

Morris's daring 'Dido' mixes mime and dance

By IRIS FANGER

"Dido and Aeneas." Performed by the Monnaie Dance Group. Choreographed by Mark Morris, with Emmanuel Music of Boston, Craig Smith, director. Written by Henry Purcell. At Theatre Varia, Brussels, through March 23.

BRUSSELS — It's a long taxi ride from the center of Brussels to the Theatre Varia where American choreographer Mark Morris is premiering his newest work, the 17th-century English opera "Dido and Aeneas" by Henry Purcell.

Morris and his troupe of 24 dancers have been based in Brussels since September as the official, government-supported company of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie.

While the earlier programs in his first season were presented at the traditional red-velvet draped Opera House, complete with chandeliers and royal box, Morris wanted a more intimate, less formal space for his experimentation.

Scenic designer and visual artist Robert Bordo edged the high proscenium arch of the Theatre Varia with a red-and-white-checked border to emphasize that it's indeed a stage on which the swiftly moving action unfolds.

Working in collaboration with conductor Craig Smith, the orchestra and chorus of Boston's Emmanuel Music, and many of the soloists from "Julius Caesar," a previous joint production, Morris set the new work as a gigantic mime-dance show.

The musicians and singers were placed on the floor of the auditorium just beneath the proscenium but in full view of the audience seated on risers that sloped down to them.

In a startling historical nod to Martha Graham, Morris cast himself at the center as both Dido, the tragic queen of Carthage, and as the Sorceress who brings her to her grave.

The opera opens with Dido seated on a balustrade downstage center, as close as Morris can get to the viewers without being in their laps. In Act II, as the Sorceress, he is in the same spot, only now curled over a black-draped bier.

When Graham was at the peak of her powers in the 1940s, she, too, danced the leading women's roles in a series of works based on the ancient Greek myths. The difference, of course, is that Graham is a woman.

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The other historical dance reference is the virtuoso twinportayal of Odette-Odile, the good and evil faces of the Swan Queen in "Swan Lake," the ultimate test for any ballerina of consequence.

Morris as Dido/the Sorceress never resorts to stereotyped movements. He is in turn noble, tragic and compelling in his dual-characterization. He never acts "feminine" — whatever that is, in this age of mingled sexuality.

As the overall shape of "Dido and Aeneas" becomes clear, the surprise of Morris' self-image subsides because he has taken an Oriental mode for most of the movement — a theatrical style in which men customarily take women's roles, as in the Japanese Kabuki.

Moreover, the image is consistent. The dancing chorus of nine women and three men, Morris included, is dressed in identical black robe-dresses, dyed black hair, earrings, and for Morris, gold fingernails.

There's none of the usual sexual partnering to be seen until the duet for Dido and Aeneas, who lift each other in turn.

The chorus members become attendants to Dido, fol-

lowers of the Sorceress, and sailors in the frolicking Act III hornpipe when the dancers hitch up the skirts between their legs into short pants.

The exception is the hero, Aeneas, (Guillermo Resto), stripped to the waist and wrapped in a black loincloth.

Morris is working in a narrative line for the first time in his widely ranging choreographic career. He has created dances for the opera before but never used movement in the same way composers use operatic recitative.

To tell the story Morris has had to invent a gestural language from elements of American sign language and the Indian hand positions that are akin to an alphabet of meaning.

Poses are taken from archaic visual elements. With elbows bent and hands held on the same plane as the body positions, the dancers often look like they have stepped from the wall friezes of an ancient Middle East tomb.

Does it work as a juxtaposition to the Baroque operatic music inspired by classical themes?

You betcha — largely because of the splendid mix of talents: Morris and his dancers, Smith, the musicians, chorus and solo singers — Mary Westbrook — Gcha as Dido, James Maddalena as Aeneas, Susan Larson as Belinda, William Hite as the Sorceress, among others.

Boston audiences will have an opportunity to form their own opinions June 6-10 when Dance Umbrella presents the only American showing of "Dido and Aeneas" at Emerson's Majestic Theater.

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