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## I want to teach the world to dance

**After his company's UK tour choreographer Mark Morris faces an even greater challenge, he tells Ismene Brown**

**"When you go to a wedding now, the only people who dare to waltz in public are 80 years old"**



Photo Stuart Conway

BRITISH ballet may have missed its biggest trick a year ago, a golden chance to get the sun back on its face. The American genius Mark Morris very nearly became artistic director of Scottish Ballet. When one thinks about what it could have meant to have this dazzling personality and those radiant dances establishing themselves on the British scene...

But he didn't. After lengthy talks in Glasgow, he decided that a timeshare split between his own company in New York and Scotland would not work. "It was a fabulous Utopian idea, but I felt in the end it would diminish everybody slightly - me, my dancers, and Scottish."

He sighs with real regret. Slumping in the Silver Swan bar in New York, smoking happily and downing pints of beer, this big tousled man, who commits the social felony of wearing socks with shorts, cuts a schoolboyish figure despite his 43 years. You would not place him as a world leader in dance - he looks much more the class tearaway, used to a ruler descending suddenly on his head.

But Morris is a bringer of comfort, a restorer of basic impulses in a dance scene that has moved far away from grabbing someone's hand and spinning onto the floor. He makes modern dance blissfully comprehensible, and ballet blissfully dancey. In fact, wherever there is a vacant directorship in a ballet company Morris is instantly canvassed. So what about the Royal Ballet?

"Well, what *about* it?" he retorts, in an intimate, gossipy voice. "I was trying to think of someone fabulous to run it, but I couldn't. It's not *me*. I know that. There are a lot of people it shouldn't be but I'm not sure who it *should* be."

He goes on to offer advice to candidates. "It should not be a wax museum, nor should everything old and valuable be thrown out to match 'world dance trends'," he mockingly leans on the last three words.

Morris never fitted world dance trends. Not for him the spidery seductions of

modern ballet, the theoretical thrills of abstract minimalism. Like some throwback to Isadora Duncan, he is inspired only by music, and his dancers look like you and me, size and age no object, flesh and cellulite gratefully received as long as they feel the music and move his way. His philosophy of choreography has passed into lore: "I make up dance and you watch it. End of philosophy," he says.

The Mark Morris Dance Group is about to visit London for the first time in 14 years, following up with a UK tour - though the choreographer has had a close relationship with the Edinburgh Festival for years. In fact we have a Morris banquet in store. His company will be followed by San Francisco Ballet bringing a new Morris commission of their own. Last summer his great friend, Mikhail Baryshnikov and his company White Oak - co-founded with Morris - naturally performed his work.

And next summer Morris will return to the London Coliseum with two of his finest works, 20th-century dance masterpieces: that explosion of Handelian joy *L'Allegro, il penseroso ed il moderato* and that distillation of Purcellian tragedy *Dido and Aeneas*, in which Morris himself will dance the doomed queen Dido. Even though this year he swore in public that he had retired.

"Like Maya Plisetskaya," he chortles. "You know, when I was a teenager I went to Vancouver to see her: I saw three shows and I ended up seeing *The Dying Swan* seven times! She just couldn't stop. 'One more time...' I intend to dance way too long," and he leers at me, cigarette drooping from his mouth like a raddled old ballerina.

It's good to hear Morris larking about. When he made *Dido and Aeneas* in 1989 he indeed seemed like a doomed queen. He had been promiscuous in the early Eighties and several close friends were sickening and dying of Aids-related illnesses.

"I got so phobic about it that I thought *Dido* would be my last dance. And it wasn't. And somehow... well, not that things have lightened up, I mean some people have just given up, don't care any more, don't have safe sex. But I am healthy and I have no more reason to fear it than anybody else."

Last year he had his famous shaggy mane cut. "My hair was long because we were doing *Dido* all the time, not because it was signature. But I wanted to have a break from *this*," and his gesture indicates a general feeling of getting trapped in an icon.

WHEN he last danced in Edinburgh, wearing pink satin pyjamas, his fleshy stomach caused much comment, but then Morris has always loved what, lately, ballet has squeezed out. "I worship ballet - I just wish other people did. I'm a really good ballet choreographer," he adds. But today's obsession with physical beauty he finds "fascistic. I'm not interested in everybody looking alike. It's not a freak show. I work with people who dance great, that's the point."

And he himself "danced great", none greater - not even Baryshnikov. As his biographer Joan Acocella has beautifully pointed out, Morris's dancing is big, juicy

and wild, but also very fine-cut.

"It's *dancing*, not 'dance'," Morris explains. "There isn't the fireworks of the big lifts and the 15 turns, but the virtuosity in my dances is subtler and more difficult rhythmically and dynamically." In *Gloria*, for instance, which we will see here, Morris's steps pull your eyes and ears away from Vivaldi's chugging beats to the inner swells, lilts and syncopations. "That score is just *packed* with hemiolas," he says, satisfied. "To cross twos and threes like that is wonderful. Sort of jazzy."

*Dido* apart, Morris almost never tells stories in his choreography. It's the deploying of a group that excites him, celebrating the common instinct to find a rhythm, rather than individual emotional crises.

Perhaps his enviably happy childhood in Seattle, where his family were constantly entertaining one another unselfconsciously, has something to do with it. But for all that, under the hippy exterior lies a classicist's soul. His ideas are clearly shaped before he reaches the studio, he has no truck with the usual collaborative approach between choreographers and dancers. "I think that's pretend, myself," he quips.

"It's very easy at the start of a new piece, generating new material, oh-this-would-be-great, getting the language. The hard thing," he explains, "is dropping the keystone in, so it completes itself in its language without destroying what's gone before. So that you go, 'Oh, of course, the inevitable solution'. And I've just read that Haydn had the exact same problem."

NOW, with almost 20 years and 100 dances behind him, Morris has set himself a new challenge for his middle age. Next year the Mark Morris Dance Group will at last have its own \$4million centre, in Brooklyn. A crucial element will be a school, but not in the sense of "the Martha Graham School" - it will be something much more basic.

For Morris has become increasingly upset at finding that what he grew up with, the natural instinct to dance, has become unnatural in today's America. "When you go to a wedding now," he says with disgust, "the only people who dare to waltz in public are 80 years old, and everybody else is embarrassed and making excuses."

He wants to start putting this right. "It will be a dancing school, like where I went after school," he declares. "In the States now there's almost zero music, zero art in schools. And so professional companies are pretty much required to go and teach kids clapping and skipping.

"I want what I had for everybody: babies, grannies, kids, as well as professional dancers. It'll have Haitian dancing and ballet and rhythm and music and fencing, tumbling, baton, flamenco..." "You know that film *Los Tarantos* with Carmen Amaya? Buy it! She was pretty old and she dances barefoot in the dirt. It's the most genius dancing in the world."

*Mark Morris Dance Group is at Sadler's Wells October 5-9 then touring to Stoke-on-Trent, Birmingham, Canterbury, High Wycombe and Woking. San Francisco Ballet is at Sadler's Wells October 25-30*