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## Mark Morris, Forward and Back

MARK MORRIS MAKES FEELING SERIOUS. Last March, at the Mark Morris Dance Group's twenty-fifth anniversary season, I learned more completely how this is so. Morris' musicality is both immediately obvious and long established, his dances often praised or blamed for their scrupulous attention to score. Yet only when seeing a range of his work in a brief span did I appreciate how consistently this musical intelligence seems not didactic but validating, not analysis but empathy. His movements trust those simple, true reactions to what we hear—this part makes me rapturous, this measure, sad—that we might be too timid ourselves to affirm and explore. And his dances are unconcerned with turning those reactions into something else—stories, symptoms, semantics. Instead, they use their attention to endlessly-ramifying form to respect the limitless richness of feeling. By discovering how music means, they discover how much. His work confirms and extends our affective convictions.

The process might clarify a difficult musical piece, like the Bartók quartet of *All Fours*, in which one figure's mechanically scissoring hands, against the pauses and pulses of the rest of the group, can explain the music's brutal precision even as they hit you with visceral power—an "Aha!" and a gasp combined. Or it might reveal a seemingly limpid selection's subtleties: as in the "Domine deus, agnus dei" section of *Gloria*, when a line of dancers pacing behind a soloist emphasizes the chorus of assurance supporting Vivaldi's plaintive melody, in an interplay that seems both structural dexterity and humble redemption. Or it might riff on associations, as in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, where the sung mention of "chain," for example, sets off chain motions in a chorus of dancers.

Or it might distill an elusive but overwhelming sensibility, as Morris' *Cargo* does for the mood of Darius Milhaud's *La Création du monde*. This score blends jazz cadences from Harlem clubs with traditional lyricism and Milhaud's novel tonalities and instrumentation; it's layered and open, fatefully resonant but with an ingenuously labile plainness. *Cargo* refines the impression of eerie idyll. The title comes from cults of the South Pacific that believed (a program note tells us) manufactured goods to be gifts of ancestral spirits; the goods in question here seem to be three wooden poles. But Morris' work has no plot to narrate or dogma to preach; rather, his basic props help to enact an innocent weirdness, neither condescending nor irrelevant, that permeates just as

surely Milhaud's music. The ballet starts with nine figures dressed in plain white underwear who appear in a warm prelapsarian glow. (Nicole Pearce's lighting is even better than usual here: in one passage, dancers moved against a backdrop of their shadows, to economically beautiful effect.) It's a space more Darwinian than Edenic, though—and the pole in the middle of the stage both intrigues and frightens; it's distilled potential. Indeed, we find as the dance continues, this plain staff can do almost anything: sometimes it's sheer geometry, sometimes a tool, sometimes a symbol. At first, dancers circle it, skittish; soon, several bat it back and forth. As intensity mounts, it becomes a weapon—Craig Biesecker fells cohorts with its swing—and a scepter—he knocks on the floor to raise them up again. Soon the poles, three in number now and horizontal, mark three militant trios, the middle figure hanging like the prize of a hunt or a sleepily malevolent tree sloth. At one point, the poles rise, a flag or standard, among three clusters of human statuary; one figure climbs and slides down. And once, after an increasingly violent dance for the whole group, three women break off to spin in unison, poles straight out: it feels something like a sped-up model of galaxy formation, in which basic shapes at high speed demonstrate a complicated, emerging universe. The seamlessly blended choreographic invention of *Cargo* suggests what's possible with no more than a straight line and human bodies. But it's not a theory of culture; it's a lived world. And if, as Morris remarked in a *Time Out* interview, this ballet is “not really choreographed”—the steps are “organized” rather than precisely set—it never seems less than meticulous, for even its wildest moments are governed by the music's freedom. When at the end the poles clatter to the floor, the dissolution breaks a controlled and theatrical spell.

*Cargo* was one of two New York premieres presented in March—*Candleflowerdance* was the other—and one of the season's many joyful surprises, old and new. An anniversary can be tricky: to celebrate endurance, as well as to assure long-time fans of what they know and love, might be to court complacency or to shut out those curious who aren't already part of the club. And Morris is an institution, with a company, a Center, a school, and a guaranteed slot on the Brooklyn Academy of Music calendar. But he is so because he continues to create things as good as *All Fours* and *Cargo* as well as to restage things as good as *Gloria*. It seems fitting, then, that *Cargo* was commissioned by and first shown at the Tanglewood Music Festival, and that one prominent marker of the Dance Group's stature is the fact that March programs at BAM were danced completely to live music—something that Morris has long insisted on and by now can consistently expect. For if Morris' ardently acute musicality is the oldest story about him, it's also what keeps him new, risky, and accessible to all. And the establishment of his Group is a cause for celebration not for the sake of any proprietary or preservationist instinct, but because it guarantees a future of free, unrepeatable occasions: movement and music existing together in time.

Morris' recent work justifies such expectation with its confident

reach among major and varying musical scores: Schubert and Schumann, for example, as well as Bartók and Milhaud. And *Candleflowerdance* takes on Stravinsky. This last composer is one Morris has rarely chosen before; perhaps the reluctance came less from Stravinsky's supposed difficulty than from his long association with Balanchine, that other highly musical twentieth-century dance-maker? The serenity of *Candleflowerdance*, however, refuses the question of anything to prove; this piece has things to contemplate, rather, or even to mourn (it's dedicated to Susan Sontag), and certainly to discover. And it's as sophisticatedly basic a work as *Cargo*, though with a very different simplicity. Here we see a civilized, ordinary society of six, dressed in bright-colored button-down shirts and pants, who stand at the edge not of some primordial clearing but of a white square drawn in the middle of the stage. This plain shape is a house, a nave, or a town center; it's a boxing ring or a city block—it's the idea of common space, or of formal constraint. Stravinsky's inspiration for the score, his 1925 piano work *Serenade in A*, was a record company's request for movements the length of a gramophone disc: within those brief spans—and well as within the classical forms he chose as his model—the composer found room for unworried freedom. Just so, Morris' square allows his dancers a calmly lyrical vocabulary of leaning, turning, sparring, embracing, falling and rising; alone, in couples, and all together. One of the piece's most effective contrasts sets such breathing patterns against a quick back-and-forth rock at the square's corners, a tick-tock that makes bodies into mechanical dolls: the difference in turn picks out Stravinsky's pianistic contrast between fluid melody and percussive accent.

And while *Candleflowerdance*, first danced last September, was the most recent example, the March programs allowed an accurate appreciation of Morris' musicality throughout his career. Canny programming helped: two different venues—three performances at BAM's opera house and three shows at the Mark Morris Dance Center—let the Group stage not only large-scale ballets but solos, duets and trios, some not seen, in many cases, for many years. Audiences could rediscover, then, not only the well-known Morris whose love of Baroque set big, popular pieces like *Gloria* and *Dido and Aeneas* to Vivaldi and Purcell, but also the lesser-known Morris whose affinity with a melancholic modernist wit has created several small wonders to Erik Satie, for example. *Pas de Poisson*, a 1990 trio for two men and a woman on one of the Dance Center programs, was a particular treat; like *Cargo*, it revives a score encumbered with modernist meaning or anti-meaning (here Satie's *Cinéma*, written for the Dadaist cinematic experiment *Relâche*), to discover a clear, suggestive—and in *Poisson*, fun—sensibility. Indeed, one general pleasure last March was to realize better Morris' career-long elucidation of modernist music. The final program at BAM, for example, which included *Cargo*, *All Fours*, and *Candleflowerdance*, juxtaposed works by three great composers written within five years in the 1920s, yet completely various, and making for three very different ballets.

Other program combinations, more temporally ranging, were equally suggestive. *V*, a 2001 ballet set to Schumann's piano quintet, is my favorite Morris work, and among his very best; it seemed even better in an evening with *Gloria*, made two decades before. Morris' love of both scores, and choreographic similarities between the two dances, let me hear and see how Schumann found, in homage to Bach, his own way to an almost Baroque serenity. Thus the gloriously affirming lift of *V*'s finale might remake the fall at the conclusion of *Gloria*. (The end of *Candleflowerdance*, five years on from *V*, might combine both: a group of dancers collapsed toward one lofty couple.) Such comparison strengthened my sense of the seemingly abstract *V* as a spiritual work, just as concerned as *Gloria*—and more subtly so—with the tension of weight and spirit, gravity and grace. And if this tension is almost endemic to the relation of physical bodies and ethereal sound, Morris' frequent emphasis of it proves that the import of merely dancing to music might for him extend to an almost transcendent realm. Over and over, watching ballets from all stages of Morris' career, I was struck with the plain act of looking up in his work; it's often an effortful move, and almost always a significant one. At the opening of *Candleflowerdance*, when the dancers point toward heaven like so many familiar St. Johns, it seemed one quiet culmination of a decades-long trope.

Morris' *Gloria*, with its everyday bodies moving to mass parts, makes spiritual aspirations especially explicit, of course, and the ballet was, fittingly enough, the oldest classic on the Opera House programs. Morris himself revisited it from the orchestra pit. This new role of conductor added a nicely musical point to the retrospective; it also seemed some small compensation for the fact that this year Morris himself did not dance on the BAM stage. This gradual (he performed *From Old Seville*, seen at BAM last year, at the Dance Center) but inexorable withdrawal from performance heightened the stakes of the small-scale programs in particular—for many of these solos, duets, and trios originally contained or consisted of Morris' dancing. And Morris' dancing was—is—glorious: precise and fluid, mesmerizingly rhythmic, impeccably natural while always much larger than life. The chamber pieces might appear flat or unjustified, one could well have feared, without such original talent to fill them. Instead, revivals of Morris solos were among the best ballets I saw at the Center. They were so, perhaps, because none of the dancers mimicked a Morris performance: finding their own way through the score he chose, they thereby reanimated the logic of steps he made. *Peccadillos*, for instance, set to Satie, could seem when Morris danced it offhand or almost childlike through many passages, but Joe Bowie's more deliberate phrasing savored the dance's architecture and let me more easily take in its timing and shape. A similar effect happened over at BAM with *Dido and Aeneas*, in which Morris used to dance the double role of Dido and the Sorceress; with Amber Darragh and Bradon McDonald—both wonderful—in the two parts, the ballet gained in structural clarity what it lost in psychological complexity.

Such successful transformation was the case in even the most seemingly personal of solos: *Dad's Charts*, for instance, or *Rondo*. Morris premiered the first at a New York concert in 1980; it begins with a soloist casually sloughing his coat and tie before throwing himself into a string of seemingly-half-improvised inventions—miming, tapping, flopping and shuffling, checking his reflexes, writhing on the floor. Indeed, the dance is in some sense about how we invent or test ourselves: reject and mimic our parents, break loose with abandon and teeter on the edge of security, relish self-dramatization even as we laugh at our own pretensions. Its charm comes by presenting such eternal adolescence in a dance that distills a teenage moment, clowning around to a favorite song. And Maile Okamura's wholehearted spontaneity, neither patronizing nor naive, made that charm genuine. *Rondo*, by contrast, is a more adult self-discovery, set to Mozart's late *Rondo in A Minor*: from a reflective opening of pointing, pausing, and gathering (as if plucking thoughts from the air with one's hands), the ballet builds in broad circles and long diagonals to a vertiginous anguish in which all precision scatters—before it resolves and returns again to a pointing, contemplative gesture. The small psychological odyssey, realized completely through steps, seems more deeply revelatory even than the confessions of *Dad's Charts*; and Lauren Grant's lingering phrases sustained the ballet's reticent intensity. Her performance was both sympathetic and intriguing, unfolding a dance that made complexity poignant.

And the accomplishment of Okamura or Grant—or of Bowie, Darragh, McDonald—was often equaled on the March programs; the technical level of the entire company right now is unsurpassed. Of course, it's more than technical, which is why the Dance Group is so thrilling to watch: the musicality that Morris' work demands means that each figure must discover the nuances of individual response even within the larger rhythm of a patterned whole, and these artists are more than equal to such opportunity. Thus the pleasure of watching Julie Worden and Michelle Yard in *Gloria*, for example, or Rita Donahue in *Dido and Aeneas*—or many others. Such performances made one hope that Morris will go on creating solos even when he no longer dances their premieres. In the title track of *Going Away Party*, it was Charlton Boyd, as the loner who finds solace among general celebration by modestly dancing his farewell to a dream. Even this light-hearted ballet, then, set to the songs of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, took seriously the consolations and pleasures of moving to music. And this sense of feeling as a discipline, something we try to do better, something to which we aspire—this left me, at the end of the Mark Morris Dance Group's generous month, both challenged and assured by the more to be seen and sensed in anniversaries to come.