

The man who put men in the 'corps'

WHEN THE Mark Morris Dance Group performed at the Edinburgh festival for the first time last year, the dancers said they liked the city so much they wanted to move there from New York. Their enthusiasm cooled, however, when Morris told them it was freezing most of the time — and it is to the festival's credit that this summer the company has been enticed back across the pond. "No one told me to say this," Morris offers, "but the Edinburgh festival is exemplary; it is one of the few festivals that don't cop out on you."

It is remarkable that Morris, a dancer and choreographer, wants to return to Europe at all. In 1988, he was offered a three-year contract as resident choreographer by the prestigious Brussels opera house, Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie. It is unprecedented in the dance world for a country to import a company lock, stock and barrel, and Morris jumped at the chance. He had founded his own company in 1981 and was struggling to make

SHOW PEOPLE

MARK MORRIS

new work while touring, which he needed to do for revenue. Brussels offered money, studio space and an orchestra, but Morris did not foresee that the opera house audience had fixed ideas about what it wanted. His residency was stormy, marked by bad reviews and boozing, and it soon became apparent that neither side would apply to renew his contract when it expired in 1991.

The antipathy between Morris and his audience became famous in the dance world. From the moment he arrived, the Bruxellois took against this talented loudmouth with his streaming rock-star hair, overt homosexuality and fondness for beer. They could not fathom the hip, big-boned, thurkish bad boy who came on stage after performances in a tuxedo with no shirt and Dyaglo green socks. And they loathed his work: for its lack of narrative, its heavy, chunky moves. They were also affronted by its same-sex partnering, transvestism, and — *quelle horreur!* — men in the corps. Critics were infuriated when Morris himself danced the female lead in his version of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*.

Morris, it should be said, did little to ingratiate himself to the burghers of his adoptive city, reportedly describing the Belgian Queen, Fabiola, as having "a Maggie Thatcher hairdo of death", and pillorying his illustrious predecessor Maurice Bejart as "shit". The Belgian cultural establishment took up arms. But Morris held his ground. "It's a strange society and very glum in general," he said of Belgium at the time. "It's also highly racist, highly sexist, highly homophobic and highly conservative, and there are certain aspects that are quite Fascistic." The hatred was mutual. *Le Soir* blazed: "Mark Morris go home."

Reflecting on the experience, Morris now says: "Basically, there were some shiteheads who never forgave me for being who I am and who wanted me to be something else. But, no, it was very, very good — especially now that it's over."

Since his return to New York, Morris has re-established his company by touring more widely than ever. He was appearing at a festival in Massachusetts when I telephoned him at his hotel room. I found him to be friendly, even jokey, excusing himself politely every now and again to attend to some milk he was steaming for a cappuccino. Has the *enfant terrible* mellowed? "At the great old age of 37, I don't think I qualify for that title any more."

In contrast to those he received in Belgium, the reviews in the United States have been rapturous. The *New Yorker* described him as "his generation's one and only [great dancemaker]". The



CHANTAL ABIGNAULT

A talented loudmouth: Mark Morris bends the rules

Washington Post hailed him as "among the dance giants of his era". And the *Boston Herald* said he has "an Aladdin's cave of imaginative genius".

Growing up in Seattle, he took ballet, Hawaiian and Tahitian dance lessons, then flamenco studies in Spain, before dancing for companies such as Eliot Feld Ballet, Kaleda Balkan Dance Ensemble and Lar Lubovitch. The most obvious influence on his style is that of the American choreographer Paul Taylor, although he has also absorbed the work of Isadora Duncan and Busby Berkeley. His unwavering confidence comes, he says, from "my darling family" and the fact that "I never thought there was anything wrong with what I was doing".

In Edinburgh he is dancing in *Home*, a "manic-depressive" piece which alternates melancholic songs written and performed by the singer/songwriter Michelle Shocked, with boisterous Appalachian Mountain clog-dancing to a fiddle played by Rob Wasserman. He has also selected *Jesu, meine Freude*, a Bach choral work, for the festival because it gives his 15-strong company the chance to perform with the local Schola Cantorum — "a top-notch chorus".

While Mark Morris may huddle over steamed milk, constantly travelling, nervous about moving to the next place, he says he's not "particularly afraid" to say what he wants to say. "The core thing is that I can make up anything I want. The rules stop at the rules I make up. Sure there are the rules of the human body and the stage, but you can get past those. It's a strange fantasy job."

Anne Sacks

Edinburgh Playhouse (031-557 2590), Tues to Thurs, Sat to 23 Aug