

Mark Morris, Béjart Pulp —and Belgian Bores—



Monnaie Dance Group - Mark Morris, in *Wonderland*. Photo: Klaus Lefebvre

Sophie Constanti assesses Mark Morris' work since his controversial move to Brussels.

Few people who saw the work of American choreographer Mark Morris during Dance Umbrella '84 - or even '85 - could have envisaged that Morris' company would one day be invited to take up a three year, state supported residency at the opera house of one of Europe's most important capital cities, let alone that such an offer would be made before the end of the decade. Certainly, his Umbrella performances were heralded by a stream of impressive quotes culled from transatlantic re-

views: "A rising choreographer of expansive talent, both prolific and ingenious" (New York Native) and "an extraordinarily gifted choreographer, the most promising of his generation" (Dance Magazine). But these compliments, heaped on to a choreographer who was at that time virtually unknown here, had the effect not of convincing British audiences of his talent, but of making them all the more suspicious of Morris. And although his work merited serious attention, it did seem as

if Morris was being over-hyped as the new prodigy of American modern dance.

In autumn 1988, Morris and his troupe journeyed to Belgium to take up a three year contract as resident dance company at Brussels' Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie. The realisation that one of their finest dancemakers was likely to be away from home for some time plus reports that he was producing some of the most accomplished work of his career, have led to Morris' American fans now regu-

larly trekking thousands of miles to catch each work (old or new) premièred in Brussels.

Morris' move to Europe also prompted British critics to take significant interest in the choreographer's output: here, at last, was the chance not only to see works such as *L'Allegro*, *Love Song Waltzes* and *Wonderland* but to see them in the kind of optimum conditions and surroundings which, for example, allowed for *Wonderland's* ninety member orchestra.

For the Belgians, gaining Mark Morris has meant the loss of Maurice Béjart and his Ballet of the 20th Century (now departed to Lausanne). The end of Béjart's reign - a reign notable exclusively for Béjart's prolific output of some of the most crass and tawdry ballets ever conceived - and the arrival of one of America's most gifted choreographers has not, however, been cause for celebration in Belgium. Public reaction to Morris' appointment and to the performances given by his company continues to tell us more about the ingrained prejudices and ungracious manners of Brussels' bourgeoisie than convince us that Morris doesn't belong, or won't triumph, in his new home. Likewise, the alarming level of support for Béjart - or for work of that ilk - indicates a profoundly unsophisticated dance audience. It is an audience which, until a few months ago, simply refused (rather than failed?) to recognise Morris' stature in the dance world and greeted the end of almost every performance of his choreography with a round of vociferous boos.

Controversy, in fact, has been the order of the day since the Mark Morris Dance Group became Belgium's national ballet company. Each new production has, for the Belgians, supplied the perfect excuse for another bout of petty disagreement between French and Flemish factions, whose comments revolve more around Morris' nationality than his abilities as a choreographer. Last spring, the Group presented a work entitled *Mythologies* at the Cirque Royal: post-première advice from *Le Soir*, "Mark Morris, Go Home", was countered the following day by the Flemish press requesting that "Mark Morris, Stay". Reliable sources inform me that both communities are now beginning to acknowledge and even grudgingly appreciate the quality of Morris' choreography. Throughout, British and American visitors have returned from Brussels unanimous in their praise for the artist confronted by a generation of dance fans not only weaned on Béjart's kitsch since 1959 but determined that his memory should live on.

A trip to Brussels last April gave me a taster of the Mark Morris controversy and the impression that Morris' spirit (and that of his dancers) has not been dampened by the philistinism encountered at performances. Likewise, his work continues to rise above the hostile reception and inconsistent criticism that mar what should have been praised as one of the most enterprising moves in the history of dance in Belgium:

i.e. the decision of Gérard Mortier, Director of the Monnaie, to replace Béjart with Morris. Since the Mark Morris Dance Group (formed in 1980) became the Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris (in 1988), Brussels has been in possession of a choreographer lauded for his acute musicality. Whether he is creating dances to Herschel Garfein's tongue-in-cheek libretto for *Mythologies*, to the exquisite lilt of Brahms' *Liebeslieder* (*New Love Song Waltzes* and *Love Song Waltzes*) or to the urgent dissonance of Schoenberg's *Accompaniment for a Film Scene* (*Wonderland*), Morris brings musical rhythm and text alive - without resorting to imitative devices or banal motifs.

His triple bill of *New Love Song Waltzes* (originally choreographed in 1982), *Wonderland* (which featured Mikhail Baryshnikov - hardly recognisable - as a Raymond Chandler-type snooper) and *Love Song Waltzes* premiered last November, provided supreme evidence of Morris' ability to fuse music and movement while, at the same time, paying homage to the independent characteristics of each form. In this way, the subtleties of both music and dance become apparent, lucid, arresting. Morris' work may humour you, rant and rave at you or sweep you along with its heady, often charmingly naive, sense of idealism, but its most potent effect (and the one that instantly hits you) is in the perfect consensus of visual and aural patterns that Morris, alone of his generation, is able to achieve. Perhaps this is why he is all too often compared with choreographers like Balanchine, Ashton and Taylor. Balanchine, in fact, used the same Brahms song cycles for his *Liebeslieder Waltzer* (made in 1960 when Morris was just four years old).

Morris' *Love Song Waltzes* and revived *New Love Song Waltzes* illustrate his delightful treatment of Brahms' *Liebeslieder Waltzer* (opus 52) and *Neue Liebeslieder Waltzer* (opus 65). In both pieces, dancers swirl, hover and brake to the intoxicating melody of three-four time. Men and women dance alone, in groups and as part of a huge wave or chorus which fills the stage and makes it impossible to believe that a maximum of ten or twelve dancers is creating such busy, fulsome and generous configurations. This physical and spiritual magnanimity informs every gesture and matches the exuberant flurry of lyrics such as "You black eyes/you have but to wink/and palaces fall/and cities sink." or, "Against the rocks the torrent/ violently driven, dashes itself/ he who does not know how to sigh like this/

will learn through loving." The opening verse of *New Love Song Waltzes*: "Abandon hope of rescue, O heart/ when you venture on the sea of love/ For a thousands ships are drifting/ wrecked by the surrounding shores," is accompanied by a single dancer - Ruth Davidson - flinging her arms with the solid weight and delicious abandon that characterise Morris' work. Dancers run, skip, gambol and leap; they become intertwined in a choreographic Ring-a-ring-a-roses, assume the two dimensional poses of figures from Greek and Egyptian friezes, then suddenly melt back into the softly curving, perpetual flow of movement. They dart and flutter to the sprightly and piquant "*Ein kleiner, hübscher Vogel nahm den Flug* (A pretty little bird took its flight)...", sit and watch each other dance or, finding tender love through their romantic duets, dream of keeping it forever - as in *Love Song Waltzes* when Guillermo Resto falls to the floor and into a divine slumber. Unlike Balanchine, who declined to print the words of the *Liebeslieder* in his programme because he felt that they had no connection with the dance, Morris supplies French, Flemish and English translations from the German and, in so doing, enhances our understanding of the sentiments he explores and portrays. He doesn't fall into the trap of replicating the words - or their meaning - in movement, concentrating, instead, on lifting their essential tone and quality so that even the nouns of the lyrics seem to describe the action and emotion on stage.

Sandwiched between the *Liebeslieder* dances, *Wonderland* conjures up the whodunit angst of a scene from a Hitchcock thriller. Schoenberg's *Accompaniment for a Film Scene* (opus 34) and his *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (opus 16) provide an ideal soundtrack for the cinematic action: five characters - played by Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rob Besserer, Ruth Davidson, Olivia Maridjan-Koop and Keith Sabado - enacting the before and after of a murder. Morris creates a brilliant reconstruction of *film noir* territory and atmosphere in which the performers, wearing 40s style dress, seem either to be rooted to the spot in fear or lost in urban alleyways and empty rooms, caught in shadowy light or silhouette. At the core of *Wonderland*'s choreo-graphic script is an unsolved murder. Morris takes us to the scene of the crime where a man stands over a woman who lies crumpled on the ground, both figures obstructing the path of a couple walking arm in arm across the stage. Morris cleverly disturbs our visual

perceptions and sense of logic by 'framing' the scene from different angles through a combination of on-off lighting and carefully measured adjustments of the murder tableau. The personal obsessions and neuroses of all five characters are unleashed in a stream of violent action, of question-and-answer situation and gnawing confusion and fear. Besserer wipes his face with a handkerchief, Baryshnikov keeps feeling for his wallet, Maridjan-Koop clasps her hands as if they are stained with blood and Davidson strokes the front of her dress as if trying to wipe away some vital evidence. Throughout, Baryshnikov's presence is low-key; his dancing as attuned to the pedestrianism of *Wonderland* as that of Morris' own performers.

Having heard that Baryshnikov was in town, Belgian dance fans (including, no doubt, some that are still mourning the loss of Béjart) flocked to the Monnaie. But *Wonderland*, I imagine, did not add up to their idea of ballet. And a Baryshnikov wearing street clothes, sporting a crewcut and displaying no hint of his balletic virtuosity, must have made them doubly irate. After polite applause and a few cheers, it was no surprise to see people collecting their coats and leaving the theatre as if to stress the fact that they had come to see Baryshnikov, not Morris' choreography. It was yet another example of the small mindedness and arrogance of those Belgians who try - but can't manage - to sabotage evenings of Morris' work. While Morris may not enjoy the on-going struggle to improve his relationship with certain sectors of the Belgian public - a year of boeing cannot have done much for the collective morale of his Group - he does seem to take a mischievous pleasure in frustrating the expectations of that public. In *Wonderland*, for instance, he didn't use Baryshnikov as the jewel in the crown and, by having the performers take their bows together, he thwarted the attempts of those who wanted to cheer only Baryshnikov.

On other occasions, Morris upsets the same people through his choice of choreographic source material. *Mythologies*, my first experience of Morris' work since his Umbrella appearances four and five years ago, takes its title from Roland Barthes' book of essays on the semiology of popular culture: Morris has chosen *Soap-powders and Detergents*, *Striptease* and *The World of Wrestling* for the three sections of a full-length work in which he reveals an acute understanding of Barthes' detached and lucid observations. In translating these es-

says to readable dance theatre, Morris stamps each section of the trilogy with his own impressions of the commercially inspired fantasies and legends to which we subscribe. In *Soap-powders and Detergents*, for instance, he muses on the "whiter than white" theme of most washing powder advertisements. To Herschel Garfein's libretto - a copywriter's tuneful text for brand names Fab, Lava and Era - the dancers bring alive the industry's penchant for soft focus imagery whereby tackling the family wash becomes an almost romantic activity. The arm and leg movements of a floor-bound corps de ballet suggest the foamy whirl and tumble of a collection of frontloading machines; a housewife, ghoulishly mummified with a pair of sheets, reclaims her preferred soap powder in spite of the familiar offers of money; and a single dancer running across the stage in Isadora Duncan fashion, with sheet billowing in the wind, makes subtle allusions to the ideological purity of early modern dance.

In *Striptease* each of the eight dancers is, as Barthes puts it, "an object in disguise". Rob Besserer is a hedonistic cowboy, Kraig Patterson a transvestite Devil woman, Tina Fehlandt the obligatory leather and chain fetishist, Donald Mouton a phallic-inches obsessed Orton look-alike and Morris himself, as dope addict, alcoholic and pervert rolled into one, manages to defy all recognisable stereotypes. In the final parade of naked bodies, Morris continues the tradition of the strip show as something that always promises more than it delivers. By making that the point of the exercise, each artificial gesture of frenzied lust is more hilarious than the last. Here, it seems, is a choreographer with an eye for the countless obscenities surrounding us and an ability to drag them out of the gutter without offending his audience.

Newspaper headlines such as "Mark Morris, Go Home", are a crude simplification of the controversy surrounding Morris. So too, are the tac-au-tac games played out between the French and Flemish, who use Morris as a cultural scapegoat. (They'd be just as contrary without him.) To date, public response to Morris has been informed by politics rather than an open-minded attitude to his work. Why, indeed, was an American choreographer and his predominantly American troupe appointed as Belgium's national, state-supported dance company? The Belgians' grudging acceptance of Morris is understandable. His residency at the Monnaie has: a) dealt a blow to the nation's pride, b)

drawn attention to Belgium's apparent failure to produce even *one* dance artist to fill the Monnaie vacancy and c) most painful of all, Morris' work has mercilessly jolted a generation reared on Bèjart pulp into the '90s.

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