

Dance



Monnaie Dance Group—Mark Morris in "L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato."

Morris Dance

U.S. company makes its mark in Belgium

By Robert Greskovic

Last August, the 14-member, 8-year-old Mark Morris Dance Group gave what amounted to its final performances in the restrictive confines of the Little Theater of the Saratoga (N.Y.) Performing Arts Center.

Recently, in Brussels, Belgium, an upscaled organization of 24 dancers now calling itself the "Monnaie Dance Group—Mark Morris" completed a four-week season at the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie, a grand 19th Century opera house fitted out with a deep, raked stage, a roomy orchestra pit, and a seating plan that includes a box still used by the Royal Family of Belgium.

To open the first season of this new phase in his expanding horizons, the widely admired, Seattle-born Morris, who has appeared in the Chicago area only once (at Moming in 1985), created his first full-evening work.

Entitled "L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato," after the oratorio by George Frideric Handel that serves as its musical score, Morris' two-act, 30-part dance is certainly a high point of its creator's booming career and probably a landmark in the history of the art that he practices.

The approximately two-hour piece, including intermission, is a feast for the eye, the ear and the spirit. With Handel's hardy but elegant Baroque music, set mostly to John Milton's verse, present-



Mark Morris performs one of his works, entitled "Ten Suggestions."

ed in a scrupulous performance—with orchestra, chorus and five vocalists conducted by Craig Smith—"L'Allegro" is grand in scale, but intimate in detail.

Its structurally clear, separate episodes all acknowledge the oratorio's airs, verses and recitatives accordingly. The three subjects named in the work's title refer to individuals of distinct temperament. "L'Allegro" is the cheerful man; "il Penseroso" is the serious-minded, contemplative soul. "il Moderato" represents a man of moderation, whose "balancing" presence was suggested to Handel by Charles Jennens, the librettist who wrote the additional text to amplify Milton's original pastoral

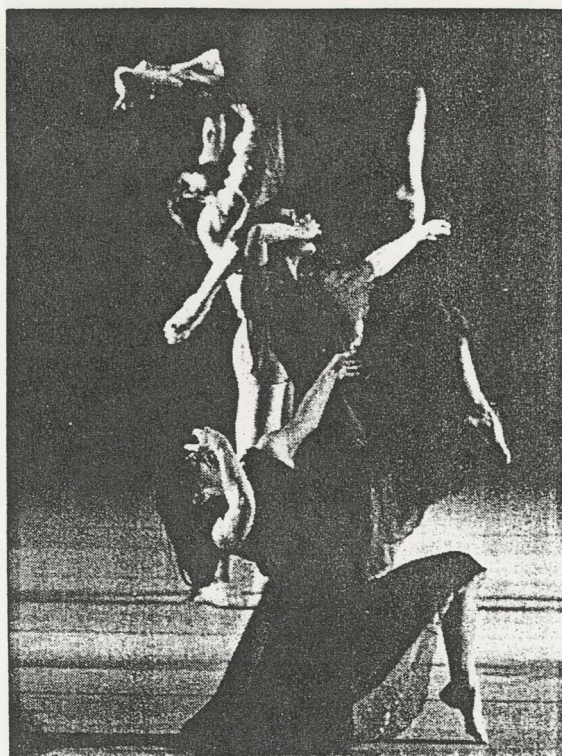
odes.

Morris' "L'Allegro" is a work of multiple depths. Not the least of these is the actual depth of the beautifully proportioned Monnaie stage, dramatized in this grand scheme by the use of numerous clear-colored, translucent drops that designer Adrianne Lobel has provided as decor, in careful concert with luminous lighting effects by James F. Ingalls. With striking but not overly schematic contrasts created by alternating stark black, whites and grays with sunny primary and secondary hues, the distinct moods of "L'Allegro," "il Penseroso" and "il Moderato" are finely and firmly established.

Morris' choreography works his enlarged company in variously effective ways. He presents his cast of 24 in large blocks; a flock of birds in wheeling flight is especially effective. He shows off select individuals as striking soloists; a passage for a male dancer as a mercurial bird is both bravura and indelible.

Oftentimes, Morris works the individual, and sometimes a couple of individuals, against some sub-group. For example, there is a vignette for two women (June Omura and Clarice Marshall) as quarry amid a hunt scene landscaped with dancers as trees and rocks and populated with other dancers as hunters, bounds and horses.

So far, the reception to Morris and his company has been positive. The early reviews revealed some lines:



The Morris troupe has settled into its new Belgian home with a burst of creativity.

drawn between the French and Flemish papers. The French reviews were mostly favorable, with some strongly enthusiastic: "The Joyful Entry of Mark Morris at the Monnaie: The Naked Pleasure of the Dance" was the headline in *Le Soir*. The Flemish papers, on the other hand, were more low-key, some clearly resenting the superlative claims made for the American during his fairly short career.

Audiences were demonstrably delighted with Morris' performances, give or take some *pro forma* booing here and there, usually in reaction to the fact that Morris is replacing the company of Maurice Bejart, the flamboyant choreographer who, in some circles, is idolized for having earned Brussels a reputation of international stature in dance.

Gerard Mortier, the controversial Monnaie director who hired Morris, is pleased by his first showings. After the first official performance of the mixed bill Morris offered as an alternate program for his initial season, Mortier toasted the company at a reception held in what the company affectionately calls the "salle de sandwich." He thanked them for the "risks" they had taken in coming to Brussels. His own risk, he stated, was minimal, once he had seen the company perform a couple years ago. "We adore you," he added.

With that, Barry Alterman, titled "chef de la troupe" as assistant to Morris, presented the elegant Mortier with a Monnaie Dance Group

baseball cap—brought in that day by Alterman's parents from the States. As the dinner-suited director donned his souvenir, the packed room cheered.

Give or take the dissatisfactions that sometimes strain company morale—income taxes are higher than anyone expected and some Dance Group members are having difficulty adjusting to large company routines—the venture is pleasing to Morris. "It has been really great for working, and I love my dance," he said, referring to "L'Allegro."

He also noted how fond he is of his technical staff, which now tours with his company. Their presence and the increased company size makes touring more costly. But, Morris said, "I don't want to do a college tour. We're going to wait until we can do a big tour with big shows, because I don't want to go back with a tape recorder and do what we've been doing. It has to be a different thing."

U.S. plans are sketchy as of now. Morris hopes to bring his upcoming "Dido and Aeneas" to Boston in late spring, before holding a residency at the Jacob's Pillow dance festival on the East Coast in early summer. "L'Allegro" is proposed for the Los Angeles Arts Festival in 1991 and perhaps somewhere else.

Having experienced Morris' "L'Allegro" alongside Handel's score live, one hopes American presenters will also "face the music" and show U.S. audiences what Belgians already know.