

Maurice yes, Morris no

Dance

Jann Parry sees a misunderstood American in Brussels.

MARK Morris is not to be taken seriously, according to the indignant critic of the Brussels evening paper, *Le Soir*: what little credibility he had left, after two years as the Monnaie Opera House's resident choreographer, has evaporated, we are told, with his latest programme, *Loud Music*.

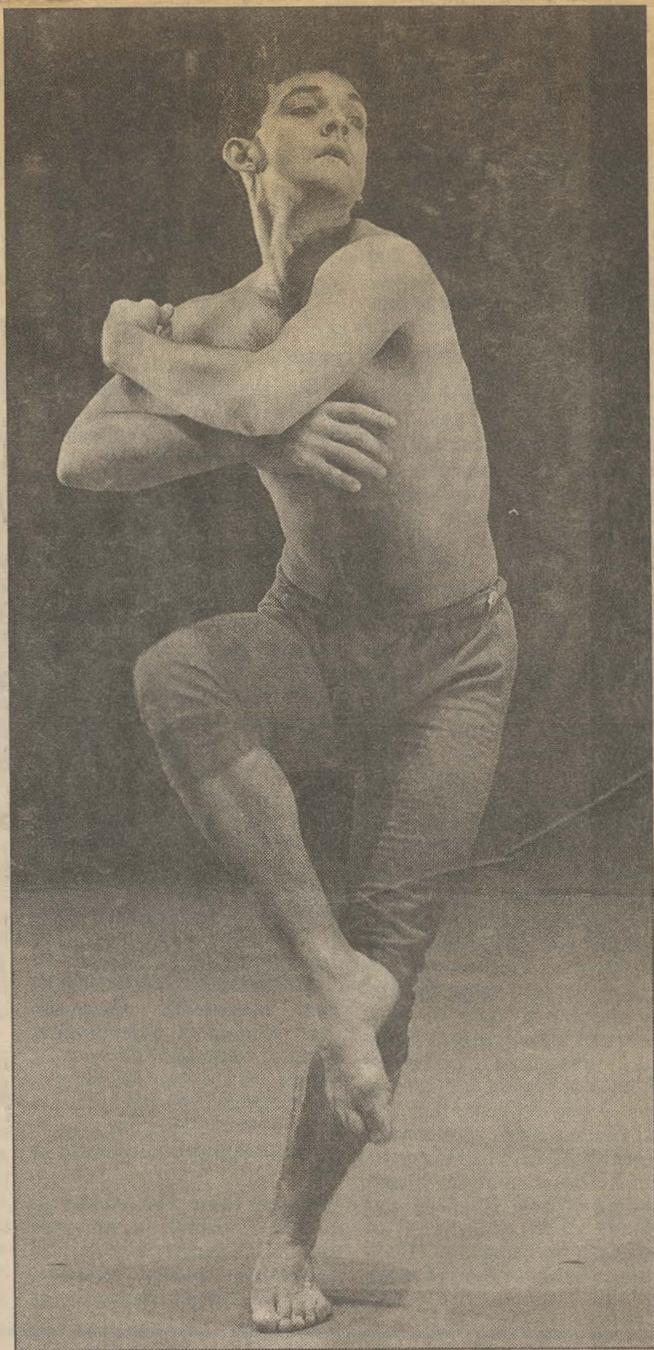
Morris takes such attacks in his springy stride and continues to provoke Belgian sensibilities by appearing on stage in lurex stirrup-tights, hair wildly frizzed, eyes outlined in kohl: 'narcissisme gigantesque,' sniffed *Le Soir*, ignoring the elaborate joke of *Tamil Film Songs in Stereo*. (Morris's spangled guru shows a gullible girl pupil the true meaning of artistry to a wailing Indian soundtrack.) Now if he had been Maurice Bejart, whose departure from the Monnaie is still mourned by his fans, such a *pas de deux* would have been properly erotic and exotic.

There is a communication chasm between the American choreographer and much of his Brussels audience — a question of humour and language, both verbal and physical.

If you saw the recent *South Bank Show* about Morris at the Monnaie, you may not have remarked that the centrepiece of the programme, Handel's *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, is sung in English. Morris takes for granted that audiences will recognise the relation between visual and verbal images: yet the sung idiom may be so tricky to decipher that layers of meaning can go unremarked. He would doubtless argue that the dance is interesting enough in its own right for some of the allusions to remain obscure. It was certainly an advantage, though, to be able to understand the lyrics in three of the *Loud Music* pieces at Les Halles de Schaerbeek last week.

Trumpet calls from *Aida* opened the programme, with Morris deploying his dancers as though they were an opera ballet filling an entr'acte; not so much a ballet company as a Denishawn troupe 're-creating' Ancient Egyptian murals. Although the music visualisation gags in *Ballabili* are hammy, they do prepare the eye for the contrapuntal risings and fallings and frieze-like parades of his sophisticated pieces.

Behemoth, which followed, is Morris's new monster work, proving that this most musical of choreographers is not dependent on music for inspiration. The stage becomes a canvas, with a seemingly outside group of five figures occupying the foreground, a quartet standing still, deep in the background,



Provoking the Belgians: Mark Morris./Photograph by Del Conway.

and single figures coming and going through the middle, until all 15 combine to form a movement choir.

Because there are no clues to the enigmatic processions, arrivals and departures, you notice the patterns traced across the floor, the juxtaposition of brief and protracted sections, of swift and slow dynamics. The dancing is clear and emphatic — although knees are often kept slightly bent, feet not fully arched — until in a group arrangement, limbs become direction signs, pointing towards or away from the wings.

The second new piece, *Going Away Party*, is a rodeo romp to cowboy songs by Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. Morris is the lonesome hero, extravagant in self-pity, but fastidious in the phrasing of his farewell solo, while everyone else has a good time pairing off, frisky and risqué, sending up the songs while endorsing the emotions that

underlie them. Irony is notoriously difficult to translate; and the camp sincerity of country and western is a uniquely American genre.

When that simple rural creed gets perverted, things turn very nasty indeed. *Lovey* shows adult children taking out their frustrations and fantasies on baby dolls, to depraved lyrics by the Violent Femmes. The piece is shocking in its apparently artless rawness, but you cannot help admiring how cunningly Morris exploits the difference in scale between dancers and dolls.

The final piece, *Strict Songs*, is, in spite of its title, a joyous celebration to music by Lou Harrison, based on Hopi Indian hymns to nature. The dancers seem intoxicated with movement, swept along like waves and fishes, trees and stars. As in the chanted words (the only ones translated in the programme), here indeed is tenderness, here is splendour.