

Dance in Jersey

A 'fellowship' with ethnic heritage

With his springy, athletic walk and wildly tousled head of dark hair, Mark Morris doesn't exactly fit the typical image of a professional dancer. But the young Hoboken resident, a recipient this year of a choreography fellowship from the state Council on the Arts, can't remember a time when he didn't want to dance.

"I saw Jose Greco when I was about seven years old, and I knew immediately that's what I wanted," he said in an interview.

While Spanish dancing has remained Morris' favorite, ethnic forms of all kinds have influenced his own personal brand of modern dance. Now that his career increasingly stresses choreography along with performing, Morris is giving "a lot more credit to my ethnic background" and its emphasis on a direct emotional response to musical rhythms.



By
Valerie
Sudol

Morris' dance training began a year after his encounter with Greco when he enrolled in Spanish dance classes in his native Seattle. A three-year stint in a Balkan dance company there expanded his ethnic repertoire to include specialties of Balkan and Slavic origin, as well as the native dances of French Canada, Greece and Crete.

After high school, Morris set off for Europe where he could study native styles in their original environment. He spent half of a 10-month stay in Madrid where he studied with masters of flamenco and jota, a regional dance of mountain people near Aragon.

Unlike the formal, staccato heel-stamping associated with flamenco, the jota is an athletic style of partnered dancing performed in rope-soled shoes to the accompaniment of mandolins and guitars. Students were permitted to visit native festivals and concerts not normally on the tourist circuit, and Morris today still talks wistfully of Spain's "totally amazing dancers."

"It was in Madrid that I finally realized I could never really be a Spanish dancer unless I was willing to change my life and adopt the customs of the country," Morris said. "I saw I wasn't willing to do that, and that I'd have to define my way of dancing on my own terms."

So it was back to the States, where he returned to Seattle to enter under scholarship an apprentice program offered by the First Chamber Dance Company, a New York-based troupe that had relocated to the West Coast. His instructor there, Verla Flowers, encouraged his ambitions as a choreographer, and for years has reserved a slot on her concert programs for Morris' experiments.

In 1976, Morris felt he was ready for new challenges, and moved to New York City. Just two weeks later he auditioned for the Eliot Feld Ballet Company and was accepted as a member, and within a month he was headed for South America on a company tour.

There is no longer the antipathy between ballet and modern dance that drew distinct lines between the two camps not so long ago. Morris, whose current dance studies are almost exclusively in ballet, praises it as "a neutral physical discipline that does great things for the body". But he objected, among other things, to ballet's sexual stereotypes.

"In Feld's ballets there were all these big, strong men and limp women," he said. "That's not my style."

Late in 1977, he left the Feld troupe to join Lar Lubovitch's modern troupe, and found there a kind of dancing that was "almost exactly how I want to move — with total abandon."

Morris now freelances as a dancer and choreographer, and has performed with modern dance troupes

headed by Twyla Tharp and Hannah Kahn, as well as in a production of "The Tempest" this summer at the Connecticut Shakespeare Festival.

His own work begins with finding a suitable piece of music. Morris' tastes run to country swing, chamber and choral music, ethnic scores and New Wave (Talking Heads, Devo), although he has yet to create a "punk rock" dance. Occasionally he will compose his own scores at the piano, tinkering around until he achieves the sought-after effect.

His \$3,000 state grant will pay for production costs to mount a proposed work tentatively titled "Castor and Pollux", set to a score of the same name by Harry Partch.

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A non-narrative piece, the work will develop the theme of the mythical twins only in that the dance will be symmetrical, repeating with slight variations four sections entitled "Leda and the Swan", "Fertilization", "Incubation" and "Chorus of Delivery from the Egg". While no specific ethnic dance will be introduced, some of the movement will be based on Macedonian music.

"To me, dance has a lot to do with energy," Morris said. "I like best dancing that is not editorial, that doesn't comment on what performers are doing or require them to project a character, but simply presents dancers dancing."

His current favorites among active young choreographers are Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, Andy De Groat and Lubovitch — all minimalists. But Morris doesn't classify himself among that avant garde group that favors spare, untheatrical effects.

"My own dancing?" Morris muses. "I guess experimental is still the best way to describe it."



Morris continues a move in his Hoboken loft... 'I guess experimental is still the best way to describe it'

Dance this week

RED BANK (Monmouth Arts Center, 99 Monmouth St.) — The MAUREEN DEAKIN DANCE ENSEMBLE offers "Masquerade," a ballet set in the early Renaissance using

elaborate costumes and handmade masks. The concert is part of a "Sunday Sampler" series aimed at young audiences. 2p.m



(Above) Mark Morris works on a routine in his studio . . . 'To me, dance has a lot to do with energy'

Photos by Cary Herz

(Right) Morris stretches in a dance move . . . 'I like, best, dance that is not editorial'

