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INNOCENCE ABROAD

MONNAIE DANCE GROUP/MARK MORRIS. Emerson Majestic Theater, Boston.

Through a black sort of irony, America's best young choreographer, Mark Morris, is now working in Belgium, and there's some question as to whether the Belgians even want him. Two years ago, Maurice Bejart, for 27 years director of dance at Belgium's national opera house, the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie, got

into a fight with the theater administration and walked out, taking his company with him. This gripped a lot of Belgian dance fans—Bejart's symbol-heavy, meaning-of-life ballets were very popular—but not the head of the Monnaie, Gerard Mortier. On the advice of the hip, young opera director Peter Sellars, Mortier offered the job to Morris, and Morris accepted. Whatever his reservations about moving his troupe from New York to the famously unhip Belgian capital, they were outweighed by the attractions offered to a subsidized dance company in Europe. All the rehearsal space Morris could want, plus access to several theaters and several orchestras, and a nice big budget that could pay him and his dancers a living wage—it was an offer he couldn't refuse.

And so, last September, the cumbrously renamed Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris moved to Brussels and two months later presented the city with a big, blushing masterpiece, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, to Handel's oratorio of the same name. Pure and lyrical in its style, traditional in its subject matter—the work had gods and nymphs, bees and birds—*L'Allegro* was like a gift, and almost all the Belgian critics took it as such.

Then in March Morris produced an entirely different sort of work, a dance version of Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*. Removing the singers to the side of the stage, he set forth a dark, cruel dance drama. The action alternates be-

tween the court, where Dido, the Carthaginian queen who was unlucky enough to detain Aeneas briefly on his way to found Rome undergoes her love-tragedy, and the den of the Sorceress, who engineers Dido's ruin. In each place, the dance is strange, extreme. In the court Dido and her retinue move in grand, rigid phrases, as if their bodies were speaking lines from Racine. The witches are just the opposite: scabrous, hysterical, colliding in midair, rolling on the floor, playing with themselves. And Dido and the Sorceress are played by the same dancer, a great one: Mark Morris.

Morris' Dido is a true queen, too noble to be less than human in her love or in her anguish. And curiously, the fact that she is played by a man merely makes her femininity more interesting. It adds a tension—the sand in the oyster. This is not a travesty act. As for the Sorceress, this is something of a travesty act, and it is terrific. Morris is a witch *extraordinaire*, talons gleaming, limbs twisting in the lurid light. She loves evil, and when she and her crones realize that their plot has taken—Aeneas is going to leave Dido, and Dido is going to kill herself—they are so giddy with delight that they act it out again and again. Smack! they kiss, and arg! they punch their guts and fall “dead.” There you have it: love and death. What a hoot! They grab their sides laughing. The amazing thing is that we think it's funny, too, even though it's the subject of the tragedy we're here to watch, the very thing

Mark Morris as Dido (right) and Guillermo Resto as Aeneas in Morris's new *Dido and Aeneas*

we're going to weep over in the next scene, when Dido, as promised, takes her life.

In this and in every other respect, *Dido* is utterly uncompromising. It laughs at evil, because the world laughs. It is sexual in its every move, because Dido's love is sexual. And it all happens in an hour. It is the very opposite of *L'Allegro*. *L'Allegro* was expansive; *Dido* is constrictive. Watching it is like falling down a tunnel. The walls get tighter and tighter. It presses in on you. It's one of those artworks that you don't so much have—it has you.

I say this having just seen *Dido* in Boston, where the Morris company, now touring, presented it for a week. (It will come to New York, together with *L'Allegro*, in the fall of 1990.) The reception in Boston was rapturous, but when *Dido* was first given, in Brussels, most reviewers seemed a little confused over its tone. Was it a joke? *Caricature* was a word widely used.

Then, a month later, came the blowout, the Brussels premiere of *Mythologies*. This was a 1986 suite of three dances—

Soup Powders and Detergents, *Striptease*, and *Championship Wrestling*—based on essays by Roland Barthes. Naturally, the one that caught the reviewers' eyes was *Striptease*, in which, by way of illustrating Barthes' point that nakedness de-erotizes, dancers representing stock sexual-fantasy types—the bride, the leather girl, the cowboy—slink about, removing their clothes item by item until they are stark naked. At the end, their job done, they pick up their clothes off the floor and exit—white, naked, human, looking as though they're going to catch cold. It is a brilliant piece, full of wisdom.

To *Mythologies*, Brussels' foremost newspaper, *Le Soir*, devoted a two-column spread on its front page, entitled “Mark Morris, Go Home!” “Provocation of suicidal anti-performance?” the article asked. “Mark Morris . . . has made a laughable demonstration of his creative poverty.” Inside the paper came the reviews, claiming that Morris “lowers to the level of his own vulgarity everything he touches” and that his use of Barthes

constituted a “despicable intellectual swindle.”

Other papers agreed. *La Libre Belgique* found the piece tasteless and empty. *Derniere Heure* asked where Maurice Bejart was now that they needed him: “*Morris n'est pas Maurice*.” And suddenly, anyone who harbored doubts about *Dido* had them no more. *La Libre Belgique* remembered it as “bad children's theater.”

This is a story that makes you proud to be a New Yorker, if only in a spiteful sort of way. Morris ran his company out of this city for eight years. Not all the New York reviewers loved him, but *Mythologies*, for example, was a big hit when it played here in 1986. A few weeks ago, at the benefit that the Morris company did for Dance Theater Workshop, I sat among a lot of what looked like investment counselors and wives while we all watched *Lovey*, a piece about sexual despair, in which the dancers rub little plastic baby dolls against their bodies. As always with *Lovey*, the audience's breathing became a little labored as the piece wore on, but everyone clapped.

Nobody called the police.

Much of the spirit of Morris' work is also the spirit of this city—the deep culture, the hatred of gentility, the sexual forthrightness, the respect for the anarchy of personal feeling. Now he's in a far country. His danced *Dido* is, in my view, the first new classical tragedy—a tragedy of character, like *Oedipus*—to be seen on the stage in a long time. That elusive ideal, a modern tragedy: he makes one, and the Belgians call it children's theater. What a hoot! The Sorceress would love this.

There's a lot of talk about how dance is becoming decentralized—moving out of New York—but much of what I see coming to us from outside New York looks like Son of Bejart, and I wonder where, outside New York and a few other like-minded cities, you have the kind of critical spirit that will support really bold new dance works. At the same time, everyone except us, particularly Europe, seems to have the money to support dance. So maybe dance will decentralize, and get worse.