

## DANCE

# Morris and Americana

"Whatever do we mean by American?" asked 90-year-old choreographer Agnes de Mille in a speech at a recent New York Gala. "Humorous, salty, bold, original," was her own answer. After seeing **Loud Music**, the last programme of the season by the Monnaie Dance Group-Mark Morris at the Halles de Schaerbeek on April 14, I couldn't agree more.

What Morris wanted to do in this programme was to present a number of very different moods evoked by widely divergent choices of music. They include a parody of the dance divertissement of Verdi's *Aida* in *Ballabili*, the tense silence of *Behemoth*, the cozy Country and Western tunes of *Going Away Party*, the blistering raucousness of the lyrics in *Lovey* and the comical soundtrack of an Indian soap opera, ending with the chanting of *Strict Songs*.



Shy student and arrogant teacher in *The Tamil Film Songs* danced by Hutchinson and Morris

Anyone who has suffered through the scene in *Aida* when ballet dancers inevitably make fools of themselves trying to look like Egyptians of 800 BC, could not help laughing at the very first image of *Ballabili*, with the mock solemnity of the bewigged dancers entering in bright red codpieces and droopy pants. It's a six-minute cascade of gags, not at Verdi's expense, but of the choreographers who for generations have had to cope with the task of making the ludicrous believable.

*Behemoth* takes place in total silence, the only sounds being those of the dancers' clapping hands and stamping feet. Until now, Morris has spoken out against these options in dance, but here he has produced an outstanding abstract piece performed in silence with consummate craftsmanship and moving clarity. Its 10 sections are like a haunting, slowly changing landscape, with constantly shifting groups of threes and fours, from which emerges an occasional solo, like the one by lovely Mireille Radwan-Dana or the introspective one of Ruth Davidson. There are subtly recurring motifs that create a cumulative effect of great beauty and inner quiet. The sense of tension is built up by the skill with which the dancers handle the development of patterns. The purity of Merce Cunningham inevitably comes to mind, but as a homage to the master rather than an attempt to reproduce his work.

*Going Away Party* is an affectionate joke, parts of which are bound to be lost on a non-American audience, unfamiliar with the music of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, a style of Country and Western that blends in jazzy rhythms. Besides the three cou-

ples — Guillermo Resto, Keith Sabado and Jon Mensinger as the three cowboys, Rachel Murray the dolled-up country dancer in tacky bouffant petticoats, Holly Williams, the cowgirl, and Clarice Marshall, all excellent — Morris has included himself as an appealing outsider who wants to be part of the group.

The eight dances follow the lyrics closely with mock pantomime precision. For the jazzy parts, the cowboys do soft-shoe routines that suggest the

suave dancing in Thirties musicals. It's one part nostalgia, two parts folklore and three parts straight fun.

*Lovey* is an unlovable dance based on the abrasive, disquieting lyrics of the underground rock group, Violent Femmes, on the subject of child abuse. Here the literal approach does not work and the chilling power of the songs is dispersed into a series of frenzied vignettes of adults doing nasty things to dolls. The horror comes across piecemeal; Morris's revulsion at adult violence against children is weakened by the anecdotal approach, in spite of the expressive power of the dancers, especially Olivia Maridjan-Koop as the girl, Alyce Bochette as the neurotic mother and Kraig Patterson.

*The Tamil Film Songs in Stereo* pas de deux, to a soundtrack of a whining female and a stentorian male voice, shows Morris as a petulant, arrogant dance teacher and Penny Hutchinson as the shy student who can't always get it right, much to the annoyance of the teacher. In melodramatic exasperation, he repeats the same ridiculous dance pattern again and again, until the female voice breaks into tearful whimpers and the student stops in confusion. It's startling to see this large, imposing mass of bones and flesh carve out the most intricate *enchaînement* with such speed and steely precision, and without a single blurred line. The whole thing is packed into about five minutes, and there was loud laughter from the audience, including Baryshnikov who had come to Brussels to see the premiere.

*Strict Songs*, set to Lou Harrison's music inspired by the culture of the Hopi Indians, is a hymn to nature which unfolds with patterns drawn from images of plants, animals, marine life, starry skies. Arms and legs sway gently like sea anemones or leaves on a tree.

Anyone as yet unacquainted with the variety of Morris's unclassifiable style should not miss this programme.

Luisa Moffett

## ROCK

## Seeds of Love

The rise of **Tears For Fears** coincided with the rise of the promo video as an overrated artform. It also coincided with the rise of a handful of esoteric and pained British pop groups whose artistic ambitions sailed loftily above their capabilities. They write naggingly catchy (if somewhat dry) pop songs. They never smile in photos. "Pretentious" is a word often used in connection with them. But everything they do,