

# Mark Morris in Brussels: An American Dream

By ALLEN ROBERTSON

**B**RUSSELS—Mark Morris is sitting on top of the world. “No,” laughs the 32-year-old choreographer, “I do *not* feel like head of the class. I feel like emperor-for-life.”

Freshly transplanted from America to Brussels, Morris, 32, and his newly expanded company have become the resident dance troupe at the illustrious Théâtre de la Monnaie. The 1,100-seat red and gold baroque theater is on its own square in the heart of the city.

Until now, it's been best known as the venue where Maurice Béjart used his Ballet of the 20th Century to develop a reputation as the Western Hemisphere's most notorious choreographer. But recently Béjart left in a huff for Lausanne. Like a child who's had a fight at a birthday party, he took his toys with him.

“How does it feel to replace Béjart? I never replaced Béjart,” Morris declares. “Béjart left. I have the job.

“It's not my favorite subject,” he admits, “because it's so inflated and stupid. There was a press conference when I was appointed—a hostile press conference, by the way—and one of the questions was: ‘What is your philosophy of dance?’”

Morris reacts with a double-take of perplexed dismay, as if someone had asked him to expound on Einstein's theory of relativity. “I don't do dance that way. My esteemed predecessor would, and for like 10 hours. I can't even begin to. What I do is the exact opposite.”

Opposite or not, his approach seems to have already generated considerable audience enthusiasm.

His first work for the new company is to Handel's “L'allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato.”

It's a big, lush group work with a joyous Paul Taylor-like sense of dynamics cantering along on Morris' individual approach to modern

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dance. All the dozen performances have been SRO. Some boos have been interlarded with the bravos, but the reviews have been essentially positive. Even more importantly, the Youth Subscription performance (a low-priced series for students) proved a gigantic success.

“The most official minister-style audiences have been the most reserved, of course,” Morris recalls. “Although the nuns loved it. The nuns were goin' wild.”

Morris' company last appeared in Los Angeles (at Royce Hall) in October, 1987, but his new ensemble piece, “Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes,” has been part of the American Ballet Theatre repertory this month at the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Costa Mesa.

The new Morris company is almost equal in size to that of Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Dance Theatre, which makes it one of the biggest non-classical dance ensembles in the world. Certainly no American-based company comes anywhere near being able to do a dozen performances of a work for 28 dancers, a live orchestra and chorus plus six solo singers. The company has 35 home performances this season, with plans to bump that up to 50 next year, plus additional touring in both Europe and America.



RICK MEYER / L.A. Times

Mark Morris: “We’re transplanting ourselves.”

On top of that, the theater itself is a choreographer's dream. The stage is large, the backstage facilities are technologically advanced and the former Béjart school, Mudra, has become the new company's rehearsal studios. The dancers are an international mix selected from the old Morris troupe plus a pair of auditions. In Brussels, 300 turned up. In New York, there were 500 hopefuls.

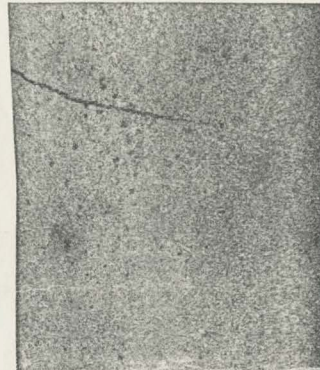
Morris company director, Barry Alterman, fills in the background: “It started like this: We were doing the modern-dance, scanty-rehearsal, one-night-stand tour-type life. You come in like a commando, shoot 'em and then run away. This is not artistically satisfying. It was icky. Not only from the hit-and-miss thing, but Mark's dancers are adults—meaning 32, 33, up to 38—and one-night-stands are good only for kids.

“We'd wanted a base where we'd have a studio of our own instead of renting at \$35 an hour in New York. We wanted to have proper seasons and be supported by a

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York may be Nirvana for me—I'm a native—but this is OK.”

“It doesn't matter much about not being in America,” insists Morris. “My mom's comin' to see it here so that's fine. That's plenty.

“Some of the dancers can be dying of grief that they're not in New York—but that feeling comes and goes. For me, I couldn't care less. . . . I've never been a New York fan. No, no, no.

“The food's really good here. The beer's good. It's friendly. It's easier to live here, at least for me. It's calm enough and small enough that you can get things done and I'm

community, maybe a part of a larger body, but you know that's almost impossible in the United States. So, we stopped booking.

“Really extreme,” says Alterman, “but I went on the assumption that God would provide and He did.

“We were in a festival in Stuttgart. Several days before, Béjart had informed Gérard Mortier (director of the Centre de la Monnaie) that after years of feuding he was leaving. . . .

“He was in Stuttgart to see an opera that Peter Sellars had done and Peter asked, ‘Have you seen Mark Morris?’ Gérard said, ‘Who's he?’

“Well, he came to our first show in Stuttgart, insisted we go out to dinner afterwards, and Mark and I were jetted off to Brussels later that week. We knew immediately that this was an offer that could not be refused. It's too much of an adventure. So here we are.”

“The scale of the job, of the

whole situation, is pretty amazing,” says Morris. “My dancers are still broke, but that's just because the taxes here are so giant. I mean they're paid more than most people who work here, but they're still scraping along.”

“I'm treated fabulously because I'm the boss. My brief is to do exactly what I want to do. The minute that changes, I'm gone. Instantly. If I can't do what I want, I won't be here. Otherwise, I wouldn't have taken the gig.” His initial contract is for three years.

“At this point,” observes Alterman, “it's still like the Grand Experiment. There are all sorts of little niggling problems, but the overwhelming thrust of this whole thing has been great. We get to do a lot of neat stuff and that's basically it.

“It's not Disneyland. As a tourist stop Brussels isn't the No. 1 stop, but it's a good place to live. New

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really only interested in working. So it's perfect.

“Or,” he says, interrupting himself sarcastically, “it will be. There's this left-over attitude here that comes from years of a single brand of experience. The audiences know that dancers are supposed to look a certain way, know that dance is supposed to be incomprehensible, and that if it's modern you don't understand it, of course. Everybody knows that modern art is not to be understood.”

“We're transplanting ourselves into another culture,” says Alterman. “If we'd wanted to play it safe, Mark would've choreographed a piece with people stepping on each other's faces and hitting each other with bricks. We

could've maybe thrown in a little Schoenberg, a little electronic screeching.”

Anyone who's seen Morris' ebullient American work over the last five years knows that's not the sort of work he's interested in creating.

“I'm really not interested in courting public opinion,” says Morris, “and if it's not to your taste, don't come. Stay home.”

“I'm not courting and I never have. Why start now just because I have a king and queen—which I love. I think it's fabulous that we're the official dance company for the Kingdom of Belgium.” □

Robertson is the dance editor of Time Out (London) and the author of “The Dance Handbook.”