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Where is Mark Morris Going?

Mark Morris Dance Group in the Mostly Mozart Festival 2009
Rose Theater, Lincoln Center, New York City August 19-22 2009

By
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Mark Morris Dance Group in *Empire Garden*. Photo by Gene Schiavone.

Mark Morris, who shares top honors (with Paul Taylor) as America's greatest living choreographer, is at mid-career, but maybe no longer at the top of his game.

Compared with his masterworks such as *Gloria* (1981—the year after his company was officially formed); *New Love Song Waltzes* (1982) and its eventual companion, *Love Song Waltzes* (1989); *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1988), arguably his richest piece; and *Dido and Aeneas* (1989), his most daringly dramatic venture, many of his works in the last decade seem unambitious and tame or created on schemes that may please him but are inaccessible to the ordinary viewer.

Sad proof of this was evident just this week. As part of Lincoln Center's annual Mostly Mozart Festival, the Mark Morris Dance Group gave New York its first viewing of the choreographer's *Visitation* (set to Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 4 in C major) and *Empire Garden* (set to Ives's Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano). The program was completed by the 2003 *V* (to Schubert's Quintet in E-flat major for Piano and Strings), a "big" number that's not as meaningful as it aims to be.

Visitation, costumed by Elizabeth Kurtzman in what look like faded rags, is a pallid affair choreographically too. The first part evokes, as if in distant memory, the way a quintet of young friends bond as a group, inevitably grow away from one another, then from time to time, connect again. There is no romance in the relationship, never a passionate falling out, just a gentle connection among people who remain true to one another through time. Physically the choreography is a gentle as a morning mist.

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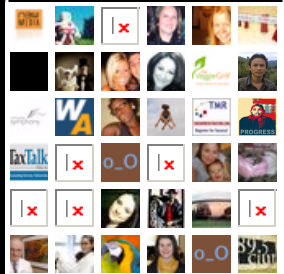


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Mark Morris Dance Group in *Visitation*. J Worden and N Vinson. Photo by Gene Schiavone.

The second part, which adds four more dancers, is somewhat more emphatic. It harbors a theme of one dancer making another fall, presumably in a mood of playful fun, but with a suspicion of real hostility behind the moves. You often see this in children and young adults—"horsing around" with a thin mean streak behind it. There are a couple of striking passages in this section, such as pairs of dancers crossing the stage horizontally, each bearing on its outstretched arms a third who lies in a rigid horizontal line, as if she were tracing a floating streak to mark their route to any who might follow or witness the group's journey.

I found the first part mildly moving, but sorely lacking in contrast. As for the second section, it felt like boiler plate to me—very adept, mind you, but boilerplate nonetheless.

For *Empire Garden*, Kurtzman designed startlingly bright outfits that made the dancers look like snazzy hotel attendants or, as they began to move, toys painted in overly bright colors, made for a child to arrange and rearrange. The rearrangement was central to the choreography. Looking increasingly mechanical and militaristic, the dancers formed sharp lines, usually cross-stage, occasionally on the diagonal, or marched in formation like soldiers on parade.

Eventually, the performers took on the air of having no control over their own destiny. Single figures, elevated by three of their colleagues so that they sit as if on a high throne, suggest dictators commanding a populace. When this happens, there always seems to be a motionless fallen body lying downstage center.

Julie Worden and Craig Biesecker are given a duet as close to loving as this dance intends to come. The stage turns into a veritable kaleidoscopic image of busily but always clearly shifting paths. There's a presumably significant motif of dancers cupping first their own cheeks with their hands, and then those of another, but there's no more tenderness in the latter than in the former; *Empire Garden*'s figures demonstrate no capacity for feeling. The patterning of the dance is admittedly brilliant, but the piece is too long for what it has to show or tell us.

Morris, from the first a stickler for having live music accompany his choreography, here had nothing but the best, including cellist Yo-Yo Ma and pianist Emanuel Ax. Indeed, the music was the number one attraction of this program.

In Morris's latest efforts, the insight into the relationship between music and dance is still there, as are the brilliance of construction, the imagination, the naughty-boy wit and its opposite: acknowledgement of loss and mortality. Moreover, he has groomed his dancers to accomplish amazing feats while managing to look like real, down-to-earth people. What's missing in the newer works is Morris's once-surgingly desire to choreograph.

How did this happen?

For one thing, it looks as if Morris's interest has shifted into other realms, opera first among them. He maintains that, to him, the human voice is the most moving of the musical instruments. He's already



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choreographed and directed several operas, with mixed outcomes. And then there are ballets created for classical companies, which give him greater exposure, fame, and, no doubt, money. Morris, who can safely be classified as belonging to modern dance, has choreographed for a number of prestigious ballet companies, but the results, with the exception of the 1988 *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes*, for American Ballet Theatre (and starring Mikhail Baryshnikov), are often thin. Classical technique is simply not Morris's native language and naturally this stymies his creativity.

Then too, Morris's once glorious dancing days are essentially over. Though he's still fascinating to watch (as were Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, compelling onstage even as senior citizens), he can no longer enjoy the fantasy of being just one of the guys (the best one, of course). Older and grown considerably bulkier than his dancers, his technique naturally diminished by age (he's 52), Morris sets himself apart to do solos or small pieces. He may miss the camaraderie of being a regular member of the team.

But who can tell—except Morris himself. Maybe this choreographic slump is just a phase before another period of glory days. (After all, the 2006 *Mozart Dances* was pretty terrific.) There's no question about his talent. He's made some of the most wonderful dances of our time.

For more information:

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