

DANCE / Mark Morris is making waves in Brussels with *Dido and Aeneas*. Judith Mackrell reports

Classic witchcraft

MARK MORRIS arouses vehement passions in Brussels, where he and his company now work. One of his most ardent fans is Gerard Mortier, director of the Monnaie Opera House who last year brought in Morris as his new resident choreographer. The story goes that when Mortier was taking advice about how to replace Maurice Béjart who had exited acrimoniously from the job two years ago the American director Peter Sellars (for whom Morris choreographed *Nixon in China*) told him that Morris was "the greatest choreographer in the world". Mortier after seeing his work for 30 seconds, agreed.

As a consequence Morris is now installed in a luxurious studio complex with vast resources at his disposal. Yet there are many people in Brussels who are sore about losing Béjart (he was 27 years at the Monnaie and virtually a national icon) and who violently resent this American interloper. When Susan Sontag saw Morris's *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed il Moderato* she gave innocent thanks that he had "found a place", which allowed him to create so monumental a work. But *Het Laatste Nieuws'* apoplectic review of his latest piece demanded how long Brussels would have to put up with Morris and what it splutteringly described as his "loathsomeness".

This "loathsomeness" is Morris's choreographed version of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and it clearly wasn't made to placate. Some of his transgressions are minor, like the fact that the dance continues throughout the opera instead of just in the interludes. (The singers and musicians perform — wonderfully — in the pit.) But more controversially Morris himself dances both Dido and the Sorceress ("It's like Mark gets to be Alexis and Crystal in the same episode of *Dynasty*" says one of his dancers.) And worse, for an opera that was premiered by schoolgirls and which contains only one chaste reference to a "night enjoy'd", Morris has injected some fairly explicit sex.

Morris, looking slightly spacey from a two hour massage, denies the charge with an arch but scholarly rebuke. "It's all there in Virgil and when Tate wrote the libretto he knew that his audience would be very familiar with the story. Certainly "the night" is visualised with an almost decorous economy while making it clear that "Aeneas is a shit". Lying on top of Dido and (shades of Nijinsky's Faun) coming in one pelvic thrust, Aeneas ungraciously gets up first and ignores Dido's trusting embrace.

In the hunting scene Morris dispenses with tactful symbolism when, to the line "Behold upon my bending Spear" he has Aeneas open his sarong to Dido's fascinated gaze. And during the witch's revels Morris as Sorceress gleefully and graphically mimes masturbation, followed by a disarmingly casual wiping of the hand. When I say this is the one moment where he looks like a man, Morris cocks his eyebrows with injured innocence, "but I don't have a penis there," adding obliquely, "What I'm doing you know is just a paraphrase."

If the idea of paraphrased masturbation baffles, the rest of the work is, however, moving and luminously clear. With an ease and

frankness of expression that are rarely seen on stage, Morris lays in front of us the full emotional range of Purcell's opera — the grandeur of Dido's love and lament, the grotesquely savage glamour of the Sorceress and the empty heroics of Aeneas. He does so, too, with abrupt shifts of style that remain astonishingly consistent with each other and the score.

The chorus of dancers, for instance, play Dido's courtiers, Aeneas's sailors and the Sorceress's followers with appropriate dances for each. As mourning courtiers in the first and final scenes they adopt the spare two-dimensional movement of a Greek chorus, their heads averted in archaic profile, their torsos twisted forward, their palms flat. At times their arms angle in stiff, mimetic gestures at others they cross the stage in a halting step that seems to tread the pulp of Dido's grief.

These taut geometries are wrenched apart in the Sorceress's cave where the witches whirl and crash in a brutish frenzy. Yet chaotic as it looks the dance is meticulously musical, visualising the sung echoes in "In our deep-

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vaulted cell" through group imitations of a single dancer. In "Come away fellow sailors" the dancers footwork has the lilt and precision of a jig, picking up on the Scottish dance rhythm in the score. And with the kind of detail that Morris loves, a sturdy jump is accompanied by a sign language gesture for "never" which not only mirrors the sung "never" but perfectly articulates the melody's dotted rhythm.

Morris thinks that the libretto is almost Asian in its compression and this is reflected in the plainness of the design (black sarongs for all the dancers) and in several of his dance references. The solo to "Oft she visits this loved mountain" reminds you of Bharata Natyam with the dancer's heels drumming against the floor, her hands mimicking the text in the manner of Indian *mudras*. And it's partly this solo which makes you realise that the rest of the detailed, powerful arm movements in the choreography are mimed too — the sickle-shaped flourish that is American sign language for never, the fan of fingers for despair and the scrolling hand for Fate.

Densely allusive as the movement is, both to the libretto and to other dance forms, you only get a fraction of its meaning on first viewing.

But the drama itself is utterly clear. Staged as continuous dance, the characters gain far more depth than in conventional opera and Dido's relationship with Belinda is particularly strong. "We're a team", says Morris "and we're very close. We never have that thing of 'thy hand Belinda and excuse me while I sing this aria'."

When anyone questions his playing of Dido he shrugs back, "it's the best part." Everything justifies him taking it — his appearance (the luxuriant curls and the softness that rounds his powerful muscles), his lavishly dramatic presence and the quality of his dancing. Like Dido's music, Morris's movement is both rich and inward and whether he's making a spare regal gesture or arching his back in anguish he radiates an astonishing physical and emotional force.

You get the same sense of grandeur, albeit travestied, in his playing of the Sorceress. Dido's proud sensuality turns to lasciviousness, her dignity to flouncy imperiousness but she remains a big, even a noble character. Morris imagined her partly in terms of "those beautiful evil women you get in Disney like Cruella de Ville", and there are moments when her violence is terrifying — crouching over a bench with her feet horribly sickled, her arms hunched like a monstrous crow.

At its final performance *Dido* was received with the cheers it deserved, although my neighbour elbowed me vigorously to show that she was only applauding the singers. Morris, however, is unimpressed by attacks on his work, particularly when they are made in the name of Béjart. "It's a knee jerk response because they got so used to bad ballet, you know *modern* ballet, which I think is the worst kind of pap. It's just fake modern dance. Kylian at his best I really like but a lot of that kind of work is just imitation. They pretend that they are bending or falling but they haven't got the weight of a modern dancer. If you read the programme note it's meant to mean a lot except that it is never visible to the naked eye."

Morris hates fakes. If he choreographs for ballet companies he gives them proper classical steps, which he loves. And when, as in *Dido*, he used other influences it's with a respectful but not slavish sense of their integrity. "I know a lot about folk dances but I don't quote from them. And when I use classical Greek dance it's my idea of it. I mean some people ask me which amphora I got a movement from!"

Partly because Morris's sense of the past is so strong, his work is often compared to other choreographers — the barefoot simplicity of Isadora, the exoticism of Denishawn, the lopey weight of Taylor, the musical sophistication of Balanchine. Certainly he's good enough to stand comparison with all of them. But there's a nerve, an instinct, and vitality in his work that doesn't come from anybody. Morris picks his dancers because they are "smart, musical, they're not embarrassed, and they are adult." And what he gives them to dance makes them look alive in a way that no other companies do.