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BALLET'S BAD BOY

Morris' Daring Danced Opera

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During the past five years, it has become increasingly clear that, of all this country's dance makers under 35, Seattle-born Mark Morris is the most sheerly talented. Indeed, many of us are convinced that, though a post-modernist, he alone has sufficient boldness of imagination to revitalize the art of ballet, at present in a state of creative exhaustion.

His "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," made last season for ABT, is surely the most exciting new work by an American choreographer in several years. Now it looks as though Morris may be the hope of opera, too.

His production of Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas," presented by Boston's Dance Umbrella at the recently refurbished Emerson Majestic Theater last week, was not simply an enormous success with both public and press, it was the kind of success that opens people's eyes and changes their opinions.

Opera Transformed

Taking a piece that, though familiar enough by reputation, is seldom seen on stage, and then only in dutifully reverent productions, he filled it with dramatic intensity — not imposed upon the opera from outside but discovered in the work itself. As one realized with something of a shock, the drama was there in Purcell's rich and passionate music all along. It simply had been glossed over for years by a succession of dull-witted directors and timid conductors.

Dull-witted and timid are not terms one could ever use about either Morris or

his musical ally, Craig Smith. Smith, best known beyond the confines of Boston, his home base, as the conductor of the majority of Peter Sellars' operatic productions, approaches baroque composers like an enthusiast.

He led a performance of "Dido" that was notable, above all, for its clarity of texture and rhythmic vibrancy. His singers phrased the music with distinction and enunciated the text as if it meant exactly what it said.

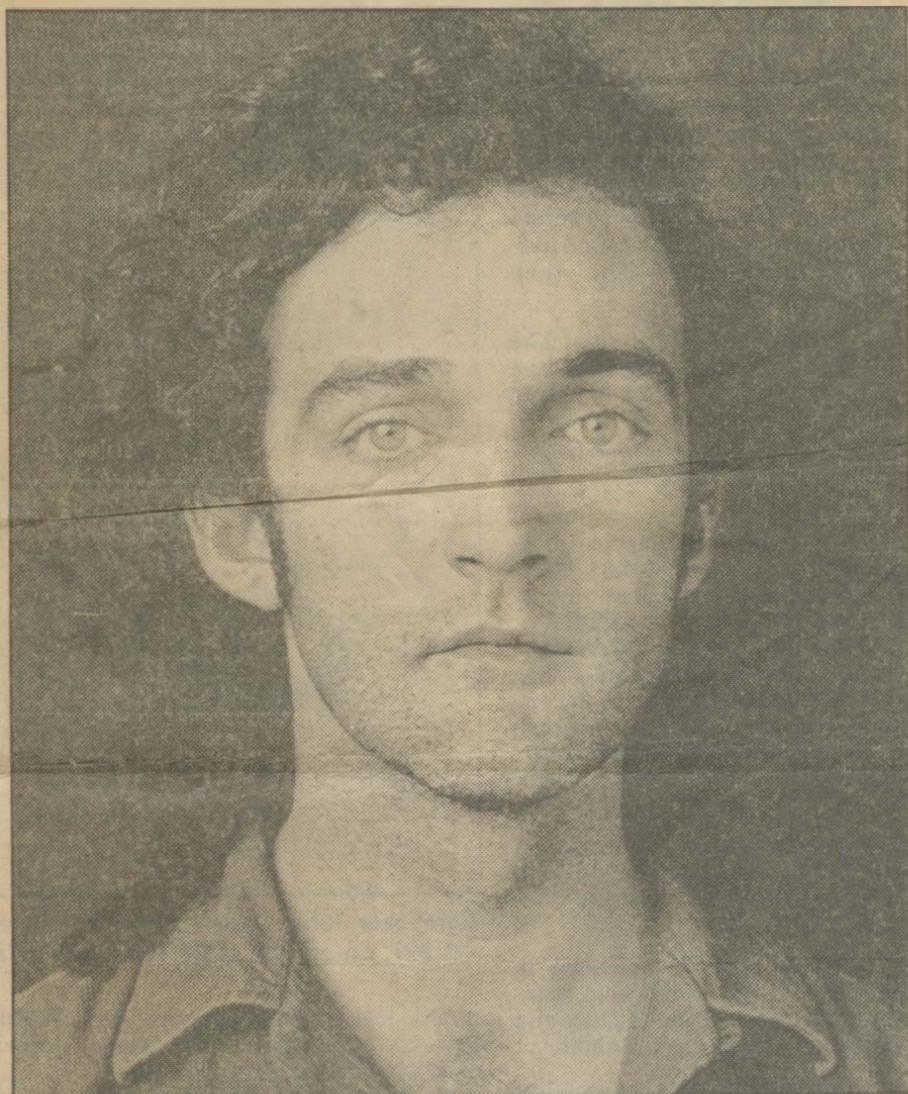
Off-stage Singers

But, except of the vocal kind, the singers were not required to do any acting. Lorrain Hunt (Dido), James Maddalena (Aeneas), Jayne West (Belinda), Frank Kelley (the Sorceress), along with the rest of the cast, were banished to the orchestra pit. To the sound of their voices, Morris presented a mimed and danced version of the opera.

In turning the opera into a ballet, Morris took his cue from the music rather than from the text. Not that he made any attempt to dispense with the libretto altogether, he simply treated the narrative elements of the work as the framework for the presentation of an essentially ceremonial experience, one in which the music was the essential medium of illumination.

Mythic Ritual

The result was unremittingly powerful. At no juncture did Morris attempt to summon up a sense of 17th century operatic style. In a succession of danced tableaux, he set before the audience both the events that chart the triumphant progress of love and its wanton destruction by evil, and the cosmic forces that



BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

Choreographer Mark Morris: he danced two female roles in his production of Purcell's 'Dido and Aeneas' in Boston

propel those events. What the audience saw was not the usual anecdotal presentation of Nahum Tate's rather prissily told story, but a stark and mythic ritual of betrayal and despair.

The most daring of Morris' ideas, and one that helped to ensure this production a stormy reception at its world premiere in Brussels last March, is the choreographer's assumption of the twin female roles of Dido and her mortal enemy, the Sorceress. Taking an approach to female representation that goes back to Greek drama, Morris succeeded in de-personalizing these two characters, and giving them universal meaning. Wearing

the same black sarong worn by the entire cast — except for Aeneas (the excellent Guillermo Resto, who was bare-chested) — Morris made no attempt to simulate female behavior. His Dido and Sorceress were embodiments of, respectively, love and hate.

In this memorable venture, he has shown that operatic production, released from the confines of verisimilitude, can achieve an all too rare profundity.

It was the formal dances that gave the evening its emotional resonance. Blending what looked like elements from Greek vase painting, photographs of Isadora Duncan, the early solos of Martha Graham and Nijinsky's "L'Après-midi d'un Faune," Morris used a style of movement that went back beyond the archaic to achieve an effect of the primeval.

Using a mixture of mime, American Sign Language, usually a medium of communication for the deaf, and hand positions derived from Indian dance, Morris intensified the effect of the lines being sung offstage, not so much illustrating them as broadening their meanings. What we heard about was Dido and Aeneas, what we saw was Everyone.

Earthy and Unnatural

Emphasizing weight and solidity, the choreography often kept the dancers' feet firmly planted parallel to the edge of the stage, a mode of stylization that made the performers look both earthy and unnatural, not so much individual characters as the instruments of destiny.

As a spokesman, Morris is provocative in content, and flamboyant in style. Unashamedly gay, he delights in scandalizing the complacent. His interviews about his assumption of these roles were essays in counter-diplomacy. Almost as soon as he arrived in Brussels, where, with his troupe of mainly American dancers, he has taken over the ballet at the Theatre de la Monnaie from the egregious Maurice Bejart, he swiftly alienated the local press. "Dido" has done nothing to mollify his opponents.

That is because they have chosen to take his behavior more seriously than his choreography. As an artist, he is invariably serious, and never more so than here.