

Dance

Mark Morris's Happy Homecoming

In Boston, Choreographer
Puts Belgium Behind Him

By Suzanne Levy
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BOSTON—"Mark Morris Go Home," blared a recent headline in Brussels's leading newspaper. Such indications of the American choreographer's alienation of the Belgian audience and press during his first season as resident choreographer of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie preceded Morris's return visit to the United States this month. So it was that the only American performances of his evening-length "Dido and Aeneas," given last week at the newly renovated Emerson Majestic Theatre in Boston, drew not only crowds of Morris's American fans but also curiosity-seekers intrigued by what had inspired the opprobrium abroad.

However, as viewings of the work last weekend proved, Morris remains the choreographer he was when he left America last year—part heart-on-his-sleeve sentimentalist, part bad boy, but mostly sheer genius. "Dido and Aeneas" is a stunning work, a choreographic and performing triumph for the 32-year-old dancer. And the prolonged standing ovations and loud huzzahs here attest to the fact that Morris's popularity has suffered no diminution on this side of the Atlantic.

Certainly some of the animosity in Belgium comes simply from the fact that Morris replaced Maurice Bejart, a choreographer who was regarded as something of a living national treasure. Bejart had held the post for more than 25 years. Morris, who had been touring with his Seattle-based company for only four years before receiving the offer to direct what is essentially the national ballet of Belgium, must have seemed an upstart to Bejart's supporters, despite Morris's meteoric rise to international prominence with a reputation garnering him mention in the company of Balanchine and Paul Taylor. And clearly, Morris's disregard of convention has won him no admirers among the more conservative patrons of ballet.

Morris's streak of outrageousness is evident in "Dido and Aeneas," in the audacity of the gender-blind casting, in the colloquial gestural details and in the characteristic frankness of the sex scenes. Even the plot synopsis in the program is cheeky.

For all its scandalousness, however, Morris's choreography is essentially faithful to the spirit



Morris and Penny Hutchinson in "Dido and Aeneas."

of Henry Purcell's 1689 opera, and magnificently matches the sweep and grandeur of the score in a staging that relegates the vocalists to the orchestra pit. With just 12 dancers, Morris populates Purcell's rendering of the ancient myth. "Dido and Aeneas" ricochets between extremes of emotion and style. The sheer exuberance of the Sorceress's minions as they enact murder and general mayhem is wildly and hilariously attractive. Yet Morris also achieves an utter poignancy as these same performers enact a procession at Dido's death.

Appearing as courtiers, witches, spirits, sailors and conscience, the dancing chorus objectifies the extravagant emotions of the main characters within strict geometrical patterns. But the center of Morris's interpretation lies in his own performance as both Dido and the Sorceress. While the idea might seem questionable, the shock of Morris in leading female roles is only momentary. In fact, far from being a camp sendup, Morris's characterization actually makes us forget about gender in its blurring of notions of masculinity and femininity, as does his arbitrary mixture of gender in the chorus.

Morris's essaying of both larger-than-life roles, also enlarges the implications of the actions in its suggestion of Doppelgänger. The strict parallels between the characters intimate that Dido contains within herself the seeds of her own destruction. With his interpretations firmly rooted in the conventions of masque and antimasque, there are strictly observed parallels between the worlds of Dido and the Sorceress, right down to pose, gesture and props.

In the tour de force of playing against gender and alternating in such antithetical roles, Morris has achieved a personal coup. He transforms himself utterly from one to the other through the choreography; the only change in his appearance is that his luxuriantly snaky hair is clasped at the nape of his neck as Dido and allowed to flow wildly as the Sorceress. Morris's riveting stage presence is heightened by his recent return to excellent dancing form after some physical problems.

For his first full-length narrative, Morris has devised the movement equivalent of recitative. Combining American Sign Language, Indian mudras and colloquial gesture, he simultaneously illustrates and expands on the sung text. However, because it is rhythmically based and highly stylized, it remains narrative dancing rather than dumb show. While most of the mime cannot be "read" literally (at least upon first viewing), it is always suggestive, if only subliminally.

This gestural language is overlaid on Morris's familiar style, which revels in the body's weight and mass and does nothing to conceal the effortfulness of movement. It is not polite, but exuberantly physical, unabashedly emotional and almost dementedly uninhibited. From the exuberant flat-footed hopping and slapping of a sailor's hornpipe to the restrained formality of the opening and closing processions, the work has an epic sweep.

Morris's profound understanding of significant contrasts in movement textures between hard and soft, flexed and pointed, straight and curved, provide choreographic interest on a fundamental bodily level. For this work, Morris has also explored an archaic flatness in the narrative sections reminiscent of Nijinsky's 1912 "Afternoon of a Faun." There are even specific gestural quotations from the Nijinsky work, and the two dances also include depiction of autoeroticism.

The performances by the Monnaie group were astonishing in their rhythmic complexity and exuberant physicality. Especially noteworthy were veteran Morris dancers Penny Hutchinson, as Belinda, Susan Hadley as the Second Woman, Teri Weksler as the Sailor, and Ruth Davidson and Jon Mensinger as Witches.

The lavish resources of a state theater have not seduced Morris into overproduction. Much of the resonance of the work lies in its simplicity of design. Both the sets by longtime Morris collaborator Robert Bordo and costumes by Belgian Christine Van Loon are spare suggestions of the ancient world. The excellent musical performance by Boston's Emmanuel Music Group was, under the direction of Craig Smith, who also has served as conductor for Morris at Monnaie. The performances were sponsored by Boston's Dance Umbrella, which, under the direction of Jeremy Alliger, has been a major supporter of Morris's work.