

All it took to condemn one of the greatest operas ever written to three centuries in shadows were a bare dozen words—"Perform'd at Mr. Josias Priest's Boarding-School at Chelsey. By Young Gentlewomen."

And the worst of it? It wasn't even true.

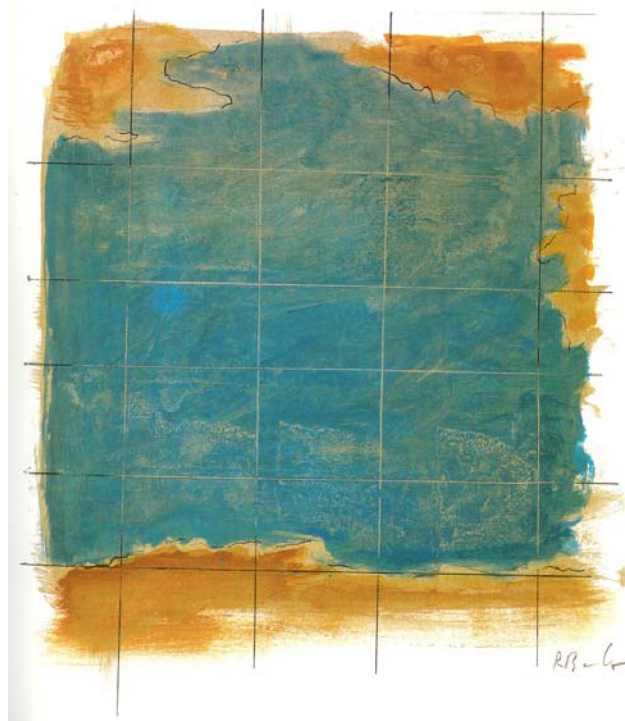
In fact Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* was probably written for performance before the King and Queen of England. But those words, at the head of the libretto published in 1689, have cast such a pall of dainty respectability, of amateur night shenanigans over the work that most listeners have neglected the evidence of their own ears. *Dido* has been mostly revived professionally when a mezzo-soprano combining musical insight with box-office clout—a Kirsten Flagstad, a Josephine Baker—has insisted on performing it. Paradoxically, Mark Morris's danced version of the piece has probably done more to establish *Dido* in the repertory than those artists did.



*Dido* was the second work created by Morris during his company's three-year residency at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, just four months after the triumphant debut of *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato* in November 1988. But it opened not in the ornately-classical "national theater" of Belgium but in the basement workshop space of a converted *art Nouveau* movie theater.

Instead of a proscenium arch there was only a narrow rectangular frame, barred in red and white like the warning-arm that descends across a level-crossing when a train is approaching (used for the premiere, now discarded from the production forevermore). Behind it a bare wooden platform (a map painted on it with colors of sand and sea) and a low wall suggesting the edge of a terrace with a murky backdrop presaging storm.

Instead of *l'Allegro's* luscious chiffon fruit-salad, Christine Van Loon's costumes this time were a severely uniform, dusty black, suggesting heat, sweat, effort. Like *l'Allegro*, Morris's movement was strongly reminiscent of the early glory days of "modern dance." But instead of graceful, free-form eurhythmic "barefoot dancing," the movement this time harked back to another strain in the tradition: the suggestion of exotic non-western movement, ritualized, flattened like a frieze.



Inevitably, the pre-premiere buzz was centered on Morris's decision to dance the role of the Carthaginian queen himself. Was this camp (something the Brussels audience had seen plenty of under Morris's predecessor Maurice Bèjart)? Was it a political gesture, psych-out, post-Modern bizarrerie? What did Morris *mean* by it? It soon appeared, to the disappointment of the gossips, that what Morris meant was business. From her first entrance, he portrayed the Carthaginian queen as a prisoner of her own role as ruler, constrained to an even narrower vocabulary of movements than the courtiers around her.

When Nahum Tate's libretto begins, the story (immortalized by the Roman poet Virgil in his epic *Aeneid*) is already half over. Queen Dido is already secretly in love with the shipwrecked Trojan hero Aeneas, already burdened by forebodings. Her courtiers have their work cut out to convince her that her passion is legitimate, that he is worthy to share the throne with her. When her confidante Belinda reveals to her that Aeneas already returns her love, she allows herself, still reluctantly, to yield.

In Virgil, their liaison is created and destroyed by the gods, who have other plans for both of them. Tate, by contrast, makes them victims of a mysterious figure called "the Sorceress," who, malignantly and without motive, sets out to destroy Dido's happiness with the gleeful indifference of a child torturing a small animal. Many commentators have said that the author's choice trivializes the tragedy. For Morris it is an opportunity to give and deepen it. By dancing the Sorceress role himself, he suggests that she is only the other side, the in-side of Dido. What weighs on the queen from her first entrance is a consciousness of fascinated guilt, a premonition of the self-destructive impulse all of us have felt, the urge to ruin what we most desire.

In such a brief summary, *Dido* comes across like a major downer. In fact, the show is more up-beat than down-; the chorus of courtiers dance out their commentary to a succession of brilliant musical miniatures (most less than two minutes long), each crystallizing one emotion or mood in its most intensely realized form, like a succession of single, perfectly-ripe fruits. (Does anyone really regret that strawberries are not the size of cantaloupes?) As the Sorceress's minions, they combine cackling comic glee with hyper-violent movement to the brink of injury, in a horrifying display of evil as self-consuming. As Aeneas' horn piping sailors prepare for departure, their cheerful unconsciousness of the darkness surrounding them deepens the sense of doom closing in.

Purcell's music is so limpid, so fluent, that it's easy to take it for granted. Frequently we hear nothing but a simple melody floating above an equally unadorned bass line. Our ears, coarsened by the clotted textures and over-seasoned harmony of most modern music, feel but don't become aware of how the composer can caress or stab with a single chromatic alteration, or convey a double message by an underlying rhythm pattern that counters the melodic pulse.

As always, Morris captures the undercurrents as well as the surfaces of the music he sets. His dance vocabulary "unpacks" the full gestural possibility of each number, so that the action proceeds like a series of sharply contrasted flash images. With singers freed from visual focus to concentrate on vocal expression and dancers able to physicalize the drama to the utmost, the drama inherent in Purcell's music is reflected with a visual intensity hard to achieve in a conventional staging.

Intensity is the key. Through sheer compression and concentration, through its movement style in which the performers move less like actors or dancers like celebrants in a sacred rite, Morris's *Dido* brings us as close as a modern audience is likely to come to something resembling classical tragedy: a living reminder that Western drama and dance were born on the stone threshing-floors of bronze-age Greece.