

AN AMERICAN IN BRUSSELS

Mark Morris, the flamboyant and iconoclastic choreographer, has assumed a choice spot on the international dance scene.

By Joan Dupont

THE VAST, AIRY REHEARSAL studios that the choreographer Mark Morris and his troupe have inherited are tucked away in a converted warehouse behind the Gare du Midi, a Brussels train station. On this particular day, the building is permeated by a cloying odor of chocolate emanating from a neighboring factory. Eating soup in the canteen, nursing colds, Morris and his dancers look subdued, wan and homesick, nothing like awesome conquistadors.

The choreographer wears a limp T-shirt over baggy, red tartan Bermudas. He is muscular, with splayed and forceful legs. His jutting, unshaven chin bespeaks vigor and resolve. The top of his head conveys a different impression — cascading dark curls over a pale brow and swooning blue eyes. Sometimes, his hair is tied back in a ponytail.

"We came here because this is the absolutely perfect thing," he says. "Just the studio thing alone is phenomenal, and the live music thing, having a resident orchestra. We came to stop the one-night stands. But I wouldn't have come if I had to make up stupid dances for opera or perform with tape or not get paid much or if I had a quota of Belgian dancers."

The new wizard of the dance world, Morris has been hailed as the scion of modern ballet, heir apparent to Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor and even George Balanchine. His admirers find him the purest example of post-modern dance, with an amazing range of musical references and an iconoclastic style that is deceptively casual.

At 32, Morris has assumed a choice spot on the international dance scene, replacing Maurice Béjart as the director of dance of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Belgium's prestigious national opera house. (The French choreographer had ended his 27-year reign in a huff over internal conflicts.) As di-



Morris, above, rehearsing his troupe and, right, at his new headquarters, the prestigious Monnaie Theater in Brussels, where he took over after Maurice Béjart's abrupt departure.

rector, Morris benefits from a \$1.5 million budget, a three-year renewable contract, four rehearsal studios, several theaters, and, most vital, a resident orchestra. Eight years ago, he was living in a loft in Hoboken, N. J.

Last September, he moved to Brussels, bringing along a number of good dancers who had worked with him, doubling his troupe, and relishing his good luck. Although cross-pollination in the dance world has been going on for years, most recently with William Forsythe taking over the Frankfurt Ballet, this is the first time an entire company has been invited, and its director given carte blanche.

This eloquent, witty and riotous force in modern dance is an innocent abroad who flaunts wicked manners. Detractors are irritated

by his punk provocations — imagery gleaned from television and comic books — and suspicious of his versatility. A militant homosexual, Morris wears a pink triangle on his lapel, and proclaims his loves and aversions unabashedly. Arriving in Brussels, he instantly provoked local reaction, mugging for a newspaper photo that later appeared under the banner headline, "No, I don't like Béjart!"

"He never said that," protests Barry Alterman, company manager and friend from the Hoboken days. Perhaps not, but in private he has said much worse: that Béjart's flamboyant style is forced, that he is the king of kitsch. Morris's one-liners can be devastating: "Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker?" he says, referring to the fashionable Flemish choreographer, a subject of national pride. "If you boiled Pina Bausch down, that's what you get." In a more circumspect mood, he says he really can't judge Belgian choreographers yet; he wants to see more.

His Brussels debut, on Nov. 23, was a triumph with the Monnaie's gala audience. But critics familiar with Morris's work felt that the audience, used to Béjart's style, didn't really understand the American choreographer. "Despite the raves, people need

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Joan Dupont lives in Paris and reports on the arts.



MARK MORRIS

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time to get used to his language," says the Seattle critic Roger Downey. "They are used to Béjart's pop ballet, little stories in which the music is a

trampoline. Morris uses music differently, to suggest movement, then he builds his structures from there."

Before they came to Belgium, Mor-

ris and his dancers could not afford sets and got their costumes off a rack; the Monnaie provides for elaborate sets and chiffon silk costumes. Studio space and time is the greatest boon: "We used to scrape to buy space by the hour; now we have all the rehearsal time we want, plus an exercise and weight room," says Alterman. "Four years ago, we were dirt-

poor and dancers weren't paid regularly. Now, the contract gives them \$250 a week after deductions."

The deductions came as a surprise. The dancers had followed Morris — leaving families, lovers, jobs behind — for what they describe as his genius, but they suffered a setback when they learned that 45 percent was slashed from their paychecks. Part of this money goes to state health insurance. Finally, they were happy to have it, because the company members said that American insurance companies consider male dancers high AIDS risks.

"I know that I get what I need and some of the stuff I want, but I can't handle money at all," Morris says.

"If anybody doesn't know or care about money, it's Mark," says Nancy Umanoff, who handles the company's finances. "I hand out money to him, and he spends it, whatever it is — \$100 or \$10. He shares a credit card with his mother and pays the bills; the trouble is, he's always losing it."

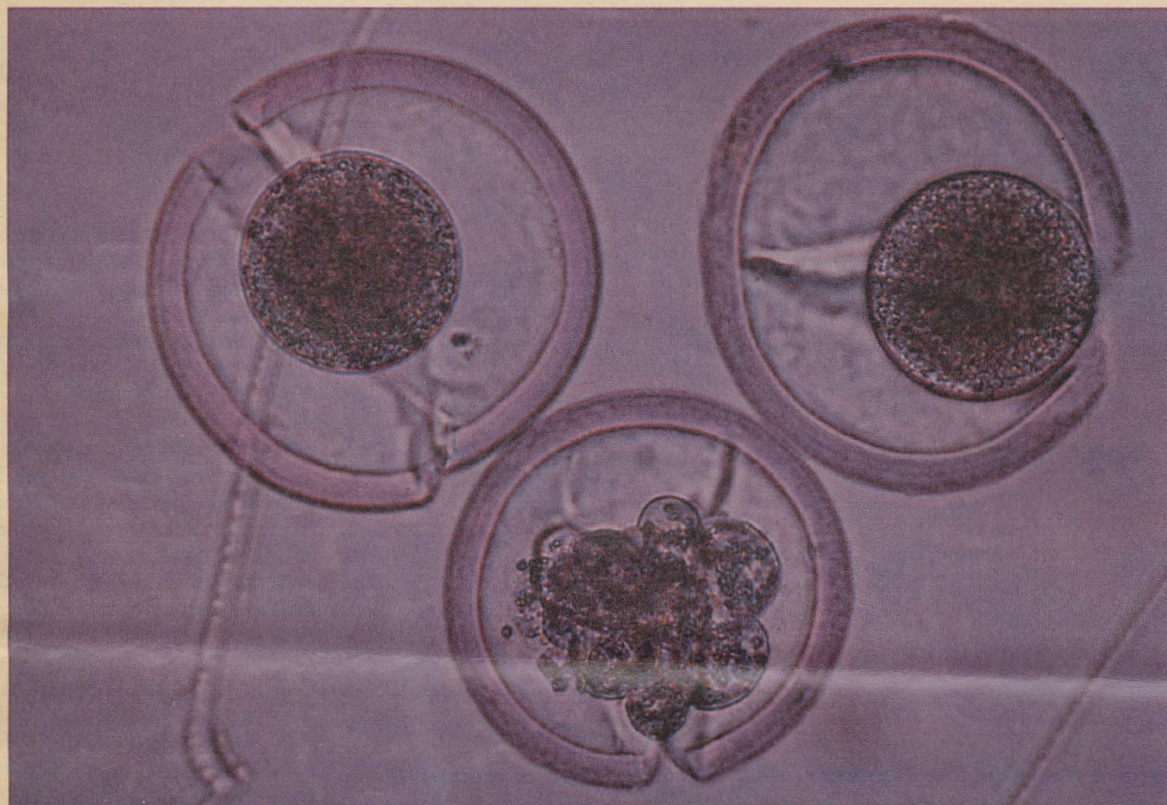
BORN IN 1956 IN SEATTLE — "a big green town," Morris calls it — his prodigious talent was nurtured by a family gifted in music and dance: His father taught him to read music when he was a child, his mother led him to Flamenco, her favorite dance, when he was 9, then Balkan folk dance and ballet. He graduated from high school at 16 and went on to spend almost a year in Europe, five of those months in Spain, where he continued to study Flamenco.

He showed up in New York two years later, dancing with the Eliot Feld Ballet, Laura Dean, Hannah Kahn and Lar Lubovitch. In 1980, living in Hoboken, eating rice and beans, he rented Merce Cunningham's studio for two nights and performed his own works with some friends. This was the beginning of the Mark Morris Dance Group; several of the original earnest and athletic-looking dancers are still in the company, a connection with the past that Morris values.

Since Morris was 12, when he "made up" dances for children's musicals, he has always created at high speed and in an astonishing variety of styles. His dances are peppered with tributes to Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor, but always set to Morris's personal perception of the music. For most dancer-choreographers, movement begins with their own bodies: They use things they do well on other bodies. Taylor works with extremely strong bodies, like his own. Morris, too, has his personal style — he is good at running and falling backward, moving in a whirlwind, and so are his dancers. Other sources of Morris's style of movement include literature, sculpture, folk dance, American sign language — he is a self-taught eclectic.

Music and dance are closely wedded in Morris's works. But the score that seems to be danced literally and the dance that appears to follow the

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The New York Times

MARK MORRIS

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beat slavishly reveal, in fact, still an other relationship, distanced, ironic, yet emotional.

In 1985, Morris choreographed "Jealousy" to a Handel oratorio, dancing bare-chested like some great god Pan miming the passions. Humor was superimposed on Purcell in "One Charming Night," a vampire seduction duet that he performed with Teri Weksler, hovering ominously over her, sleek as a bat. He makes even a sophisticated dance like this seem simple; his strength and humor come from the way he counterpoints his visuals — harsh, grim — against the beauty of Purcell's hymn, building up to the intense moment he sinks his teeth into Weksler's throat, and a countertenor sings, "Lord, What is Man?"

In 1984, a breakthrough year, Morris won a Bessie Award for choreographic achievement and he was invited to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival; he returned to BAM twice, most recently last May, performing "Strict Songs" to Hopi Indian chants sung by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus. (In 1986, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship.)

Writing in The New Yorker, the critic Arlene Croce was "stunned" by Morris's precocity in group pieces such as "New Love Song Waltzes," set to Brahms. She described him as a "dancemaker and spellbinder."

Alastair Macaulay, also writing in The New Yorker at a later date, compared Morris's audacious use of Brahms in this piece to Balanchine's in "Liebeslieder Walzer": "'New Love Song Waltzes' doesn't try to give us a world of the 19th-century waltz and of Romantic expression, as does Balanchine; its treatment of the music is of and about our time, and part of Morris's skill is that this never looks anachronistic."

But his versatility and musical range — from traditional Bulgarian to Yoko Ono, from Verdi to Satie, Thai popular music and contemporary Indian love songs — is not to the taste of everyone. The critic Clive Barnes, after seeing "Strict Songs," reported that Morris had "all the musical sensibility of a frog faced with ice cream."

Last spring, however, Barnes had high praise for "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," which Morris choreographed for the American Ballet Theater.

JUST AS IT LOOKED AS though there were no new worlds to conquer, Morris — in Stuttgart as part of a brief 1987 European tour — met up with a friend, the director Peter Sellars, with whom, last year, he had choreographed John Adams's opera, "Nixon in China."

"I've never seen talent flow from a person like Mark before," says Sellars. "His ideas become flesh, the way I imagine Balanchine's must have; the difference is, Mark was not educated at the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg: Balanchine's work was about perfect behavior, Mark's is all about bad behavior — he can go from the most tacky commercial to the most profound searching work with complex musical scores."

It was at that time that Gérard Mortier, director of La Monnaie, called Sellars with the news that Béjart had walked out on him. Sellars told Mortier, "Take the next plane to Stuttgart, come see Morris dance."

"I made my decision quickly," recalls Mortier. "I was struck by his sense of music and his sense of humor, so rare with artists. Béjart had his own empire, he squashed other styles. Morris will bring something new to Brussels; he'll invite other dancers and make Brussels a city of dance."

For La Monnaie, Morris has choreographed a new work, based on Handel's setting of Milton's "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato." "He's obsessed by Baroque music," says Alterman.

In the Brussels rehearsal studio, Morris pores over some William Blake engravings on "L'Allegro." "I never really knew Blake — although I've been accused of having Blakian images in my dances," he says. "My 'L'Allegro' is based on Milton, Handel and Blake, but I can't tell who's who anymore, and nobody who sees this piece has to know anything about Handel, Blake or me." At its premiere in November, the work took two hours. With this extensive choreography, musicians and singers to inte-

grate, Morris decided to sit out this dance. He will make up for it in March, when he performs multiple roles in "Dido and Aeneas."

Morris auditioned 800 dancers in Brussels and New York, hiring 11, including one Belgian dancer, to complement his original group of 12 for "L'Allegro." "I wanted to do it bigger." The new recruits seem to have been won over to Morris's style; some have even adopted his vocabulary. "Where I come from," says Joachim Schlömer, a student of Pina Bausch in Essen, West Germany, "we never learned to become freer, we didn't make it bigger. I loved Mark's audition — it wasn't heavy; I felt I could start dancing." He is wistful, however, about his limited English, not getting the in-jokes (and insults) that keep the company laughing and seem to be part of Morris's directorial style.

QUAFFING BEER FROM the bottle, whistling Handel, Morris is about to begin rehearsal. Despite his relaxed look, he is always on time and seldom improvises. Working from the Handel score, he has mapped out half the choreography. The troupe doesn't have the music yet — rehearsals will begin with taped music, with the orchestra coming later — and scrambles for clues to what this piece is about. One of

Morris's techniques is to keep his dancers in the dark.

"He doesn't want us comfortable, so he changes things, right up to opening night," says Erin Matthiesen, who lived with Morris for four years. "He wants the roughness, the friction between anarchy and total order, for his ideas come from music and his emotional state. If you look closely at his dances, he's laying his heart on the stage."

In contrast to their extravagant master, the core company is middle-American-looking, as anonymous as a crowd at a Greyhound bus station. Several of the men are balding, many wear glasses, looking as if they would be more at home behind a teller's window. The ones who look the youngest are often not. Bird-like Teri Weksler is 36, "Mark tells me I'm in the winter of my career," she says, introducing herself. Curly-haired Jon Mensinger dropped out of dance for two years to work on Wall Street. Susan Hadley, who used to be a cheerleader, was a pre-med student, and got her dance training late. Penny Hutchinson was a high-school friend of Morris's, and Matthiesen left a secure teaching job for the Brussels adventure.

When I comment on how his dancers look, Morris beams. "Aren't they so weird you can't believe it?" He

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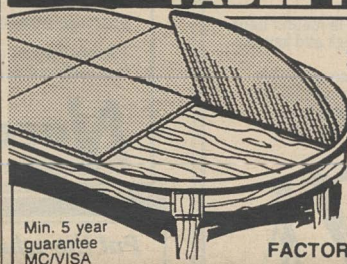
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revels in the women's full bodies, which are more robust than the rail-thin figures in most dance companies. "Most women dancers look anorexic because that's what male artistic directors want to see — something prepubescent. I hate to see it, I hate to work with it; it's wrong. I work with women."

He snaps his fingers, "Now, thrill me," he enjoins them. Singing and moving along with the music, he keeps an eye on the furthest reaches of the room, watchful of the new elements in the company — Schlömer, applying himself studiously, and Mireille Radwan-Dana, a Béjart student, whose beauty and ballet ways make her stand out, in the words of one of the dancers, like a sore thumb.

"That's not an arm position, Joachim," Morris calls, "it's a sensation, and you don't drag your feet because I'll fire you."

The dancers enter from both sides of the room in a marathon walking stride, merging in the center to rush upstage.

"You're entering the beautiful basilica," he tells them. Then, "What do you think this is? 'E.T.'? There's nothing worse than nonactors acting. Stop acting and try not to look so Presbyterian!"

They try, moving more fluidly, building to a pinnacle.

"I don't like the way the three of you are standing." He stops the action to reposition them. "I like it, but it's wrong — we'll keep it anyway."

He has names for each section: the "light and Scottish-looking cricket dance," a square dance plus a jig, and "the stupid men's dance" — in which male couples kiss, slap and knock each other down. In one dance, the women hitch the men up in their arms — small women, tall men — and carry them off.

"I have to switch things around because I like that," Morris explains. "Sometimes I use the opposite type for a part, so they can't do imitations of themselves. Everybody is versatile because of the nature of my dances, and they're difficult to do because I'm quite specific: They go the wrong way, on the wrong leg at the wrong time, which makes them more interesting."

He turns back to his dancers. "You're off the music," he berates them, "just like white people at a concert. Da capo, please."

I ask Penny Hutchinson, who has known Morris since he was 15, if his talents were recognized at school. "Oh

yes," she says. "He was so foppish, but so free, the others were envious. He came from a special family: They were always making music and home movies. There was always drama — he had a birthday cake that exploded like a volcano. Dad was fun, but Mom decided the temperature."

His father died when Morris was in high school; the same year, his grandfather and two uncles died. "I was impressed by his concern; he always had balance," Penny Hutchinson says. "I was on drugs, and I stopped when I met him. I'm very religious, but not Presbyterian," she laughs. "And Mark is, too — he used to meditate a lot."

MORRIS RUNS through Brussels' Gare du Midi, his ponytail flying, and emerges on the other side at the Au Relais bar, one of his early-evening haunts. "I love running," he says. "I love making my dancers run: You can't hide when you run."

He orders a dark beer and teases the waitress — he is one of the few people in the company who speaks French. "I can read anything and usually pronounce it all right; they say it's related to music. I know math from music, and my geometry is all from how people work. I learned anatomy from dancing, and I think I have a pretty good take on it, because I don't want anybody to get hurt."

He has inherited Béjart's physical therapist, Tineke Klumper, giving her a vital role in the company. Dancers see her regularly, in a room off the rehearsal studio Morris had redecorated. Klumper's job has changed; she finds she deals less with pain and injury, and that Morris's dancers are more responsible and mature.

"Ballet is perfect and not everyone can do it," Morris says, "so you strive for that perfection, and that's what makes you get better. But people don't accept gravity, and gravity is our friend — at least, we modern dancers, we like it. Ballet dancers are antigravity; that's the big difference, it's not political anymore, it's about gravity."

He is leaving for Paris to perform with the American Ballet Theater in "One Charming Night," for their gala, and to rehearse them for "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes."

In Paris the following week, as Morris rehearses

'A lot of people will cheer for him, and a lot will be happy if he falls on his face,' says Baryshnikov of Morris. 'That's what life is all about.'

the A.B.T. dancers, Mikhail Baryshnikov is at his side.

"I know you've been practicing that arabesque for years," Morris tells a lush ballerina, "but you don't get to do it."

"He hates glamour," whispers Teri Weksler, Morris's partner in "One Charming Night." "But look how different he acts with them" she smiles slyly. "So respectful."

Respect is in the air. Baryshnikov praises Morris's imagination and sense of style. "I'm happy he has this wonderful opportunity for creation," he says of Morris's post at the Monnaie, "but it's a shame that two of the best young American choreographers — he and Bill Forsythe — are working outside the United States. If our Government doesn't support talents like that, we will lose the talents."

"He's surprising me all the time with the range of his vision and depth of his thoughts. A lot of people will cheer for him, and a lot will be happy if he falls on his face. That's what life is all about."

BACK IN BRUSSELS, Morris has missed rehearsal time, and he didn't really enjoy being part of the Paris gala, in which Christian Lacroix costumes for "La Gaieté Parisienne" were the star of the show.

"L'Allegro" is three-quarters finished, and the dancers are more at ease since they've received tapes and have been developing their parts to the music.

"This will really turn out all of a piece, but first I had to develop the language," Morris tells his company be-

fore the run-through. "That stupid men's dance? It's a cartoon, but so's the music. Handel had a great sense of humor."

"I'm not even going to look at my score. I'm going to watch. You don't have to kill yourselves, but you have to do everything clearly and perfectly."

The crowd at the basilica fuses in a new tempo, wound up like a mob scene from Fritz Lang's "Metropolis." Humor — Handel's, Milton's or Morris's — shines through a scene that he calls "The Lesbian Convict Hunt," in which two women run and hide in the shrubbery, pursued by mounted hunters, buglers and hounds to the tune accompanying the words "Mirth admit me of thy crew to listen how the hounds and horn cheerly rouse the slumbering morn." Morris sings along, waving a beer can to the beat.

Later, over dinner, he is happy. He is usually happy in restaurants, and hungry. He keeps punctuating what he is saying with "We need more food." He goes on: "This has been a really good week; people have lightened up a lot. People get scared. I do, too." He recalls being away from home, in Spain, his first time abroad, when he was 17: "I was just coming out, and it was a very homophobic society. I remember I wrote home to my mother to tell her, and she answered with this perfect letter. She's highly sensitive; she knows everything."

He talks about the fluttering hand motions the men make in the dance: "Post-modern dance, whatever that means, has been about how it feels to dance or the theories of dancing, and I don't buy that. There's also the dramatic, emotional element which is not acting or mime, but it's real emotion, and you have to make those emotions happen. It's pretend, in that it's bigger in a shorter period of time than real life is, but all of that has to happen. 'L'Allegro' has become stream-of-consciousness; I look at it as if I didn't make it up. But I can tell when the spirit is right, very clearly, very immediately."

"And I love working with people: I love people, which doesn't mean I don't insult them and degrade them because of the way my humor works — my patience is short. That's just because I want excellence, and I get it. I would like to be more patient, but I am what I want to be." ■

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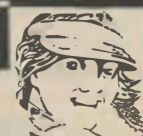
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