

Mark Morris, a Choreographer Who Makes Things Happen

By JENNIFER DUNNING

"It was like getting drunk and dancing to Bulgarian music all night," Mark Morris said the other day. "My favorite thing." He was talking, strangely enough, of the work of one of the most formal of postmodernist choreographers, with whom he danced for a time. But Mr. Morris is full of surprises.

The gifted young choreographer-dancer, who will perform tonight through Sunday at the Dance Theater Workshop's Bessie Schönberg Theater, could pass for a particularly hip punk rocker, on stage or off, but for his characteristic expression of pleased astonishment. That mixture of impudent, zany humor and whole-hearted involvement is typical both of his dances and the vivid physical wit of his performance style. "My mission in dance is to make something happen," he says. "I'm so tired of concerts where nothing happens."

A rehearsal has just ended at the theater. Perspiring dancers file out, worrying enthusiastically to the young choreographer about the difficulties of the dances. "I know it's hard," Mr. Morris said later. "But it's fresh and dangerous, and it still has an edge on it, which I like." The wide-ranging dances will include a five-

minute trio, set to traditional Tahitian music, that is "a real formal study, a postmodernist arrangement of phrases," as Mr. Morris puts it; and "Jr. High" and "Etudes Modernes," interwoven pieces set to the player-piano music of Conlon Nancarrow.

Memories and Modernism

"'Jr. High' is a sort of personal reminiscence," Mr. Morris explained. "It's about things like trying to recover enough from adolescence every morning to get yourself to school, and getting by in gym class by leaping around a lot. It's a dance for men. 'Etudes Modernes,' which is for women, has an early modernist feeling. All angular and geometric."

Also on the program will be "New Love Song Waltzes," commissioned by Dance Theater Workshop, and "Songs That Tell a Story," set to music by the Louvin Brothers, a 1950's country-and-western duo. "It's sort of white country gospel," Mr. Morris said. "Little moral tales. I worry because many people think country and western is campy, and this is pretty serious."

"'New Love Song Waltzes' is danced to the Brahms waltzes that George Balanchine didn't use. It's a set of 15 waltzes, and sort of a love dance with a lot of misunderstandings. The music is very mature some-

how, and the dancing isn't virtuosic technique at all, though I hope it will be emotionally."

'Every Digit of Your Body

For someone only 26 years old, Mr. Morris has performed with an unusual number of respected choreographers, among them Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean and Hannah Kahn. He credits Miss Kahn with much of his choreographic education. "It was hard keeping up with her, but I loved that," he said, going on to describe qualities that equally identify his own dances.

"You had to use every digit of your body. There was an incredible subtlety to her dances, which came from her having choreographed around the gesture, from giving importance to textural changes and distilling the dynamic ones. Everything was so specific. There was nothing else that could happen when you were dancing that phrase. And I learned a lot from Hannah about how to flatten and clarify gesture, to perform without projecting in the classical sense. Just to dance it purely and well."

Some of Mr. Morris's freshness on stage comes, it is likely, from his early experience in flamenco and Balkan folk dance. "I started studying flamenco at 11," the Seattle-born choreographer recalled. "I had seen

some, and I liked it. I found a wonderful teacher named Verla Flowers, who taught real old-school Spanish dancing. Soon she had me hanging around the studio, and then she got me to take ballet. And after a while she just automatically gave me a spot of 15 minutes or so on the school programs, which were done for parents, but in a good theater, to do a dance of my own. She never even looked at them first. 'This will be Mark's ballet,' she'd say."

Performing With Balkans

One of the dances was "Barstow," which he choreographed at 15 and is still performing. "It was made to use a piece of music I liked by Harry Partch." He smiled. "I wasn't a football player." Around that time, he began to perform professionally with the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble, which toured the Northwest extensively, and taught Croatian circle dances in a small coastal Yugoslav fishing village. "It was a very rich experience, and I learned a great deal about community. When I came to New York to dance, I was still trying to make that sense of community happen."

At 17, he went to Spain to learn more about traditional Spanish dancing. Some general modern-dance training in New York followed, and soon he

was performing. In 1980 he presented his first dances in New York. But this concert at the Schönberg may be his last in the city for some time, for he plans to return to Seattle soon. "I can't afford to live and perform in New York," he said.

"I'll teach when I can in Seattle. And I'll make dances. I think I'll be freer to experiment there. Do garage solos. You can't be corny in New York anymore. And Seattle is much more of a mix than New York, where dancers know dancers and actors know waiters. It all becomes so specialized. I think there has to be some experience in what you do. I don't feel many people do real dancing anymore. Everything seems so self-conscious in dance here now. It's the whole hipster scene, I guess. I listen to rock, too, and I know what's going on. But I think you have to have some knowledge of craft and form and structure."

Mark Morris and dancers will perform tonight and tomorrow at 8 and Sunday at 3 P.M. at the Bessie Schönberg Theater, 219 West 19th Street. Tickets are \$5 (Theater Development Fund vouchers accepted). Reservations: 924-0077.