

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE  
Here To Stay" duet in *Spring* and their instant falling in love during a game of blind-man's buff in *Winter* as other episodes in a partners-through-the-years scenario. It's a nice, gently presented idea—beautifully acted by the two of them.

Willie Rosario, under the supervision of Graciela Daniele, has made the Cuban scene into a hot, snappy Broadway production number. You don't remember it for the mambo, but for the sexual teasing. Theatrically, it's a good contrast to the subtler parts. For me, some of the high points of the evening were a crisp sextet to "Nice Work If You Can Get It" in the Hollywood scene, the tangos in the Paris scene, the hilariously skillful duet by Pierce and Freydon as a pair of inept entertainers (she's now superb at blowsy comedy as well as at passionate dancing), a creamy waltz by Taverna and Carr, and, in fact, the entire Viennese masked ball, choreographed by Pierce with splendid musicality and sense of stage design. "Tales from the Vienna Woods," a swirl of white gowns and tail coats, and you coast home happy—Eighth Avenue be damned.

## JACOBS

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE  
Chaplin scuttle—he's part Mad Hatter, part escapee from a painting by Magritte—and performs a languid, off-balance, chattering dance. It's as if he's on the deck of a keeling luxury liner. Gillis is soon joined by four women dressed in leotards that suggest nudity (the breasts are outlined), and he looks both bewildered and pleased. The women continually reappear, now bedecked with pink bows across the bust, now with chiffon veils, and the dance begins to look like variations on the theme of sexual fantasy, though the fantasy has less to do with sex than with escape.

And so one thinks of George Babbitt's dream girls or Prufrock's mermaids (at one point the women pull themselves across the floor as if legless). And of course, there's the work of Surrealist painter Paul Delvaux, whom Wolfangle credits for inspiration in the program. Indeed, *Phases* is visually literate, niched into a repertoire of images—the bowler, the Chaplin slide, the newspaper, the noncommittal nudes—that personify Surrealism and its unflappable congress with illogic, its high-tension clarity. Punched out of that blackened eye (a cosmic negative), Wolfangle's dance is both stark and wacky. It's fluid and dreamy, too, with a built-in wariness: the space around the dancers is vibrantly, resonantly empty.

Though there are moments when Wolfangle allows things to get a tad silly, Federico Mompou's mysterious piano music seems to refocus her, as does her attention to the Gillis role, which is virtuosic in its whirring, fainting ambivalence. It fits Gillis gracefully, and, in return, his concentration, and those amazingly sensitive hands and fingers, help keep *Phases* taut and riddling. Despite its brevity, *Phases* holds its own in the Taylor repertoire—in reach and scale it's certainly no miniature. And though one sees the Taylor influence, you don't feel him breathing down Wolfangle's neck.

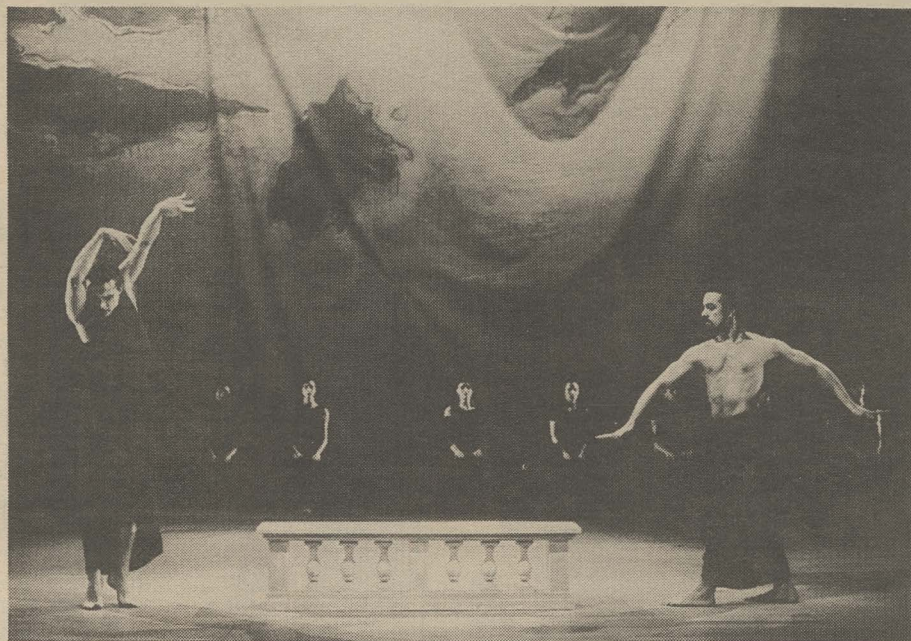
Linda Kent's *In Transit* was the first of the women's dances to premiere and it is slight, sweet, and forgettable. A suitcase sits onstage, and as the lights come up we see that the tiny, flyweight Kent is folded up in it. She rolls out, and the suitcase becomes an oft-returned-to prop, both friend (security) and foe (symbol of leave-taking). Kent wears it like a snail shell, jetés over it in liberation. Meanwhile, *In Transit* takes her all over the map—Taylor's map; she's made her dance in the palm of his hand. This is Kent's last season with the company, and *In Transit* looked to me like a fond, slightly apprehensive farewell.

Kate Johnson's *Ruah* (a Hebrew word  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 98

## Brouhaha in Brussels

# Morris Under Fire

BY ROGER DOWNEY



Mark Morris and Guillermo Resto in *Dido and Aeneas*

Art in Belgium is inseparable from politics, and politics inseparable from language. When the Mark Morris Dance Group made its debut last November as the house company of the nationally subsidized Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie (with a decorously rapturous setting of Handel's *L'allegro, il penseroso ed il moderato*), the reactions of conservative and/or French-speaking critics ranged from approving to rapturous while most of the left-leaning and/or Flemish-speaking press dismissed the work as old-fashioned, unadventurous, inferior.

The front shifted a little over the next four months with the unveiling of a Morris repertoire evening and a *Dido and Aeneas*, but by and large the traditional battle lines held. Nobody was prepared for the bombshell that came whistling in Friday before last.

That was the day *Le soir*, Belgium's national French-language daily, built its front page around a two-column photo of dancer Rob Besserer in his cowboy drag for the striptease sequence in Morris's *Mythologies*, over the headline (in English): *Mark Morris, Go Home!*

The author of the front-page blurb and accompanying inside review, Charles Philippon, had greeted *L'allegro* with a fusillade of superlatives. Now, with the near-incoherent fury of a disillusioned lover, Philippon called *Mythologies* (performed in New York in 1987) "a derisory demonstration of creative indigence... proof of total incompetence... In *Striptease*, he [Morris] boldly removes his underwear. What has he left to show us? Nothing, in fact, remains to him but to get dressed again and... part, in search of other audiences."

Morris and his company were so stunned by the xenophobic violence of one critic's attack that it took a while to realize that a lot of Belgians actually regarded a front-page rebuke from *Le soir* as a plausible prelude to Morris's departure—or dismissal—from the Monnaie with two years of his contract yet to run.

It's impossible for a stranger to evaluate all the issues contributing to the current crisis justly, but the ones that seem really to matter aren't hard to enumerate. For one thing, Morris is an American, and that's enough in some people's minds to disqualify him for the job. Plenty of Flemings (Dutch-speaking Belgians) would have liked to see Anne Teresa de Keersmaker get at least part of the dance action under state theater auspices, and Francophones have their own lists of candidates. Many reasonable people here feel that at the very least, Monnaie artistic director Gerard Mortier was obligated to

hire a European for the top national dance job.

The trouble with that is that Mortier doesn't see his job as that of running a national theater. His selection of Morris to replace Maurice Béjart as the Monnaie's dance-man was a kind of inspired flier, but it was based on the premise that a small culture palace in a small country needs resident artists of international celebrity and stature to compete in the international cultural marketplace.

Nobody coming into the Monnaie job would have had an easy time of it. Before he quit in a quarrel with Mortier and moved his 60-dancer Ballet of the XXth Century to Lausanne, Switzerland, Maurice Béjart had reigned supreme on the Belgian dance scene for more than 25 years. His flamboyant, accessible spectacles were popular here, and not just with dance mavens, and his international notoriety was a source of immense pride for nationalists who never saw his work.

Morris is not a discreet talker, and the opinions he expressed about Béjart's oeuvre early in his tenure gave hostile reporters plenty of ammunition against him. He was also seen walking out (along with most of his company) about 15 minutes into de Keersmaker's *Ottone*, her four-hour dance-deconstruction of Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea*, which didn't do him any good with the nationalists in the audience.

Aesthetically, there was bound to be trouble once Brussels understood just what Morris's choreography was like. The classicizing, lyrical *L'allegro* didn't offer much of a handle for criticism. Real trouble only started to surface in March, with the opening of *Dido and Aeneas*. Stylistically, *Dido* (the U.S. will get a look at it in June in Boston) is "modern dance" with a vengeance: tunics, two-dimensional attitudes, lots of orientalizing arm-work. But the thing that really got under many people's skins was Morris himself. Not only did he take the role of *Dido*, playing it with the flat-out emotional intensity and scale of a silent-movie performance, he also danced the malevolent Sorceress (to his mind the self-destructive other self of the painfully queenly *Dido*) with the gleeful cruelty of a child.

Morris had valid grounds for his decision to play the roles, rooted in classic theatrical and Baroque-opera conventions: he's always been an iconoclast about sexual stereotyping in dance; and, besides, *Dido* is a role he's wanted to create for years. But nobody told the Belgian press about his reasoning beforehand (nobody asked, either), and the fat was in the fire. Former fan Philippon

scarified the piece and the performance, saying both "verged on disrespect for Woman." The reviews started getting personal, deprecating Morris's body ("big, hairy, clumsy"), his use of it ("insipid, caricatural, degraded"), and his general attitude.

As far as I know, the word "camp" (which Morris loathes) was never mentioned, and certainly not "homosexual." Sophisticated Belgians, like sophisticated Europeans in general, think themselves thoroughly enlightened—which means they're indulgent about homosexuals who play by the rules.

Morris is different. His stage presence is visceral, intense; even clowning, he's *there*—seductively, dangerously so—and clearly doesn't give a damn about your opinions, sexual or otherwise. *Dido* was bad enough. His performance in *Striptease* April 19 blew the lid off.

Roland Barthes's essay on the Parisian striptease, from which Morris drew the idea for his dance, is based on the now-familiar idea that the eroticism of stripping is almost purely fetishistic; that the naked flesh that is nominally its climax is in fact antierotic, pure, antithetical to the supposed nature of the spectacle.

Six of the figures that parade the stage in *Striptease*—baby bride, biker girl, hunky handyman, and so on—exhibit Barthes's thesis "straight": Morris's character is the wild card. Who is this jittery, business-suited individual with the Tiny Tim hair, lunging and stumbling among our comfortable stereotyped sexual fantasies? He's not glamorous; he's not funny; he's not appealing; he's just *there*, pulling off his polyester trousers, miming obscenely with his leatherette belt, bumping and grinding in wrinkled Y-fronts. He's a grotesque commentary on the whole idea of striptease—and he's the artistic director of the Belgian national ballet, for God's sake!

The press for *Mythologies*, too, was overwhelmingly negative, though most reviewers managed to deplore it without giving way to the Calvinist violence exhibited by Philippon. Some reporters even seem shocked by *Le soir's* hate-campaign: though, once again, the shock may have as much to do with Belgian and press politics as with libertarian principles. Whatever the motivation, the day after Philippon took the pulpit, the Dutch-language tabloid *De Morgen* ran an editorial headlined (again in English): *Morris, Please Stay*. Conceding that *De Morgen's* critic hadn't liked *Mythologies* either, columnist Rudi Rotthier went on to say that "the man has scarcely had time to build himself a place in Brussels, the public hasn't had time yet to figure out that he's concerned with different themes than his predecessor Béjart, and perhaps with themes that are more vital and more pregnant."

"The overblown reaction against Morris isn't to be accounted for on purely artistic grounds. Part of the public still lives in nostalgia for the Béjart era... Others hope that Morris will serve as a stalking-horse to strike at his defender Gerard Mortier... Should Morris in fact vanish—and the pressure to get him moving is obviously great—Belgium may well be a little more polite, a little less agitated, and a whole lot grayer."

The company, after a few days of total shock, is pulling itself together, embarking on three weeks of rehearsal for performances at Jacob's Pillow and a round of the European summer festivals. Until now, the 21 Americans in the company (three Europeans were invited to join of the 500 who auditioned) have been pretty much isolated from the country they live in—by language, by the sheer bureaucrat-  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 98