

DARING, BAREFOOT AND BOLD

THE WORLD OF DANCE BY BARBARA NEWMAN

WHEN Mark Morris came to London in 1984, his company of three gave three performances in the Dance Umbrella festival, and sold a grand total of 420 seats. In America, critics were already writing "Morris, at 28, is on just about every dance fan's short list of contemporary choreographers destined for the history books". But few people here knew anything about him.

Today, Morris is the director of the dance wing of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, the Brussels opera house, which sells 90% of its 1,140 seats by subscription and is always packed. His contract obliges him to present his company—which now numbers 28 and is called the Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris—in some 60 performances a year, anywhere in the world, and to create several new works each year as well. In return he has at his disposal a budget of \$1.5 million, four rehearsal studios, and the Monnaie's orchestra, chorus and production staff.

Morris is now 33. He is the most talked about young choreographer in the world today, possibly the most sought after, and probably the best. His arrival in Belgium in November 1988 gave the local dance audience something of a shock. After 27 years of the Ballet of the Twentieth Century, with its sleek, glamorous dancers and glittering, vacuous choreography, they were suddenly faced with dancers of all sizes and shapes and with choreography of substance.

In place of the benevolent offstage presence of choreographer Maurice Béjart—"Belgium's only living cultural icon," as he was described to me in Brussels—they got a young American with shoulder-length curls who danced two women's roles in the second new piece he made after his appointment and took off all his clothes in the third.

Instead of the vaguely exotic, safely erotic primping in pointe shoes of Béjart's work, dance at the Monnaie was suddenly barefoot and bold. "At 14," Morris once explained, "I joined Koleda, a Balkan dance ensemble . . . It was marvellous dancing. It has this satisfying gravity—the body weight held low, the feet solid and flat against the floor. Rhythmically it's terrifically complex, and I loved the sense of community. It made me feel for the first time that dance was an important thing to do, not just ornamental."

The first work Morris made in Brussels, *L'Allegro, il Moderato ed il Penseroso*, is important by anybody's standards.



Mark Morris and his company may be seen on the South Bank Show on March 25 in excerpts from *L'Allegro*

In just over two hours, it offers the viewer nothing less than a simple conversation between 17th-century poetry, 18th-century music, 19th-century painting and 20th-century dance. Simple is the crucial word. Only a fool would embroider on the entwined masterpieces that animate the choreography, and Morris is no fool.

Framing and supporting the work are Milton's interlocking pastoral odes, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, written between 1630 and 1638 and first published in 1645. When Handel composed an oratorio around these texts in 1740, his collaborator, Charles Jennens, supplied a third voice, *Il Moderato*, to mediate between Milton's cheerful and contemplative arguments. William Blake responded with drawings and poetry of his own, and now Morris has added his response, in movement, to the intimate dialogue of the other three.

"My *L'Allegro* is based on Milton, Handel and Blake," Morris told one interviewer, "but I can't tell who's who any more, and nobody who sees this piece has to know anything about Handel, Blake or

me." A less confident, less daring choreographer would have buttressed such an ambitious project with explanations, but Morris's skill is his safety net, and it renders both biography and footnotes irrelevant. Like the memorable dances set to Baroque scores by Balanchine, Robbins and Paul Taylor—all of whom Morris cites as important influences—*L'Allegro* is a self-contained creation that speaks directly to the viewer.

The variety of voices it adopts and its constantly shifting relation to its sources are remarkable. Since, for Morris, "just about every dance starts from a piece of music", it is no surprise that *L'Allegro* so often assumes Handel's structure, sometimes replicating it exactly and at other times escorting it as counterpoint, like sound made visible.

In some sections, the movement leaves the music and follows the text, either word by word or more generally. You see angels and hunting dogs, nightmares and "the hidden soul of harmony" in images as clearly legible as Milton's. Or it abandons representation and becomes pure abstract geometry, intersecting lines, concentric circles, curves and angles that engage the mind and eye like architecture.

Morris draws on everything he knows and values: folk dancing, tap dancing, ballet, Taylor's rugged energy, Balanchine's musical serenity, Robbins's seamless construction. And as the evening passes, the community of

dancers expands its embrace until it absorbs the audience completely, making them a valued part of the dancing, too.

"Every moment changes your perspective," he points out. "Every seat changes your perspective." And he is right. Watching his work also changes your thinking about the future of choreography. You begin to believe, as it is difficult to do in Britain, that it *has* a future.

"I'm interested in mastery," he has declared, "mastery in the sense of a Japanese National Living Treasure practising some incredibly obscure art form . . . real mastery, where nothing else matters."

If you cannot travel to Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg or America to see his company this year, or to Paris where he is making a new work at the Opéra, treat yourself to a glimpse of the choreographer and his company, and excerpts from *L'Allegro*, on the South Bank Show (ITV), on March 25. You will not often have the privilege of watching such a gifted young master at work.

Photograph: Klaus Lefebvre.