

DANCING

Mark Morris Goes Abroad

THE good news about Mark Morris is that his latest piece of choreography is the best thing he has ever done. The bad news is that he has done it in Brussels, the city that he and his company now call home. There is nothing at all the matter with Brussels; from Morris's point of view, it is just about perfect. But for Americans who wish to follow his work or who have a serious interest in the future of American dance—it comes to the same thing—Brussels is a long commute. Previously, the farthest I'd had to go for a Morris première was Seattle, which was his home base until the Brussels invitation came along. This time last year, I was sitting in the Seattle Opera House watching the dances that Morris had made for a local production of Gluck's "Orpheus" and wishing that Morris had been the director as well as the choreographer.

In Brussels, Morris has options no American city could offer him. He has the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, one of the finest of all European opera houses, in which to present his work; he has generous amounts of rehearsal time and handsome, well-designed rehearsal facilities; and he has a budget that not only guarantees his dancers a living but also lets him hire the extra dancers and musical forces necessary for the production of, for example, his new wonderwork, "L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato," which is based on Handel's oratorio of that name. This munificence is compelled from Brussels taxpayers at rates unthinkable to Americans. It was the populace of Brussels that, inflamed by a performance of "La Muette de Portici" in 1830, rushed out of the theatre and tried to overthrow the government. What some of us find even harder to believe is that the populace of Brussels has never rushed from Parliament to overthrow anything on the stage. Just before Christmas, I spent a few nights in Brussels watching the Morris company, now called the Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris, perform the two different programs with which it had made its Brussels début, in November—"L'Allegro" and a mixed bill of older works. The audiences seemed impressed—thrilled, even—with everything they saw. "L'Allegro," a full-

evening work, is a good introduction to Morris's art. It is both sombre and playful, sacred and profane. It shows his musicianship and his theatre sense. It has grace, delicacy, and sweetness of expression, along with other things characteristic of its creator—ungainliness, unruliness, and love of risk. Morris is as capable of the celestial virtues in art as of the down-and-dirty ones, and he withholds nothing of himself in "L'Allegro." The piece pours forth treasures. As it draws to an end, its abundance flows to a level just short of excess, and you're happy about that. Then it overflows, and you're even happier.

Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," which were published together in 1645, are full of pictures; that may be why they are among the first of Milton's works to be taught to schoolchildren. A century later, Handel set his music to an arrangement that alternated sections from the two poems. It was the idea of the librettist Charles Jennens (later the librettist of "Messiah") that the sanguine and melancholy temperaments should confront each other in a duel of opposites to be resolved by "Il Moderato," a

conception of Jennens' intended to personify the eighteenth-century spirit of harmony and reconciliation. As things turned out, Handel paid less attention to Jennens' format than to Milton's imagery, and Morris, following Handel following Milton, has produced a stream of dances teeming with pictorial suggestion and achieving in the range of their humanity the resolution that Jennens sought to bring about by edict.

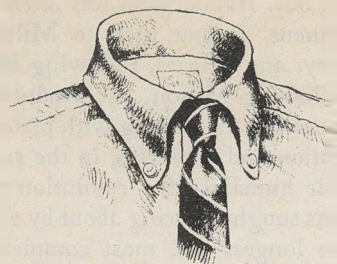
The longest and most complex of Morris's compositions, "L'Allegro" is also the most securely centered. Everything in it seems to spring from or be unified by a single idea, which, if one could name it, one might call whole-mindedness—the view that human nature balances itself, intertwines and harmonizes its antithetical strains with no need of legislation, either of the eighteenth century or of our own. More an appetite than an idea, this is what binds the imagery of Milton, Handel, and Morris in a semblance of continuous discourse. I can't recall another modern-dance work this side of Paul Taylor in which antecedents are as clearly marked and continuity is as strongly implied as in "L'Allegro." Perhaps because so many modern-dance choreographers have concerned themselves with breaking away from established practices, there isn't much precedent for what Morris



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has done here. When he makes overt reference to another choreographer, it's to Taylor—the Taylor of “Aureole,” which was also set to music by Handel. But Taylor is no more active a presence in “L’Allegro” than Denishawn is in Taylor’s work. For Morris, Taylor is there, and so is the Balanchine of “The Four Temperaments,” as a matter of philosophical inheritance.

“L’Allegro” is a dance spectacle in two acts. It has elements of pageantry and mime, but its dance impulse is steadily and inexhaustibly compelling. You see boys and girls responding to the beat, leaping, holding themselves in the air, becoming stags or birds, and



rushing on. At different times, you see fleeting allegorical figures—Attic Grace, Melancholia—and lively, real little persons: shepherds, knights and ladies, the cricket on the hearth. No attempt is made at an official narrative; it's easy enough to spin one's own out of the welter of rhythms and emerging shapes. But it takes more than two performances, which were all I was able to see in Brussels, to grasp everything that Morris has put before us. The Brooklyn Academy may present the work next year. In Morris's concert there last spring, there were indications that he had begun to move away from the structural confines of his musical settings into the realm of pure metaphor. “L’Allegro” confirms that direction. The second program shown at the Monnaie ended with a resplendent performance of “Gloria,” another work with a High Baroque choral setting and one of Morris's most affecting. But it is light-years away from “L’Allegro.” In “Gloria” we have a Morris who already sees himself as part of a tradition. His horizons, though, seem limited to what could have been expected of or permitted to a modern-dance choreographer in the eighties. In “L’Allegro” he seems to see himself as part of the world of art, and is brilliantly justified in doing so. The stance is taken in all humility and with appropriate art-on-art invocations. Blake on Milton and Poussin on Milton play a part in Morris's visualizations, with Blake's the prevailing and acknowledged influence. (The Monnaie's poster for the première of “L’Allegro” was a reproduction of Blake's “Milton's Dream”; the souvenir program

included a small Blake portfolio.)

But Morris's triumph is to have transcended the sum of his sources. He has been helped by a wonderful company; both recruits and veterans dance with headlong lyricism. He has been helped not nearly enough by his designer, Adrienne Lobel, whose rising and falling scrimms and solid-color drops fill the stage with predetermined indeterminate postmodernist Attitude. In only one sequence, “Populous cities,” where the pastoral mood is broken, was this décor effective. The

flowing chiffon costumes, by Christine Van Loon, are also neutral, but not so insistent about it. The soloists in the oratorio were the sopranos Lorraine

Hunt, Jeanne Ommerlé, and Jayne West; the tenor Frederick Urrey; and the baritone James Maddalena. Craig Smith conducted them and the Monnaie orchestra and chorus in a performance good enough to stand on its own.

This June, Boston will see a Morris “Dido and Aeneas,” and there will be a week at Jacob's Pillow this summer. But how, operating from Brussels, will Morris manage to continue being a vital force in American dance? His position just now is hard to gauge. In Brussels, he has taken over a theatre that for twenty-seven years was the headquarters of Maurice Béjart and his Ballet of the Twentieth Century. It remains to be seen whether an audience built up by Béjart will continue to be fascinated by Morris. While houses so far have been full and ovations as warm as any Morris might receive in New York, there have also been a few boos, which could plausibly be laid to disgruntled Béjart partisans or to representatives of the Brussels dance establishment resentful of the American interloper. In April, Morris will present Brussels with his tripartite evening “Mythologies,” two-thirds of which —“Striptease” and “Championship Wrestling”—is among the most risk-taking, noncelestial work he has ever produced. It is safe to say that nothing he might put on could draw a clearer distinction between his sensibility, particularly his way of using trash, and Béjart's. (Actually, Béjart—who has relocated to Lausanne—doesn't use trash, he embodies it.)

If Brussels accepts Morris, it could be that his future will align itself more with European than with American dance, but this wouldn't necessarily

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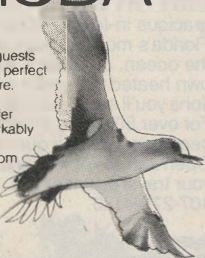
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mean that we'd lose him. European expressionism, which has already made inroads into American dance, could very well be affected, in turn, by him. But even if Morris is forced into splendid isolation chances are that he will go right on being the major figure he is now. He is seeing out the eighties as he began them—as his generation's one and only. He's known the isolation of being gifted. Geography adds nothing to that.

WHO says stars are a dying breed? From the Monnaie I went to Covent Garden, where Sylvie Guillem, première étoile of the Paris Opera, was appearing with the Royal Ballet and giving London a dose of ballerina chic, Continental style. For her star turn, "Grand Pas Classique," she wore a beautifully fitted tutu, the bodice and skirt covered in what looked to be five thousand dollars' worth of black lace. The upper half of the costume was black net, with long sleeves and a turtleneck. Guillem's bright-henna hair was cut short and combed down in points all around her face. The whole effect was like a cross between a ballerina and an apache dancer. "Grand Pas Classique," choreographed in 1949 by Victor Gsovsky, is the tricky pas de deux Cynthia Gregory used to dance here in the seventies. In one notorious performance, Gregory smoked a cigarette during her variation, whether to dramatize her contempt for such claptrap or her ease in overcoming a technical challenge I cannot say. All that was missing from Guillem's performance was the Gauloise dangling from her lip. Guillem is that sturdy Paris stereotype the gamine as ballerina. But her manner isn't as brassily arrogant as her look leads you to expect. At key points—during a preparation or at the climax of a prolonged piqué balance—she would cue the audience with a smile or a glance, and each time the audience would be ravished by the dear little thing.

With her large peanut-shaped head and long, curvy legs, Guillem is physically all of a piece; one imagines a smart choreographer building on that and making her into the kind of theatrical icon that Roland Petit made of Zizi Jeanmaire. But so far it hasn't happened. Like many striking young ballet dancers today, Guillem is unconceived. Jonathan Cope, the rising young Royal soloist who was her part-

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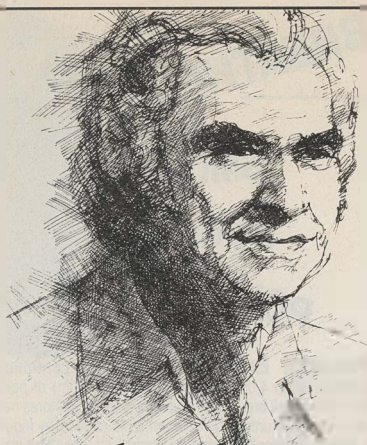


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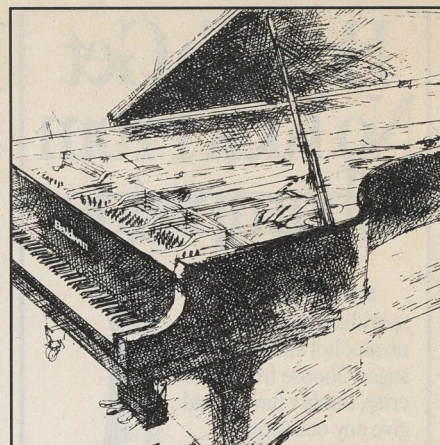
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ner at Covent Garden, also has no focus as a classical dancer. His dancing is assorted specialties performed with no apparent relation to physical disposition or level of vitality. As Balanchine's Apollo, he gave a ponderous, self-conscious performance as painful in its way as Guillem's knowing, glib Terpsichore. The ballet has just been restored to the Royal repertoire, and though the staging this time is credited to Karin von Aroldingen, it's that same labored "Apollo" which Nureyev used to dance. Fiona Chadwick gave the liveliest performance, as Calliope, and two nights later she was a credible Cinderella in Ashton's ballet. Cope in the role of the Prince did not look lost, but he didn't look found, either. Without Ashton to rescue him, he has to rely on the rest of the company as a standard, and the Ashton tradition is no more honored today, now that Ashton is dead, than it was in the last years of his life. And with it, I'm afraid, has gone the Royal's identity as a classical company.

A new ballet by David Bintley, "The Spirit of Fugue," was a fussy account of Bintley's preoccupations as a choreographer; least among them seemed to be reviving the dancers' awareness of the Ashton tradition. Bintley's mentor, in fact, appeared to be Balanchine. "The Spirit of Fugue" followed "Apollo" on the program and quoted extensively from that ballet and from "Agon." Both Bintley and his composer, Peter McGowan, refer to Bach in their program notes, and Bach, to be sure, was in Stravinsky's mind both when he composed "Apollo" and when he composed "Agon." Presumably, Bach was in Balanchine's mind, too. But the internal connections that exist between a Bach fugue and a Stravinsky ballet seem to have eluded Bintley, and to have been replaced by mechanical reminders of Balanchine's choreography. One can't blame young choreographers for trying to uncover the tracks of their predecessors. How it happens that a Morris finds the path of invention while a Bintley plods in circles, taking us past sights we've already seen, can never be explained in terms of methodology. It is not a matter of re-tracing or reconstituting a process. Nor is it a matter of obliterating the past and starting out afresh. But when the path is struck, it is always as if for the first time.

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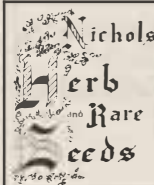
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