

on the

November, 1984



Elisa Monte DANCE COMPANY

Richard Landry

Secret Pastures

Mark Morris DANCE GROUP

Penguin Cafe Orchestra

on the



The audience magazine of BAM's NEXT WAVE Festival
Volume 2, Number 3 November, 1984

The Brooklyn Academy of Music
NEXT WAVE Festival Humanities Program
and OPERA America's
Opera for the 80's and Beyond
present

New Visions in American Opera: A Symposium in Three Acts

Recent trends in the contemporary opera-musical theater field suggest that it is time for reexamination of basic assumptions about the nature of the form. A new generation of composers, librettists and theater artists are exploring unique combinations of music and theater, creating works that defy description by conventional definitions. These efforts can be seen as providing a foundation for what may be the emergence of an indigenous American operatic form.

This two-day symposium will bring together a diverse group of outstanding scholars, critics, and practicing artists to confront some of the most important issues facing today's music-theater field. Three major papers have been commissioned and will be delivered by each other followed by responses from a panel of opera-musical theater experts. The resulting discussions promise to be an exciting exchange of great interest to anyone concerned with contemporary opera.

Act I European Opera in an America Context.

Tuesday, November 13, 2 pm-5 pm

Act II New Perceptions in Lyric Theater

Wednesday, November 14, 10 am-1 pm

Act III Alternative Models of the Creative Process

Wednesday, November 14, 2:30-5:30 pm

All sessions will be held in the auditorium of the CUNY Graduate Center, 33 West 42nd Street, New York. Admission is free of charge and open to the public. For further information call Roger Oliver, Humanities Director, NEXT WAVE Festival, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (718) 636-4107.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Tina Clarke currently lives in New York City. She has been a frequent contributor to several Canadian publications and the Canadian Broadcasting Radio Network.

Roger W. Oliver is the Humanities Director of the NEXT WAVE Festival.

Elizabeth Zimmer writes about performing arts for *The Village Voice*, *Dancemagazine*, and other publications.

William Harris writes about theater and performance for the *East Village Eye* and *The Village Voice*.

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MARK

modernist and romantic

Young choreographers are usually greeted by the press with polite encouragement, not accolades. Except Mark Morris. Since his first concert at the Cunningham Studio in 1980, and his three subsequent ones at Dance Theater Workshop, the kudos haven't stopped pouring in. "Mark Morris is just what a choreographer should be: original, energetic, and unpretentious," hailed *New York. Dancemagazine* went a step further, labeling Morris "an extraordinarily gifted choreographer, the most promising of his generation." Even *The New Yorker* groped for superlatives: "The Mark Morris experience," wrote Arlene Croce, "is like nothing else in dance."

What's all the fuss about? Much of the attention has resulted from Morris's unconventional stance within the dance community. He now lives and works most of the year in Seattle, far from the closed world of the New York dance scene. "I would like to choreograph for another forty years, not just one fabulous season before getting dumped," says the personable, twenty-eight-year-old Morris, tossing back his curly mane. "So I don't allow that by being in Seattle." (Interestingly, his dances which have received the most acclaim here are those he created back West.)

Then there's the fact that Morris, a prolific choreographer, dances very

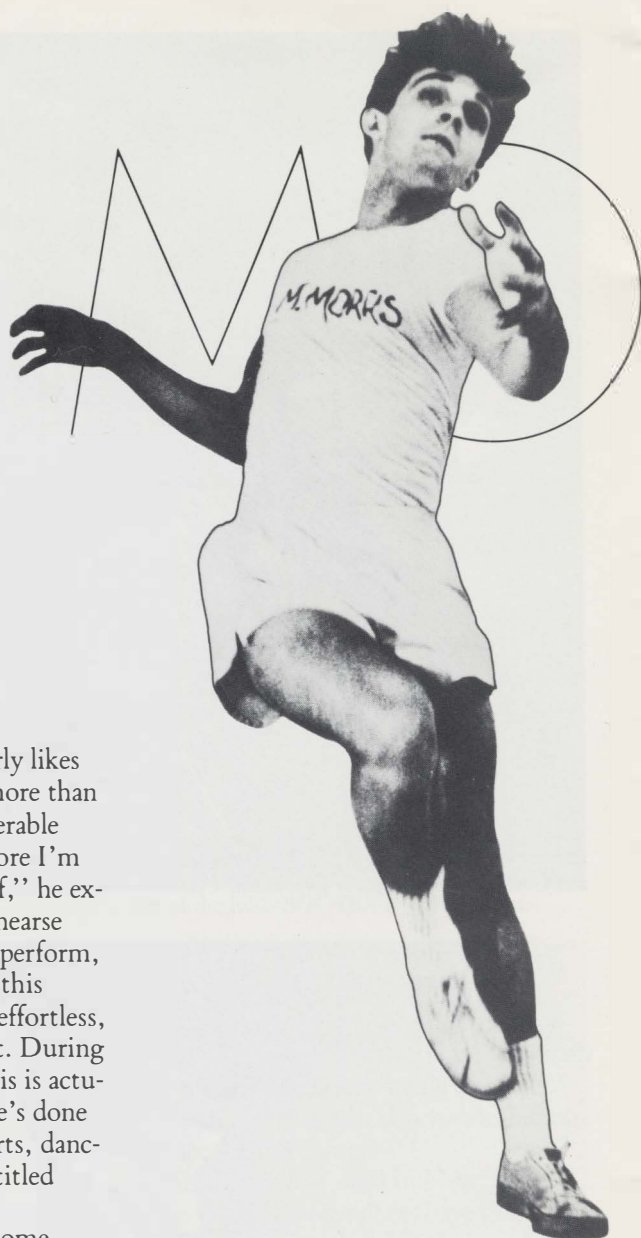
little in his concerts. He clearly likes making up steps for others more than showing off his own, considerable performing talents. "The more I'm in, the less I can keep track of," he explains. "Besides, I hate to rehearse myself." When Morris does perform, it's usually a solo. Watching this huge, furry man move with effortless, athletic grace is indeed a treat. During his BAM engagement, Morris is actually performing more than he's done in previous New York concerts, dancing a twenty-minute solo entitled *O Rangasayee*.

His blunt opinions—and sometimes controversial behavior—have also set Morris apart. During a performance of Twyla Tharp's *Nine Sinatra Songs* at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina, last summer, Morris walked down the aisle and shouted at the stage, "No more rape." Morris was referring, he says, to the rape of choreographic ideas, not the seeming brutalization of the women dancers. At the curtain call, he continued his protest by booing the choreographer. If Morris's actions seemed infantile and inappropriate to some, they also belied a gutsiness and passion that is very evident in his dances.

Ultimately, it is his dances which have earned Morris his reputation. He certainly doesn't resemble his post-modern peers, but attempts to catego-

rize him or pigeon-hole his work are tricky, if not futile. Each new Morris dance tends to look completely different from its predecessor, because Morris choreographs from an eclectic and broad movement vocabulary. He playfully blends modern, ballet, and folk dance idioms. Anything can happen, from dancers crawling on their knees to a literal gesticulation of a lyric to virtuosic extensions. Morris continually surprises audiences with his inventiveness.

There are, of course, some connecting threads in his choreography. The movements are often simple, yet the rhythms are invariably complex; the dances are episodic, mosaics of potent bits of movement and music; many



RRRIS

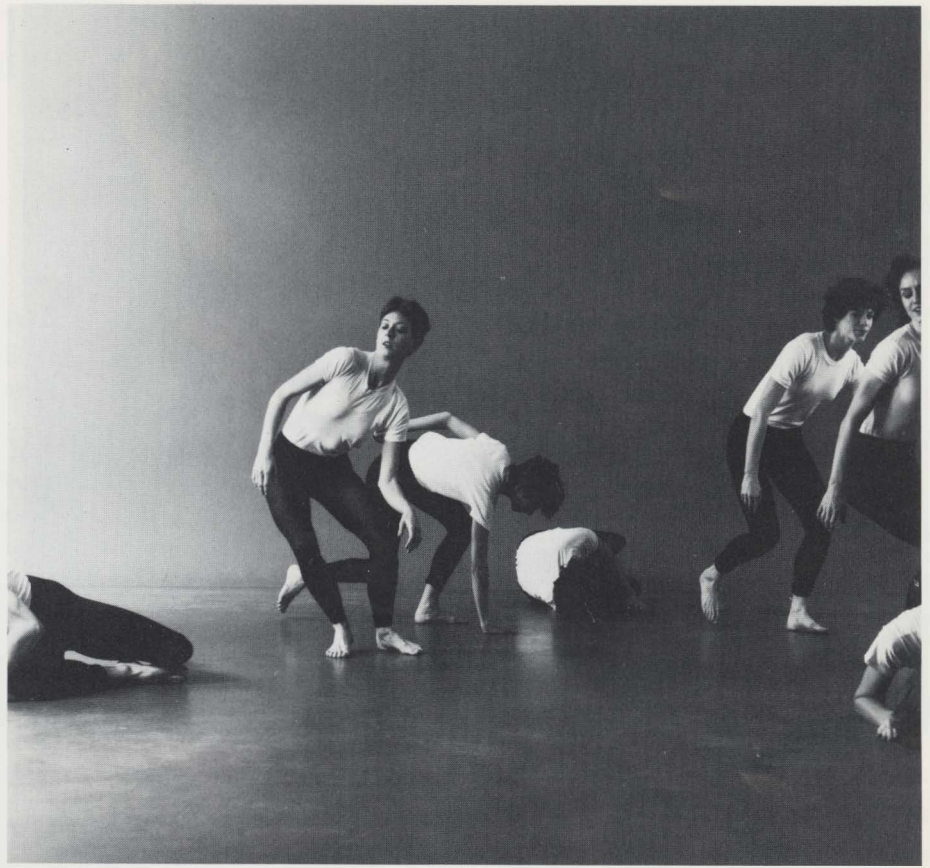
by William Harris

are quite witty, and most seem spiritual in content. Morris is forever exploring emotional states of being. His choreographic style, however, is much more carefree than psychologically rigorous. He reaffirms the simple joy of people moving together.

"I'm a romantic and a modernist," says Morris. "I love Doris Humphrey and Mary Wigman and early Martha Graham—serious, formal, interesting work—and I've certainly plagiarized liberally from a lot of sources, including the whole Judson era. I would never make up a dance about walking in squares, for instance, but I have often incorporated going in squares in my dances.

Morris's own performance history reflects the diverse influences within his work. He has danced with Laura Dean, Hannah Kahn, Eliot Feld, and Lar Lubovitch, as well as short stints with Twyla Tharp and Kathy Posin. (In fact, he has raided most of these companies to assemble the two groups of dancers—one here and one in Seattle—he now works with.) But the experience Morris claims has most informed his dancing and choreography were the three years spent with the Koleda Balkan Dance Company. During that time, Morris performed a variety of Yugoslavian, Romanian, Greek, and Bulgarian folk dances.

"I really love that stuff," says Morris, who started studying flamenco at



Left: Mark Morris. Right: the Mark Morris Dance Group. Photos by Lois Greenfield.

age eleven. "People dancing together and dancing very hard." No wonder his own choreography often looks like contemporary folk dances, quoting directly from these older ethnic forms or referring to them. "There is a certain gravity I favor in my work," Morris continues. "Everyone who dances with me has a big butt—to bottom it out, to make it human instead of linear."

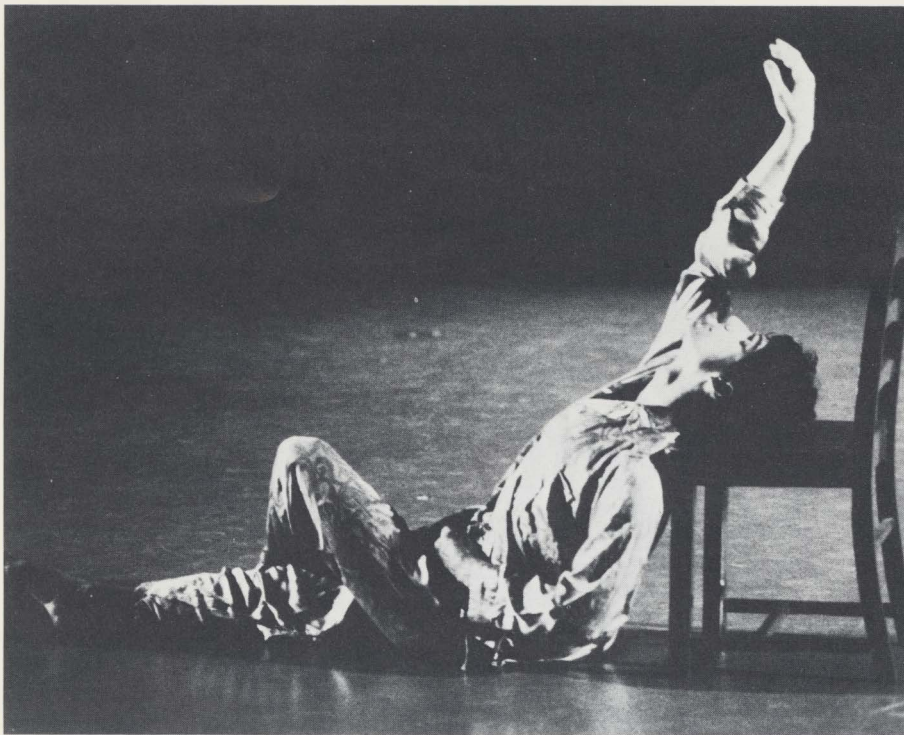
Morris choreographs quickly, allowing very little rehearsal time. He's confident of his dancers' ability, but likes having the rough edges show in performance. That's also why he won't perform his solos frequently. He's afraid they'll become too pat and polished. He intentionally begins each piece afresh by first establishing a structure. This is an artificial set of guidelines outlining what he hopes to accomplish, or avoid, in a particular dance. "I have to start somewhere," Morris quips. "I always break the rules, but I have to have a strong structure on which to drape the steps."

Consider *Death of Socrates*, which premiered last season at DTW. Morris decided to build a piece showing men

dancing together, but not in any conventional way. Before the first rehearsal, he had already determined that there would be no physical contact between performers, thus eliminating any whiff of a tired, homoerotic lyricism. He also decided there would be no machismic jumps or turns or combative stances. Morris was actually quite pleased with the result, although audience reactions were decidedly mixed.

The structure may be based on complex mathematical equations or movement patterns, but more often than not, it is derived from music. Morris loves music—all kinds—and his choices are always surprising, not to mention esoteric and offbeat. He has choreographed to everything from Brahms and Beethoven to Thai popular music and Yoko Ono's squeaking incantations. Music is not the background to his dances, it is an equal partner.

This BAM concert, which includes one New York premiere, one world premiere and one revival, will provide a glimpse into Morris's musical sensibility. One of the group pieces



Mark Morris in *Ten Suggestions*. Photo by Holly Williams.

has been choreographed to Vivaldi, the other to music composed by a young Boston-based composer named Herschel Garfein. Morris's solo has been set to traditional, southern Indian music. "I listened to that piece for three years before daring to make up something to it," admits Morris, who has become increasingly fascinated with Indian aesthetics. "You either hear Indian music as 'nyeah, neyeah, neyeah, neyeah' or you hear it as the incredibly sophisticated form it really is. It's very devotional, and it's very humbling to pursue that in a dance."

Although Morris is aware that this kind of score is very difficult and elusive to most audiences, he is committed to challenging viewers as much

as entertaining them. He can't abide choreography that he finds all hollow flash and not much else, which is why he booed Tharp. Sure, there's an arrogance inherent in his style, both personal and choreographic, but this guy has an equally fierce devotion to the art of making dances.

How has all the critical acclaim affected him? "It's nice to be respected," grins Morris, "but as a friend of mine says, it's more important to be cute. I have a reputation for humor and everything I do immediately gets laughs in Seattle. But I feel the pieces are getting darker. Maybe because of so much notoriety, I'm now allowed the freedom to make up the dances I want to do."

Elisa Monte

Continued from page 9

ling I don't want other elements. The other elements would not really add to the specific moment.

RWO: With *Indoors* did Todd Miner see any of the piece?

EM: Oh yes. I knew that Todd's work would be just right for that piece. He sat in on a lot of rehearsals. We discussed it

quite a lot. He was there almost from the beginning.

RWO: And in the new piece *Marisol* is doing the decor.

EM: Marisol did the costumes for *Treading*, so we have worked together before; and certainly we have known each other for a long time. I thought her sensibilities would be right for this piece. We are working with a very defined stage, which will make it harder be-

cause of the limitations and easier because of the clarity.

RWO: How did the new piece germinate? What was the impulse?

EM: It is hard to say when I am in the middle of it. Again I started with the movement of my own body and translating the state of that to the moment. I'm dealing with atmosphere and with people influenced by it. The music has been right in terms of images and specifics. It is more about moments rather than one long view of the moment. I feel it to be a more instantaneous kind of approach.

RWO: How are you working with the company on the piece?

EM: I started by teaching them phrases and vocabulary, so that their bodies could start getting used to the movement.

RWO: Is that how you usually work? Invent the vocabulary for yourself and then teach it to the company and then start putting it within the framework of the piece.

EM: I find it helps if they know what point of view they're working from as well. Their bodies start to define the style of the piece. When they start to move they know which way to move so there is a definition to it.

RWO: Do you have a backlog of pieces in mind you want to do or do you do a piece and think of another piece.

EM: No. I do it and then start to think of the next moment. An idea I had two years ago just does not interest me now, so it seems silly to get a backlog of ideas I'll have outgrown; I'd rather start new. It is more scary that way because things are always open and the possibility of failing is always there. It seems more honest.