

## DANCE REVIEW

## New Work By Mark Morris

**DIDO AND AENEAS.** By Henry Purcell; text by Nahum Tate. Monnaie Dance Group / Mark Morris and Emmanuel Music Group. Presented by Dance Umbrella, Tuesday at the Emerson Majestic Theater, Boston.

By Janice Berman

IT SEEMS peculiar to journey from the dance capital of the nation to see a major new work by Mark Morris, America's best young choreographer. It seems even stranger when one considers that America's best young choreographer is not even working in America.

"Dido and Aeneas," which we will not be seeing soon in New York for reasons as incomprehensible as those that keep its creator and his company, the Monnaie / Mark Morris Dance Group, in Belgium rather than in the States, is

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## In Boston, a New Work by Mark Morris

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one amazing piece of work. Only 55 minutes in length, "Dido and Aeneas" is filled with contrasts. It is at once darkly austere, in keeping with the narrow simplicity of the story, and wildly voluptuous. It picks us up, brings us down, and horses around. It is perfused with energy, beginning as the curtain rises on Morris' dancers, ranged in front of a drop that suggests a map of the earth. The dancers are posed on a balustrade like statues, but they quickly give the lie to that stillness by moving forward with inexorable force, sure steps, assertive arms.

They're moving toward a massive figure standing at center stage, his back to us. Like his 11 colleagues, Morris is dressed in a somber black sarong. Right now he's Dido, his long, curly hair pulled back, his arms flicking out to suggest a halo. In the next scene, he'll be the Sorceress, painted evil nails gleaming, hair streaming. He'll alternate roles through the five scenes.

Morris, whose trademark has long been outrageousness — to an extent that has never obscured his creative genius — is perhaps an Odette / Odile for our confused times; an era, for instance, of sexual openness and the ravages of AIDS, of homelessness in the midst of plenty. But there's also a historical basis for the *travestie*; in ancient times, men regularly took women's roles. Morris has offered a better reason:

Dido, he told an interviewer, is the best role.

Mark Morris' ballet is set to Henry Purcell's 17th-Century opera, whose libretto by Nahum Tate was geared toward performance by a girls' school choir. In this production, nine wonderful grownups, the Emmanuel Music Group, sing the roles.

"Dido and Aeneas" is a more linear tale than Morris usually tackles, and he tells well the story of love and betrayal of Dido by Aeneas (Guillermo Resto) and the baleful / cheerful mischief of the Sorceress. The movement is as tied to the singers' words as his earlier works were to the note.

When the choir sings of joy, the dancers' legs seem to twiddle with pleasure. A drunken sailor does a hornpipe that's better than any real one you've seen. There's mimed mayhem: happy disemboweling in fulfillment of revenge fantasies. And there's ribaldry: Aeneas' "bending spear" has nothing to do with warfare — per se.

There were fine performances from Penny Hutchinson, Susan Hadley, and Teri Weksler as the Sailor. Almost all the dancers are dense-bodied, built like Morris. Their grace, shaped by his musculature, ripples out, curved and squared, articulated and articulate. Many of the movement's styles and phrases are never seen on other modern dance troupes — stamps of Indian *mudras*, for instance, or gestures from American Sign Language. Morris also incorporates jigs and reels of European folkdance, shapes of mourning that suggest Martha Graham, demonic falls and rises that suggest Paul Taylor. But the swiftness of the transitions, the fluidity, the way in which each dance gesture and phrase has a resonance that reaches past its physical immediacy, is Morris' own. His own, and maybe Balanchine's, and before that Petipa's.

When "Dido and Aeneas" premiered last spring in Brussels, the local newspaper ran a banner headline: "Mark Morris Go Home." He's got two years left in his contract. Maybe after that he *will* come home. It's something to hope for. / ■