



Morris's solo in his ballet *Ten Suggestions*

A master steps into his place

Is Mark Morris, the young American choreographer who has now established himself in Brussels, one of the very few greats of our time? After seeing his latest works, Alastair Macaulay thinks he is

HATS OFF, gentlemen, hats off. Is there a choreographer more disarming than Mark Morris? In each piece by him, I find both transparent innocence and learned sophistication.

On Morris's two visits to Britain in 1984 and 1985, this combination was not always so powerful; but on discovering, this May in New York, his choreography for large groups, I was overwhelmed — and now have the new convert's fervour for all the work of his I see.

He and his company have now started a residency of at least several years at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. After seeing the first two programmes there, it seems clear to me that the 32-year-old Morris is, with Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor, one of the three great choreographers working today; and it seems no less clear that the new full-evening work with which they launched their new regime is one of the masterpieces of our time.

L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato is a choreographic setting of the Handel oratorio and has all and more of the largeness of spirit that characterises Morris's work. This is a billthe, pastoral piece, and a deeply poetic account of human personality — approaching that senior and more disturbing masterwork, Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*.

In *L'Allegro*, Morris uses the barefoot vocabulary of Isadora Duncan — walk, run, skip, hop, jump (legs bent) and so on — and

sustains it for 2½ hours. The piece is an invocation of Graeco-Roman classicism (you see three graces, nymphs, maenads, Theocritan and Virgilian pastoral; you feel both Platonic contemplation and Horatian epicureanism) by way of the 17th century (Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*), the 18th century (Handel's setting of the Milton in alternating strophes and antistrophes), the 19th century (Blake's drawings and poetry in response to Milton) and the 20th (Isadora).

What emerges at once is a view of men and women living at ease with nature. Morris choreographs, with a sweet wit, pastoral imagery such as I've only previously encountered in Ashton — birds in song or on the wing; foxes pursued round thickets by a hunt of hounds, horses and men; a couple walking through idyllic scenery. These and numerous other episodes all come fresh from Milton's words.

You see dance soloists replaced by the corps in direct response to the score's structure of single and choral voices. More vitally, you feel the constant vigour and variety of Handelian rhythm.

The curtain falls on three concentric rings (clockwise, anti-clockwise, clockwise) of dances — an Ashtonian configuration, here set so as to reveal Platonic harmony, a social order at ease, mortals ringing the graces, exuberance and decorum fused.

In one long-chain dance that's all walking, you see old Greece and Eighties minimalism, constantly refreshed by baroque rhythm and pattern. As with Balanchine, seldom does Morris sustain one choreographic idea for more than half a minute without then varying it, building on it, providing a counter-idea.

His mastery is never more moving than in the way he builds the architecture of a piece, device upon device, all of them shaped and connected by a central idea. Through it all there runs the colloquial vitality of the dancing, with its easy force of gesture. It was a joy to watch the bare feet alone — the clarity and power with which heels rose and fell, the detailed, luscious fullness of the tread — and to realise how much of the dancing's beauty wells up from this simple basis.

The same virtues — lucidity and weighty force of articulation, colloquial intensity, master-architecture — were to be felt too in a second programme at the Monnaie this December. This began with three short works — the group dance *Frisson* (to Stravinsky's symphonies of wind instruments), with its accumulating succession of tense, frozen, blocklike angles; the *Ten Suggestions* (to anecdotal Tcherépkin piano Bagatelles), a droll, vibrant solo for Morris himself, in pink satin pyjamas, toying dramatically with a series of props (chair, hoop, ribbon, scissors, hat); and the *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* (to Poulenc), in which male and female, both as individuals and as a group, are combined and con-

trasted. The three formed a perfect group — each one a reflection of bygone modernism in its fragmentation of mood, subject matter, line and rhythm, and each shaped so as to elucidate the workings of its score.

When it grows hard to watch one of his ballets — said Edwin Denby of Balanchine — it's good advice to pay more attention to the music. The same is true of Morris, I'd seen the Poulenc twice before: only this time, thanks to listening more carefully to its clarinet/piano colloquy, did I start to guess what he meant with it. Usually, though, it's the other way around — his work makes us hear the music more acutely.

THE concluding choral Gloria (Vivaldi), Morris boldly builds entirely out of variations on an initial theme (one dancer standing and walking, the other stretched flat on the floor, inching forward with hands and elbows raised like grasshopper legs).

Morris is disarming in many ways. (Surprise tactics are second nature to him — are part of his instinctive wit.)

He loves to work in forms that have long been thought out of date, such as the music visualisation of Denishawn, or forms that have been used all over Europe in a pretentiously bombastic way, such as choreography to religious music or to philosophical writings (Brussels will see his Roland Barthes trilogy *Mythologies* in the spring).

I must mention briefly also the rainbow spectrum of colour, achieved with exceptional beauty, in James F. Ingalls's lighting and the wings, scrims, and costumes of Adrienne Lobel's decor — stage designs that implicitly honour Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia and Wieland Wagner — and the ravishing lucidity and drive of sound achieved by Craig Smith's conducting, his five soloist singers, the Monnaie chorus and orchestra and the instrumental soloists for the Tcherépkin and Poulenc.

Acoustics, stage space, theatrical dimensions all had such intimate harmony that the whole experience had a rare keenness. Since *L'Allegro* honours Milton, Handel and Blake, it is natural to say that it should be brought here. But it is best seen in Brussels. No important modern dance artist has been "given" a home theatre like this before.

At the performances I attended this December, there were one or two boos (the spectre of Béjart's trashy sensationalism long resident at this theatre, will not quickly be exorcised), but many more cheers.

My first thought during *L'Allegro* was that, just as one thinks of Britten at Aldeburgh, Wagner at Bayreuth, Shakespeare at Stratford, late Verdi at La Scala, Rounonville in Copenhagen, Balanchine in New York, Petipa at the Kirov, so now Mark Morris dance has found an ideal setting at the Monnaie.