

OUT OF LEFT FIELD:

An American in Brussels

by Elizabeth Zimmer

In the downtown New York dance community, life is hard. Full-time work is the exception rather than the rule. Emerging choreographers can't afford studios or companies; they plot things in their heads—not the most effective way to make dances—and then draft dancers for a few weeks a couple of times a year and pay them a couple of dollars an hour.

Fortunately, the pool of available talent is large; eager performers work with two or three or more choreographers simultaneously, dashing from one rehearsal to another, from class to part-time jobs, occasionally stealing a few hours to work on dance ideas of their own. Some young artists thrive on this pace. But, as one moves along into one's thirties, forties, and beyond, one finds oneself wistfully wishing for things most Americans take for granted—health insurance, a pension plan, a reliable income sufficient to cover the rent, maybe even an occasional vacation.

By the time they're into their thirties, most choreographers, especially those without trust funds, have either found a modicum of success or given up the struggle. Some teach full-time, making dances for their students. Others go into arts management, or get "straight" jobs. The nonprofit dance world in New York City simply can't support everyone who wants to work in it. But genius has a way of cutting through problems, logistical as well as creative ones. Some artists manage to find solutions to the financial hassle. These solutions may seem extreme, but they do allow the work to continue. Twyla Tharp recently folded her company into American Ballet Theatre so she could spend time choreographing instead of fund-raising.

Mark Morris, the prolific young choreographer widely hailed as "the new Paul Taylor" and wildly cheered by his fans, several years ago abandoned the New York scene for Seattle, his native town. Lower rents, state arts funding, and teaching opportunities allowed him to work and live comfortably. His company stayed mostly in New York, commuting for some rehearsal periods and touring, but continuing to work with other artists as well. Morris himself choreographed a new work for the Joffrey and one for American Ballet Theatre.

Recently, however, he's taken a more drastic step. Late last August, he hauled his entire company to Brussels, where, as of September 6, they began rehearsing

for a one-month season scheduled to open November 23. The Mark Morris Dance Group has signed a three-year contract to be the resident company at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. They'll be paid excellent salaries fifty-two weeks a year, with health insurance and long vacations: Even taxed at the hefty forty percent Belgian rate, it's still a real living. Their hosts are paying for housing through the end of 1988. After the fall home season, they'll get a long winter break, then reconvene in Brussels early in February. A dance work-week is six days in Belgium, but that's a small inconvenience for this kind of security. The Mark Morris Dance Group will have another home season in March, tour Belgium in April, perform across the United States in May, play Jacob's Pillow in June, and then begin the cycle again.

Security. Money. A community welcoming an artist and his ensemble with open arms. It sounds like a dream come true for Morris, who, like George Balanchine in the heyday of the New York City Ballet, will have a solvent structure devoted to mounting his work. He won't have to give a thought to fund-raising. His upcoming season includes two alternating programs and will feature the premiere of Morris's choreography to Handel's "Allegro," with solo vocalists, a choir, a full orchestra, and twenty-six dancers; he gets to work with additional European and American dancers as well as his own regular performers.

All of this is fabulous for Morris, but what does it mean for the gypsy dancers who've stuck by him for years? What about the ones among them who also choreograph? What happens to their careers as originating artists, while they concentrate, in Belgium, on being instruments for another choreographer? On the eve of their departure for Brussels, Susan Hadley and David Landis shared their feelings about the move. Hadley, 33, was actually looking forward to the trip. She and Landis are the only company members bringing their spouses along, and Hadley's husband, Bradley Sowash, is also her collaborating composer. Landis, 35, is bringing Gail Teton, also a choreographer.

Constantly touring with Mark Morris since she left the company of Senta Driver in 1985, Hadley's own production rate has been quite low. "It always felt like I was doing two jobs at once," she

explained. "In some ways, this will be more conducive to my own work. Will there be a pool of dancers interested in working with an American choreographer, developing new work? That's the big question. I know I'll have studio space, and my composer will be along." Hadley's leaving her Pilates and dance teachers behind and will have to get used to new instructors, which the Belgians will also supply for the company in Brussels. "I think I've made a conscious decision, right now, to put the 'dancer' first. My performing career is a finite thing—if I don't do it now, I don't do it. When opportunities to make dances conflicted with Mark's touring schedule, it was a real sacrifice, but I made a conscious choice. The challenges Mark presents are also very interesting.

"Bebe Miller decided to leave Nina Weiner early, and Stephen Petronio left Tricia [Brown]—when they leave may depend on how fulfilled they've been in their performing careers. And on whether they're ready to word-process or waitress to support their choreography. I'm not finished with Mark, not finished with that capacity at all. I have to do the dancing now. The choreography will be there when I'm forty-five."

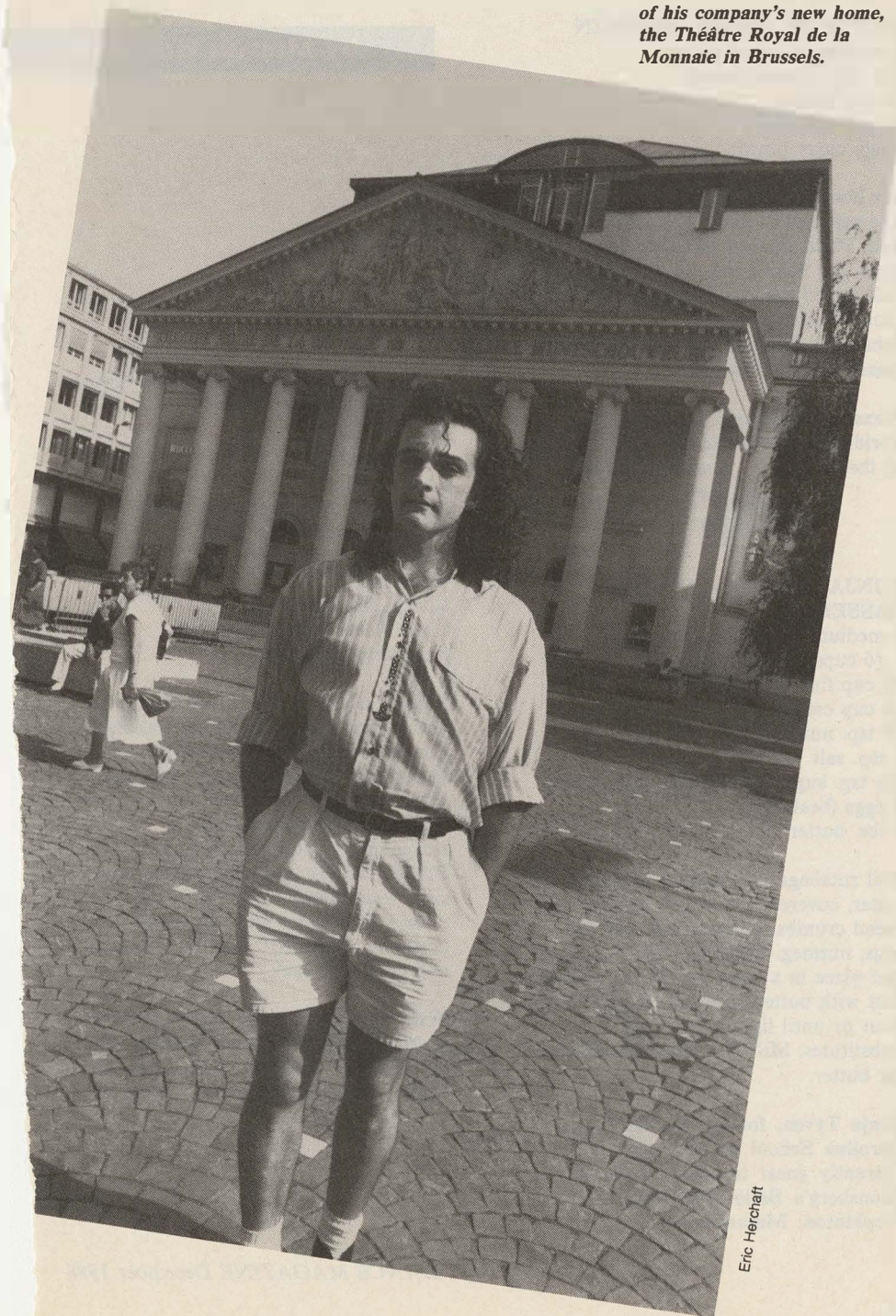
Landis thought that what started him off was the lure of performing; he began dancing as a hobby in high school and kept it up while acquiring two degrees in psychology. He also has an MFA in dance from the California Institute of the Arts. He's been making and showing dances on both coasts since 1975 and has performed with Susan Marshall, Charles Moulton, CoDanceCo, and Ruby Shang, as well as for Mark Morris, whose group he joined in 1983. Landis is a bit less sanguine about the move to Europe; it's not clear what his wife will find to do there. "It's rainy, like Seattle," he said. "Two hundred days a year of precipitation. The situation sounds great for Mark Morris, secondarily for us in that we're getting paid. But unless Gail finds something she's thrilled with over there, it could be a purgatory. It lets Mark do whatever he wants, as a choreographer. He doesn't need contact or friends. We, on the other hand, will be isolated."

Hadley got some strange vibrations from her American colleagues before she left: "You have to somehow explain yourself to other dancers here. In Europe, you're treated like a professional. Here, people look at us with suspicion, as though we're doing it

for the money." Landis concurred. "Why should American artists feel purer or more righteous because we don't get paid?" he asked. It certainly affects your life. The lure of a steady income pulls people out of modern dance. Look at Matthew Diamond, who's now a television director. He got an Emmy for directing some soap opera." Hadley added: "This move to Brussels—almost all of us are over thirty. We're facing life changes anyway. It's not just going abroad. It's 'Gee, I'm 35. What about children?' Mark's one of the youngest in the group. The younger ones aren't thinking about children or families or futures. Brussels or Iowa, it wouldn't matter to them."

Landis has worked in New York City and in California. "It's a hard choice to make, artistically, between New York and the regions," he noted. "If we go out, we'll have to pioneer. It's much harder. Here the environment is so nasty, in general, that you keep focused on your work." "In Seattle," Hadley agreed, "it's so beautiful, you don't want to go to the theater. Here, the theater is the best game in town." Being away will mean some real changes in her working process: "I'm going to give myself the time to think, so that my next concert will be produced with real care. It might be a year and a half before I get to do it. And I get the sense that the producers, the powers-that-be, don't like that. Young choreographers who show

American choreographer Mark Morris stands in front of his company's new home, the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels.



Eric Hersholt

promise tend to get pushed too far too fast. That can really stifle the artistic spark they show. Paul Taylor doesn't make an evening of new work every year." "People end up milking one idea over and over again," Landis added. "There's such a pressure to succeed. It's a problem of a hiatus in exposure. Whenever you drop out of sight, you lose momentum, drop out of people's minds, especially the producers'. It's hard, then, to come back. I guess when we get back from Belgium and we're living on our pensions, when we're 45, we can choreograph."

Both of these artists have worked extensively outside New York City, Hadley often in Ohio (she has a MFA in dance from Ohio State) and Landis on the West Coast. "It's a struggle no matter where you do it," he told me. "There's a rite of passage you go through in New York City that's imperative if you want to work anywhere else. Both New York and the regions have to recognize talent for what it is, not for the fact that it has been to New York." "The sooner modern dance gets regionalized," Hadley felt, "the better for dance and for the country. The support can be fabulous. And there's some allure to making work in a place that's a little more starved for it."

"A few producers have too big a say in what sort of artists get attention in New York," observed Landis. "The world's art community does not just exist south of 23rd Street in New York City. It's too easy to think that, if you don't fit into the downtown mold, you're not an artist. Art is open to all kinds of people, doing it their own way. Minorities, people in Arizona, people with families or other interests. The art community will be better off if it's more expansive."

I took a very personal interest in the views of these artists that August afternoon. They were packing to leave, and so was I. On September 21, I began a new job as dance critic at the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. For the first time in my career as a writer, as one who has spent years in the "regions" and a decade in New York, I'm receiving a regular, full-time salary, health insurance, an office, travel expenses, and the freedom to decide what I think is important to write about. These are all things a critic needs to be able to concentrate fully on the changing panorama of dance and on the craft of criticism. The "region" I now inhabit is a metropolitan area much bigger than, and nearly as populous as, New York; the dance scene, however, is quite different. Exploring those differences, and finding out what is unique about dance life in Los Angeles, should keep my plate full for a while. Readers of this column will be assured of some choice morsels. □