

W Weekend



Jazz fans can
soar on the
voices of Full
Swing
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THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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Spokane Chronicle

Mark of excellence

*Acclaimed
choreographer
Mark Morris
prepares the
dancers of
Spokane Ballet
for Saturday's
performance of
his new modern
work, "Vestige"*

See centerfold





Story by **Alice Feinstein** Photos by **Kit King**

Dancemaker mixes 'animal' with classical

Mark Morris glided out onto the studio dance floor in his baggy pink sweat pants and wooly red socks to demonstrate the next series of movements in his new ballet.

In the throes of creating a brand new work for Spokane Ballet, Morris was working under pressure. That's the way he likes it. Intensity under pressure — creativity about to come to a boil — brings out the "animal" in dance.

Shostakovich's "Sonata for Cello and Piano" vibrated from a tape recorder in the background while dancers in the company watched intently. The new work, as yet untitled, was to be performed Saturday, and Morris had only three weekends left to give them the movements for the remaining two-thirds of the ballet.

At that point it existed only in his head.

Morris crept slowly forward in a zombie-like walk, spun and dove to the floor.

A few women dancers in the company rolled their eyes at the apparent difficulty of the movements.

After years of strenuous exercises at the ballet barre, dancers legs are invariably strong; but ballet training, for women at least, doesn't do much for upper body strength and here he was, asking them to dive to the floor into a prone position that looked suspiciously like a push-up and then rise up and out of it sideways.

It's not pretty and it's certainly not easy to do, but in a raw, vital sort of way, the movement works.

And so does Mark Morris, the choreographer.

Dancers' bodies are the raw material for his sculpture, the clay out of which he molds his creations. His creations have earned him high praise indeed.

A recent issue of *The New Yorker* devoted a two-page article to Morris extolling him as an up-and-coming young dance artist. Dance critic Arlene Croce, referring to his "raw gift of choreography," called him "a dancemaker and a spellbinder" who is "a symbol of his times."

That drove Mark Morris right out of New York.

It wasn't that specific article, but that coupled with similar praise in other big name publications that did it, Morris said in a recent interview.

"With that kind of good press, the best kind of thing you can do is leave town," he said, shaking his brown mane over a vodka martini. "The more funding you get, the more recognition you get, the more you have to keep doing the same sort of thing."

What happens when big-name choreographers receive such high praise is that a sort of self-censorship develops in which they try to "mimic themselves," to reproduce the dances that earned the praise in the first place, Morris said. It's a good way to get trapped.

Morris has watched the dance scene in New York.

"You're discovered as a dancer-choreographer and you do all sorts of festivals and programs, then you're dropped," he said.

Is that why he *really* left? Did he fear his success was limited and that he might eventually be "dropped?"

"Not at all," he replied to that question with a laugh. "I'm just starting to happen, as they say."



Says Morris: "I only work under pressure. I either work and kill myself or I don't."

New York is just a sore point with the guy. He resents it that dance artists need to have that New York experience before they get taken seriously. Going to New York becomes an initiation they go through on the path to success in Peoria.

"I went to New York because that's the only place I could do what I wanted to do."

Morris is very young, only 27, to have already been acclaimed as a choreographer of note. That might be young, he agreed, but he has been working at it a long time.

From Seattle originally, he returned there in January and is now teaching at the University of Washington.

Morris' background includes an apprenticeship at First Chamber Dance Company in Seattle, where he first met Spokane Ballet director Terrence Grizzell. They were both apprentices there at the same time.

When he first left Seattle, it was with the dream of being a Spanish Flamenco dancer. It seems that as a child he saw Jose Greco perform and was enthralled.

He went to Madrid for five months but was driven out by three things — the Franco government, the Catholic Church and homophobia. Spain, he said, "is a homophobic society. And I came out years ago."



Artistic Director



myself or I don't do anything."



Artistic Director Terry Grizzell, seated at right, met Morris when both danced in Seattle.

Morris put together his own group of dancers and in 1980 put on his first New York concert, an entire evening devoted to his works. He has done an annual concert there since.

Morris described his work as "contemporary, based on work that is classical. . . . There's something animal about it that people like to watch."

One of the things he likes to play with in his works is "gender representation," he said, adding "I hate the way most choreographers deal with men and women."

He likes to attack choreographic cliches in his work, make men who love to do "big tricks," do "fragile, feminine — in quotes — movements" instead, or have women do the big jumps and partner each other.

Morris said he enjoys working with Spokane Ballet.

Struggling over the past few weekends to complete his new work in time for Saturday's performance may have put Morris up against the wall creatively, but that is where he likes to be.

"I only work under pressure," he said. "I either work and kill myself or I don't do anything."

Mark Morris' "Vestige" will be performed along with "Grand Tarantelle," "Les Patineurs" and "Allies" at 8 p.m. Saturday at Whitworth's Cowles Auditorium.