

THE BRUSSELS CHAPTER BEGINS:

# MARK MORRIS COMES TO TOWN (BRUSSELS)

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Two moments from Mark Morris's first work as resident choreographer at Brussels Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*.

Photos: Klaus Lohmann

It has been a long year and a half in Brussels without a resident dance company. But, after Mark Morris hit the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie on November 23, everyone agreed that it was worth the wait—every minute of it. The newly installed Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris has now replaced the much-beloved Ballet of the Twentieth Century, which, under the name Béjart Ballet Lausanne, moved to the Swiss city when Maurice Béjart decided to leave Brussels in June 1987. The impact of that loss could still be felt long after Monnaie director Gérard Mortier had announced that Morris had taken the job and would be bringing his dancers over to form the new company.

Virtually unknown here, the name of the long-haired, boyish-looking choreographer from New York City by way of Seattle did nothing to reassure those who feared that Brussels would lose the prestige that Béjart had given it. Morris arrived in September and immediately set to work on his evening-length dance for the November premiere, while the press maintained a reserved, even hostile, attitude toward this brash newcomer. The fact that Morris had chosen only one Belgian dancer from the three hundred who had auditioned in Brussels last July did little to endear him to the locals. ("Brussels was easy," Morris commented. "It was much harder in New York with five hundred.")

Then, soon after his arrival, Morris held a press conference in one of the Mudra studios, which, now that the school has closed, have been turned over entirely to his company. Morris's almost eccentric informality and very American sense of humor went largely unappreciated by the gathering of journalists and critics taught to expect declarations about life, love, and death. "Let's put it this way," said a smiling Mark Morris, "I like to make dances, and I am happy when people enjoy looking at them."

On opening night, the mood of the Monnaie audience was mixed: a certain amount of "This better be good" combined with curiosity about an unknown quantity and a certain skeptical excitement over the unprecedented praise for this young man in the American press. And then the curtain went up for the world premiere of *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*. At the end of the first movement, Morris had virtually the entire audience in the palm of his hand, as the first of many bursts of spontaneous applause rang through the theater.

Based on two poems by Milton set to music by Handel, *L'Allegro* is a pastoral ode in the form of an oratorio for tenor, baritone, and three sopranos. Handel's friend Charles Jennens arranged the libretto as a dialogue, dividing the 328 lines into brief sections that in turn extol good cheer and earthly delights or pensive solemnity and meditation. There is no plot or cast of characters, but shifting vistas of opposing moods that Morris uses in a contrapuntal mode, creating abstract

dances, visual imagery, suggestions of folk dances, humorous vignettes, snapshots that hint at stories never told. His approach to the symmetrical architecture of the baroque score combines his love and understanding of Handel with a freedom of treatment that borders on the impertinent. This blend of respect and cheekiness is what I found so enchanting and what sustains interest throughout. His handling of the tempi is as imaginative—or as arbitrary, depending on the point of view—as his visualization of Milton's verse.

At times, Morris chooses direct contrast, as when two dancers face each other in stillness during a virtuoso flute solo, while at other times he stresses and underlines a rhythm as in traditional folk dancing. Morris is just as unpredictable with the text. Many of his dances are woven around feelings, landscapes of the soul: whether melancholy, as in the nightingale solo for Teri Weksler to the aria "Sweet Bird that Shun'st the Noise of Folly," or majestic, as in the two slow diagonal lines of men linking arms in a religious ritual when the chorus sings "Join with Thee Peace and Quiet." But Morris can also accept the tenor's challenge to "Jest and Youthful Jollity," launching into a game of one-upmanship with choreographic quips and cranks. In a very funny sequence, he gives a graphic illustration of a hunting scene when the baritone invites everyone to listen to the "hounds and horns."

The second part struck me as more uneven, with some great passages—as in the exulting finale—alternating with less felicitous ones, such as the awkwardly

gymnastic pas de deux or the repeated shaking of fists. As a whole, I felt that a continuous, slightly shorter version would have enhanced the pleasure of such riches.

Visually, *L'Allegro* is of a dazzling simplicity. Designer Adrienne Lobel has devised five luminous frames that multiply the proscenium through colored scrims and the skilled lighting of James F. Ingalls. Christine Van Loon has dressed the women in fluid chiffon and the men in flowing shirts. The colors are rich, deep tones of gold, russet, greens, and blues like a woodland painting for the first part, then stridently bright pastels for the second.

The dancers, Morris's own group with nine temporary additions, all deserve praise for the musicality and stamina displayed throughout this demanding work. Their individualities all add to the richness of the texture, but Weksler, Tina Fehlandt, Donald Mouton, Kraig Patterson, Keith Sabado, and Jon Mensinger added a special flavor. The five American singers and the orchestra and chorus of La Monnaie were placed under the direction of Craig Smith.

If the European press is still divided about Mark Morris, there is no doubt that the public has embraced him with unrestrained enthusiasm. American writer Susan Sontag, who had come from Paris, summed up the event with these words: "Let's be thankful that Mark has found a place that gives him the possibility of creating a work like this. He could never have done it at home." □