending a knee with every other step.

Paul Taylor's one-act Handel dance, "Aureole," is, in its simplicity, use of everyday gestures

and wholehearted faith in music, a precursor of "L'Allegro." But Morris' new masterpiece is, in scale and complexity, in a category by itself, a category made possible not only by its creator's genius, but by Mortier and the European system of arts support. There aren't any plans to tour "L'Allegro" in the United States, and it can be argued that since we wouldn't pay for it, we don't deserve it. But because one man in Boston, Dance Umbrella head Jeremy Alliger, had the foresight and taste to support Morris' work early on, the only US appearance of the "Dido and Aeneas" Morris will premiere in Brussels in March will be here, at Harvard University's Sanders Theater, the first week in June.

arts & letters

Art Institute an accredited college

Christine Temin's article describing problems facing the Artists Foundation (Sunday, Nov. 27) referred to The Art Institute of Boston as "a commercial art school," and, while this description is apt for much of what we do, it discounts the rigorous work of the many talented people who study in our well-established Fine Arts Department.

Further, the description speaks an unawareness of the fact that, earlier in November, the Massachusetts Board of Regents empowered the institute to grant

the bachelor of fine arts degree to its students.

We were once a "commercial art school" and we are proud of our programs in the applied arts, but today we are, more accurately, Boston's only independent college of art and, incidentally, the first such institution in Boston's history.

WILLIAM H. WILLIS JR.
President
The Art Institute of Boston

Sanders Theater still affordable

The arts manager who told Richard Dyer that the rental costs of Jordan Hall and Sanders Theatre are the same (Sunday, Nov. 20) is wrong: Including police detail, etc., the total fees of Jordan Hall are \$1,000 higher than those of Sanders (and it also holds 300 fewer people). Despite its advantages (box office, ushers, poster space, etc.), Jordan Hall at \$2,200 has become prohibitively expensive to the smaller organizations where every penny counts.

If one expects more than 700 people in the audience (which is the maximum capacity of most area churches), Sanders, with all of its problems, is still the only affordable choice in the Boston area.

KATALIN MITCHELL

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FRI 12-16 - TUE 12-20

MOTHER'S HEART,
DAD'S HAND.

KLAUS MARIA
BRANDAUER

WING
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