

To: Barry Altmann . Mannaie Dance Group / Mark Morris  
 From: Dale Harris . NY

Mark Morris in Brussels  
 by Dale Harris

Survivors from the Balanchine era, take heart: The art of choreography is not dead, it has merely moved across the Atlantic. Not that the Europeans have unexpectedly produced a dance-maker of consequence, simply that Mark Morris, the most talented American choreographer under 35--and thus, by definition, the most talented choreographer of his generation anywhere--has transferred his base of operations from Seattle to Brussels, where he has been in charge of dance at the Theatre de la Monnaie since 1988.

With his recently staged world premieres, "Wonderland" and "Love Song Waltzes," Mr. Morris has confirmed the artistic success of his first season. No doubt, Gerard Mortier, director of the Monnaie (and designate-director of the Salzburg Festival), knew exactly what wonders Mr. Morris was likely to produce when, after seeing the latter's company perform in Stuttgart in 1987, he asked the choreographer to move to Brussels. Still, the director's courage should not be underestimated. Not only did he appoint an American to an important position at what is Belgium's national opera house, he appointed someone with aesthetic views radically different from those of the Monnaie's former resident choreographer, the much-beloved Maurice Bejart.

During his nearly three decades in Brussels (1960-87), Mr. Bejart won a devoted following, especially for large scale extravaganzas like "Mass for the Present Time" and "Choreographic Offering." Though without aesthetic merit, these were received as serious works of art, no doubt because they sought to give expression to unarguably noble sentiments, like the beauty of peace or the brotherhood of man. Purveyors of Euroschlock, like Mr. Bejart, show no awareness that, in dance, the meaning is either implicit in the movement or is simply non-existent.

The importance of Mr. Morris for the Bruxellois is that his subject is movement, not ideas. As "Wonderland" affirms, dance expresses not a literary correlative but a series of swiftly changing, ultimately unfathomable revelations. What gives these revelations coherence is the music, which both establishes structure and sustains mood. In "Wonderland," the choreographer has made use of two works by Arnold Schoenberg: Five Pieces for Orchestra, Opus 16 and the ominous "Accompaniment for a Film Scene," Opus 34. Mirroring in the form of his ballet the constantly fluctuating colors and textures of these scores, Mr. Morris has created a sequence of brief scenes (some of them disorientingly enough, danced in silence), in which strange events are presented for their own sake, without causality, consequence or explanation.

Though "Wonderland" has the manner of a narrative ballet, it eschews any kind of sequential narrative content. A succession of discrete vignettes, each of which is suddenly plucked from the surrounding darkness by the harsh glare of a spotlight, the piece features five people: Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rob Besserer, Ruth Davidson, Olivia Maridjan-Koop and Keith Sabado, all of them dressed like figures in a 1940s underworld movie. Consciously evoking the cryptic atmosphere of a Raymond Chandler-like murder story, "Wonderland" offers no clues about the meaning of the mysterious incidents in which the cast of characters is involved. Fascinated but uncomprehending, we watch as one episode gives way to another. Inevitably we come to conclusions for which there is insufficient evidence. Nothing is certain, not even the corpse abruptly disclosed center-stage, since in the following scene the apparently dead figure is reanimated. Moreover, the same incident is sometimes repeated from a different point of view, as if to make us doubt the deduction we have just made.

What is clear, above all, is the prevalence of dread, hostility, violence. Sometimes the characters tremble with apprehension. One of them looks nervously at his watch. Another picks up a piece of evidence from beside the corpse and hides it in his pocket. Huge Rob Besserer menaces tiny, crew-cut Mikhail Baryshnikov; they grapple in slow motion; the little man keeps collapsing upon the larger one, each time rising to his feet to continue the combat. Rob Besserer chases one of the girls behind the translucent backcloth. He drags her onto the stage, then falls to the ground while she unfolds her limbs over him. Mikhail Baryshnikov is manhandled by two men. Rob Besserer writhes on the floor. Olivia Manildjan-Koop cowers in terror. In this world of undefined fears and arbitrary brutality the only thing of which we can be certain is the need for vigilance and self-reliance.

As a parable of lovelessness, "Wonderland" is haunting, especially since it is programmed between two works whose subject is the fulfillment and variety of love: "New Love Song Waltzes" and "Love Song Waltzes." Like more than one Morris ballet, these are performed to vocal music, the same Brahms song cycles, as it happens, used by Balanchine for his celebrated "Liebeslieder Walzer." Mr. Morris's appropriation of a score associated with another choreographer implies no challenge, only the possibility of alternate readings. Balanchine puts his ballerinas first into slippers, then into pointe shoes, while Mark Morris leaves his cast barefoot. In the former's version, set in a ballroom, dance is a metaphor both for social discourse and for the poetic dream that sustains our outward existence. In the latter's, dance is the idiom of irrepressible feeling, the language of an emotion that energizes the whole of life. Whereas Balanchine's work is organized in terms of the pas de deux and Mr. Morris's in terms of the group, the former is social in orientation, the latter personal.

There are differences between "New Love Waltzes" and "Love Waltzes": the first gives expression to an all-embracing amorous gusto, the second to a more thoughtful view of passion. Both are valid, both present love, not as an image of sexual union, but as the paradigm of an abundant generosity of spirit that includes sex, companionship, respect, courtesy. The more one sees of this young choreographer's work, the more apparent it is that his essential subject is the infinite resources of human feeling as these are made manifest in the dancer's body. Apart from Merce Cunningham, no other choreographer today is creating work of such beauty and significance. In June, his company appears at Brooklyn Academy of Music, in July at Jacob's Pillow. He deserves to be seen more widely in the land of his birth.

and