

## DANCE

# Serving Laughter

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Morris's charming "Sandpaper Ballet," set to such Leroy Anderson pops novelties as "The Syncopated Clock" and "The Typewriter."

For Mr. Parsons, who as a dancer worked with both Mr. Pendleton and Paul Taylor, a choreographer known for his sly sense of humor, making funny dances has always seemed natural. "Watching those men — watching the effects of humor in their dances — made it important to me from the get-go," he said during a rehearsal break.

Still, it's unusual for outright belly laughs to be heard at the ballet. Balanchine was more witty than funny, Ashton more sweet, while Mr. Taylor's modern-dance comedies are usually pitch-black. (The laughter heard during "Big Bertha" and "Le Sacre du Printemps" is almost invariably nervous.) Mr. Morris's work is jokier than that of any contemporary choreographer of comparable stature, but few of his dances are predominantly comic — the jokes, though essential, are incidental. As for the Trocks, their drag versions of the classics are an acquired taste, though their repertory also includes the two best ballet parodies ever made, Peter Anastos's "Go for Barocco" and "Yes, Virginia, Another Piano Ballet," in which the idiosyncrasies of Balanchine and Jerome Robbins are spoofed with a wicked mixture of love and malice.

Robbins himself was a master of baggy-pants comedy in his Broadway days, and had it suited him, he probably could have become the Buster Keaton of ballet as well. Instead, he chose to be the Woody Allen, opting for angst over laughter. Only two of his best-known ballets, "Fancy Free" and "The Concert," are intentionally funny from start to finish, and "The Concert," a City Ballet staple since its premiere in 1956, is an oddly uneven piece of foolery whose best bits are diminished by a flat finale. What is surprising about "The Concert" is not that it is uneven but that it is so concentrated in its purpose. Like a stand-up monologue, it exists solely to make you laugh, loud and long and lots. Not many important choreographers have sought to do the same thing, and none has specialized in it.

Why has there been no choreographer who was to dance what Keaton was to film — that is, an indisputably



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

*David Parsons finds humor in movement exaggerated in ways "only a dancer could achieve."*

major artist who expressed himself exclusively through comedy? Perhaps the problem is that since the invention of radio, American humor has tended to be verbal rather than physical. (Try to imagine a "Seinfeld" ballet.) Mr. Parsons, by contrast, gets his laughs from movement. "It's funny to the eye," he said, "when trained dancers make familiar shapes and movements. 'Too Many Cooks!' is full of movements that millions of people do. Everybody stirs. But to make those movements funny, you put them in a theatrical context, then exaggerate them in a way that only a dancer could achieve — and that touches people."

Interestingly, he longs to try his hand at a Tayloresque black comedy. "I haven't really worked on a true comedy of darkness," he said, "and it's still something I'm searching for — to be able to make a deep statement that has comedy attached. My comic dances are lighter. Changes of pace. A comedy that massages our fears — that'll be a big step for me."

For now, though, he seems content to show his audiences a good time, secure in the knowledge that the pursuit of innocent laughter is wholly honorable. "Laughter is incredibly important, especially during a night at the theater," he said. "I don't like people to have a monotonal emotional experience. I want to put them on a roller coaster. You don't stay in one emotional state all day — sometimes you laugh, sometimes you cry — so why would you want to feel just one thing all evening?" □