



Morris, Mark (b. 1956)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Mark Morris.
Courtesy Mark Morris
Dance Group.

Mark Morris is one of the best known and most respected leaders in the dance world today. His works typically mix elements of Eastern and Western cultures and of the traditional and the avant-garde; they are set to a wide range of musical styles, from classical baroque to rock, and frequently explore sexual ambiguities. No less an authority than Mikhail Baryshnikov has proclaimed Morris one of the greatest choreographers of his time.

Born on August 29, 1956 in Seattle, where he was raised, Mark Morris fell in love with flamenco at the age of eight when he saw a José Greco show. At thirteen, he joined a folk dance group, and later went to Spain intending to become a flamenco dancer. After a brief apprenticeship, Morris realized that flamenco was too limiting for him. He moved to New York when he was nineteen to pursue a career in modern dance.

During the early years of his career in New York, Morris performed with a variety of companies, including the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, the Hannah Kahn Dance Company, the Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians, the Eliot Feld Ballet, and the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble.

Although Morris was primarily a dancer during his tenure with these companies, his ambition to choreograph led him to form the Mark Morris Dance Group in 1980. Founded in collaboration with friends and colleagues, the group had its first performance at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio in New York.

Since then, Morris has created over 100 works for his company, as well as works for the American Ballet Theatre, the San Francisco Ballet, and the Paris Opera Ballet.

During the 1980s, the Mark Morris Dance Group gained increased recognition, performing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in 1984 and appearing for the first time at the Kennedy Center in 1985.

His works were often unpredictable and irreverent--the provocative program for a 1985 performance in San Francisco included *The Vacant Chair*, in which Morris appeared in his underwear with a brown paper bag over his head, and *Lovey*, a dance where dolls are abused and ripped apart to recordings by the Violent Femmes.

In 1987, while the Mark Morris Dance Group was working in Europe, choreographer Maurice Béjart retired as Director of Dance at Belgium's state opera house, taking the opera's ballet company with him. The opera's director, Gerard Mortier, recognized the potential of the Mark Morris Dance Group and offered Morris the position.

From 1988 to 1991, Morris served as Director of Dance for the Belgian National Opera in Brussels, bringing to Europe a distinctly American flair with such works as *The Hard Nut* (1988), his witty take off on the classic *Nutcracker*, updated to the 1960s and set in a suburban American home, complete with vinyl furniture and a white plastic Christmas tree.

During that same period, Morris also choreographed such works as the critically acclaimed *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1988), with music by George Frideric Handel, and *Dido and Aeneas* (1989), a dance set to the baroque opera written by English composer Henry Purcell. In the premiere of that work, Morris himself danced the dual roles of Dido, queen of Carthage, and the Sorceress.

When his contract with the Belgian National Opera expired in 1991, Morris and his company returned to the United States. They continue to make regular and frequent appearances throughout the country and in Europe.

Morris has also proved himself an accomplished director and choreographer of opera, most notably *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1996), an opera by Christoph Willibald Gluck, and *Platée* (1997), a comic opera by French composer Jean Philippe Rameau.

In 2001, the Mark Morris Dance Center opened in Brooklyn, New York. The new center provides Morris and his company a permanent space in which to create, rehearse, and teach.

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Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.