

# Dance/Tobi Tobias

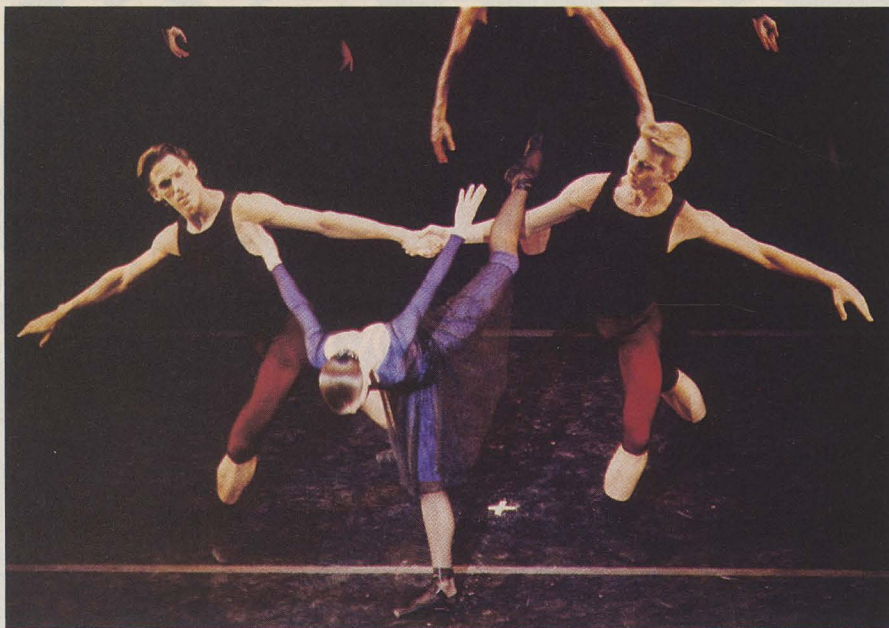
## AN ACADEMIC QUESTION

"...Morris's new piece looks like a collection of observations on classical ballet by one who has a love-hate attitude toward it..."

MARK MORRIS'S WORKS FOR HIS OWN modern-dance company are physically juicy and outrageously imaginative. Yet for his initial venture with the **Joffrey Ballet**, he has produced a dance—set to C. P. E. Bach's attractive Concerto in A Major for Violoncello and String Orchestra—of surprising academic dryness.

Its ground plan is frankly schematic. There is a corps of ten—five women, five men. Twinlike women (Jodie Gates, Deborah Dawn) lead the initial allegro section. Along with a matching pair of men (Philip Jerry and Tom Mossbrucker), they back up Leslie Carothers for the slow middle section—five soloists, a five-couple corps. The final segment is led by the two male soloists. The feeling of the dance's happening in the confines of a grid is furthered by the static opening section, in which each performer is assigned a small square in the playing space and pretty much locked in it. An ordered hierarchy prevails throughout: The corps is given full play only when the soloists are absent or still, be it for an extended passage or just a few notes. Both soloists and corps painstakingly demonstrate clever but predictable examples of unison, mirror image, and so on. Your computer might have thought it up while you were off having a sandwich.

The piece can be viewed as a collection of observations on classical ballet from someone who has a love-hate attitude toward the genre and pays homage to its beauties and rigors by turning them inside out. For example, the twin female soloists are carried aloft in a glorious arabesque position by their partners, planted with exquisite care in the same pose, and then promenaded not, as is the custom, by the arm extended to complement the outstretched leg but by the point of the extended foot. The language of the piece is classical for the most part, but it is not used in the prescribed way. Steps are employed as discrete units rather than as parts of a singing phrase. Of course they look peculiar in their isolation, and Morris emphasizes or exaggerates other peculiarities of classical dancing so that this unnatural means of expression, invented to express human ideals, looks simply unnatural. Nearly all of Morris's comments have been made earlier, and more incisively, as well as



**GRID PLAN:** *The Joffrey Ballet dancers in Esteemed Guests, by Mark Morris.*

with warmer sentiments, by Twyla Tharp.

Ironically, Morris has borrowed Tharp's favored designer, Santo Loquasto, who has executed a chic parody of ballet clothes in black and dark jewel tones. Coupled with Phil Sandström's evocative nighttime lighting, they conjure up a Plutonian underworld. Both elements may take their cue from corpse-like images reiterated in the choreography: women laid prone, splayed limbs forming an X; women lifted by their cavaliers to face the audience, torso slung limply forward from the waist, head hanging. Morris's previous ballet for an Establishment company was called *Mort Subite*. Is he telling us (or himself), albeit regretfully, that ballet is dead?

This piece, by the way, is called *Esteemed Guests*. I haven't figured out why.

JUDGING FROM THEIR BIOS IN THE HOUSE program, the dancers Senta Driver has chosen for her small company, **Harry**, are something besides dancers: actors, athletes, educators. The choreographer's own entry is heavy at the top with her high-powered education (Latin and philosophy at Bryn Mawr) and her roles as writer, speaker, and administrator in her field. Her dances, too, look as if they're

stubbornly trying to be something other than dancing.

Frequently without musical accompaniment, in themselves they lack musical phrasing; the movements are abutted like bricks without mortar. Chunky and blocky, the action refuses to succumb not only to the natural flow that makes for lyricism but also to the brilliance inherent in allegro work, as if that, too, would be a cop-out. Neither does Driver purvey pleasure on more pedestrian planes—the sheer physical thrill of athletics, say, or the clean honesty of utilitarian motion. Although the concept of a dance may be blessed with her tough-minded wit, the stuff of which it's made is belligerently without beauty or particular interest of any kind. In attempting to create dances that indulge in none of the customary blandishments of dancing, Driver produces work that simply won't let you in.

With her new *Video 5000*, she makes still more trouble for herself. She imprisons her dancers behind a semi-transparent scrim onto which Dennis Diamond projects his gargantuan video images—dancers in slow motion, body parts teasingly dangled into the frame, a laughing head. Diamond's grainy, weightless, eerily silent material wants to be perceived as



visual art; Driver's live dancers (their gravity confirmed by thudding footfalls) are kinetic art. While neither contribution is compelling on its own, the two elements never quite mesh to make a meaningful whole, but rather distract and detract from each other.

SINCE ITS LEADER'S DEATH EARLY THIS year, the **Charles Moore Dance Theatre** has been carrying on its work of presenting African and Afro-American dances under the guidance of Moore's wife and stage partner, Ella Thompson Moore. The troupe appeared at the Theatre of the Riverside Church in an ingratiating if somewhat slight and disheveled program called "Traces: An American Suite."

Prefaced by two short works from Africa, "Traces" is a chronologically arranged string of numbers demonstrating the dancing that has flourished in this country in the last century and a half through black invention and participation. Both folk and theatrical forms are represented; the unifying link is complex and compelling rhythm. The group is fortunate in having as its accompanists a handful of superb percussion players led by Chief Bey, a salty fellow who can perform syncopated wonders merely by slapping his hands against his thighs.

The African segment of the program

yielded some of the most vivid images: in a dance from Ghana, a line of women, arms linked daisy-chain style so that they formed a human rope; Ella Thompson Moore, in a solo from Dahomey, crouched over a fetish that her own energy has brought to life. The American dances tended to be less fierce and more charming: an elegant cakewalk, a piece with square-dance formations subverted by swing rhythms. A fifteen-year-old named Shaun Baker-Jones, with ball-bearing knees and the speed of the Devil, provided evidence that tap dancing is not a dying art. Unfortunately, a bunch of splendid moments doesn't add up to a successful concert.

Two veteran hoofers scheduled to appear the night I attended had been forced to cancel, so a program that was a little skimpy to begin with—many important forms of Afro-American dancing were ignored—grew even flimsier. But what is missing in "Traces" is not so much personnel or choreographic material as an explanation of how the dances included evolved from their African roots: the aesthetic history, the social and political context. "Traces" is the result of a project funded for three years by the National Endowment for the Arts and intended, it would seem, as an educational device in addition to being food for the eye and

soul. Moore's company would do well, I think, to connect the dances with some brief verbal elucidation.

As for the company's regular performers, they may not be the most physically perfect or technically accomplished artists in town, but any such deficiencies are offset by their engaging stage manner, a delicately balanced blend of modesty and exuberance.

THE DANCE COMPONENT OF A BENEFIT performance at the New York State Theater celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the American Guild of Musical Artists (long may it flourish!) displayed several of the traditions crucial to the growth of dance in this country. As Suzanne Farrell pointed out, most of the classical companies represented on the program are led by artists bred by George Balanchine. Other salutary infusions of Russian blood via Ballet Russe artists and later émigrés (Makarova, Baryshnikov, et al.) were also apparent. Unremarked, but equally interesting, were the Danish heritage—demonstrated here by Flemming Flindt's Dallas Ballet, in an airy, gracious Bournonville trio—and, from modern dance, the legacy of Martha Graham's gut-propelled technique. Dancing in America is a mongrel affair; that, perhaps, is its strength.

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