

Controversy stalks a Morris dancer

Despised in Europe,
loved in America —
Mark Morris talks
to Debra Craine

Mark Morris attracts superlatives the way honey attracts bees. He is, some say, the most exciting choreographer alive today, the greatest dancemaker of the post-Balanchine generation. Or, according to Arlene Croce of *The New Yorker*, "his generation's one and only".

He is also controversial. In Brussels, where the 33-year-old American has been based for the past two years, his work is booed, critics find him loathsome and headlines scream "Mark Morris Go Home".

Who is this choreographer who can arouse such passions? He looks like a rock star, drinks beer like a lager lout and talks like a hippie throwback to the 1960s. He is considered an *enfant terrible* in Europe, treated practically as a god in America, but is virtually unknown in Britain. Apart from two small-scale appearances at London's Dance Umbrella festival in the mid-Eighties, his company has never performed here.

Without travelling to Brussels, the nearest you can get to Mark Morris is watching tomorrow's *South Bank Show*. Until you see his work it is difficult to imagine what the fuss is about. But even the dance excerpts in this documentary provide glimpses of his astonishing musicality, range and



Choreographer Mark Morris: 'I'm very classical, very old-fashioned'

imagination, and the special way he can make dances that touch the heart and leave one breathless.

It was his musicality that brought Morris to Belgium in the first place, the quality which so impressed opera house director Gerard Mortier that he offered Morris a three-year contract as resident choreographer of the Monnaie Theatre. The American was hired to replace Maurice Béjart, who, after 27 years at the Monnaie, was himself a national institution. It did not take long for Morris's outspoken and outrageous nature to alienate the Belgians.

"We pay a large price for the work we do in Brussels. Yes, we have the studios, the theatre, the orchestra, but it's a strange society and it's very glum in general. It's

also highly racist, highly sexist, highly homophobic and highly conservative, and there are certain aspects that are quite fascistic." That is Morris's considered view of Belgium.

It is typical of him that he does not hesitate to bite the hand that feeds him. Nor does he balk at criticizing his illustrious predecessor, whose work he describes as "just awful".

"When I was 14 I liked a lot of Béjart's work. I really wanted to dance with him, I wanted to study at his studio in Brussels, which is now my studio. But the work has not aged well, and I've changed. I see it now as being quite vulgar."

As a boy in Seattle, Morris decided to become a professional dancer after seeing José Greco's Spanish company.

After a brief career with several modern dance companies in the United States, Morris set up his own at the age of 23 and quickly built a reputation as a choreographer with new ideas and a respect for tradition. He loves Balanchine — although he is sorry to see that "his dances are rotting away" — and he admires Merce Cunningham.

Morris borrows movement ideas from everywhere, including non-dance sources, but somehow makes them look original. Like his choice of music, his choice of subjects is catholic, ranging from love to spiritual matters, striptease, vampires and soap powders.

He is not afraid to dance with a paper bag on his head or have his dancers perform in the nude, but he denies his work is flamboyant. "I'm very classical, very old-fashioned. The people who hate my work in the States hate it because it seems retro to them."

The move to the Monnaie allowed Morris to broaden his creativity and mount large-scale works like the monumental *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato*, which combines pastoral odes by Milton with music by Handel and is regarded as one of the major dance works of the decade.

His choreographed version of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* — in which he perversely danced the female lead — infuriated the Belgian critics who found its gender-bending and auto-eroticism offensive.

● The *South Bank Show* is broadcast tomorrow at 10.40pm (ITV)