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Mark Morris, a Franklin High School graduate, has come home to Seattle to find 'a better-rounded life . . . friends who are not exclusively dancers . . .'

Dancemaker comes home

Choreographer Mark Morris wowed New York City, but Seattle's artistic atmosphere has lured him back

by Renate Strauss
Special to The Times

More than anybody in recent memory, Mark Morris has swept a fresh breeze — make that a gust of exhilaration — into the local dance scene.

After eight years in New York, the 27-year-old dancer/choreographer has returned to his native Seattle to pursue his career here. The first results of that move will be evident soon: The Mark Morris Dance Group — the choreographer and eight others — will present its first concert here Thursday through next Sunday at the Washington Hall Performance Gallery, 153 Fir St.

Morris' New York years read like the classical success story: performances with world-class choreo-

graphers, among them Eliot Feld, Twyla Tharp, Lar Lubovitch and Laura Dean; frequent appearances at the important places that sponsor dance, such as the Kitchen and Dance Theater Workshop; and unanimously rave reviews from critics hailing him as a rising choreographer of expansive talent.

The New York Times calls him "a gifted young choreographer with a flippant, nutty wit . . . as well as a sense of literacy and respect for craft." The New Yorker's Arlene Croce writes: "Mark Morris is a dancemaker and spellbinder. . . . His technique is something he is born with. The raw gift of choreography may be the most individualizing of all gifts to experience."

But Morris threw it all aside to return to Seattle, where he is teaching at the University of Washington. In a recent interview sandwiched between rehearsals,

he explained that although New York is recognized as the capital of dance, it simply failed to offer a number of things he considers important for his art — such as a life apart from dance.

"I hate living in New York. I hate the climate, the filth and the sort of 'dance club' atmosphere there," Morris declared. "I also felt the need for a better-rounded life — a little house, a yard, friends who are not exclusively dancers, and a chance to have some solitude to do my dance-thinking with."

He has found that in Seattle. With close friend Erin Matthiessen — himself an ex-member of the Laura Dean Dance Company — Morris shares a Wallingford cottage that has a mile-wide view of Lake Union.

"I know people here, musicians, actors as well as dancers," Morris said, lighting one of his exotic Indonesian cigarettes. "In New York the atmosphere is so incestuous — people are so heated up about their work, all the artists are much more isolated . . . it's hard even just to socialize." He also felt increasingly pressured "to always top myself in my work, less free to take risks or explore new ideas."

Sitting cross-legged on the floor of his living room, which is wall-to-wall with an eclectic wealth of books and records, Morris looked at ease, with the casual grace of a cat. His pale face and blue eyes are framed by an extravagant tangle of brown curls; his conversation, peppered with gestures, comes across as witty and sophisticated, never phony.

"My work affects everything I do: the television I watch, the music I listen to, books I read, people I know, even my sexuality. But I also crave things that are not related to dance. I don't believe dancers can afford to be ignorant about everything except their work."

In making his move back to Seattle, Morris

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Artistic atmosphere lures choreographer

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illustrated an increasingly significant phenomenon: a westward movement that is altering the face of the dance world by building thriving, world-class dance troupes which don't look to New York for support or approval.

"The Northeast represents what was. The West and Southwest represents what's coming," said San Francisco Ballet's president, Robert E. LeBlond Jr., in a recent issue of Ballet News. "Look at the great progress the Pacific Northwest Ballet is making in Seattle. Now the Joffrey (Ballet) has moved to Los Angeles. The handwriting is on the wall."

Musicality and an exceptional feeling for structure are the hallmarks of Morris' dance style.

"He can take a piece of music and literally make a visual shape out of it," says pianist Harriet Cavalli, a faculty member at the

Cornish Institute and former music director of the First Chamber Dance Company. "He sculpts musical architecture into kinetic structure."

"All my dances have very, very strict rules that I work with, rules that I have learned from music," acknowledged Morris, who also studied piano technique and theory at Cornish. "Musical structures absolutely fascinate me.

"When I study a score, I actually 'see' the architecture of the music, complete with textures, physical and kinetic qualities. The music serves as the blueprint for my dances."

Morris' style — "an indefinable Mark Morrisian stew," said one critic — also reflects the breadth of his dance background, which ranges from Balkan folk dance to ballet. The result is an unusual blend of traditional and post-modern dance, combining a classical purity and virtuosity with a thoroughly contemporary look. Morris cited some of his influences: George Balanchine, Eliot Feld, Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp. But he isn't stealing anyone's ideas.

"I may seem old-fashioned to some of my colleagues," said Morris, "but I don't like these trendy works I see: people collaborating with rock stars, sculptors or using dense spoken texts — I really like to see *dancing*. My dances . . . are about life. I think it's fair to ask about a dance: 'Yes, but what does it mean?' Why expect people to see your work unless there is some content, a point of view?"

Morris is equally forthright about being homosexual.

"I don't apologize for being gay. It is very important to me in my personal and professional life," he said, explaining that he is bored with the stereotypical sex roles of many choreographers: pas de deux that always cast men as invincibly macho, manipulating helpless, fragile women.

"A lift is a fine idea," Morris explained. "But instead of the man always lifting the woman, why not have interchangeable female-male parts that are more dramatic and less predictable?"

Morris began choreographing at 13, thanks to the encouragement of his first dance instructor.

"I found a wonderful teacher named Verla Flowers who taught strict classical Spanish dancing and ballet," Morris recalled. "Miss Flowers always allowed me to choreograph a piece for our annual recital at the Seattle Playhouse."

One of those dances was "Barstow," which he developed at 15 and still performs.

Barely out of Franklin High School, where his late father was a guidance counselor, Morris began to perform professionally with the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble (the precursor of Radost) and toured the Northwest. At 17, he went to Spain to learn more about Spanish dancing.

"He seems to have come in with extra knowledge. He's one of those people who knows more than he should, considering his life experience," said dancer Penny Hutchinson, who has known Morris since high school and frequently performs with him (she likewise recently returned to Seattle after several years of dancing in New York).

Despite his success and undisputed talent, Morris is not earning enough to afford a manager.

"I can't do cocktail parties or meet boards of directors, and I'm no good at politicking," he confessed. Nevertheless, an impressive amount of work keeps pouring in: He now has choreographic commissions from the Batscheva Dance Company of Israel, the Netherlands Dance Theater and the Joyce Trisler Danscompany, among others.

A recipient this year of the

prestigious National Endowment for the Arts Choreographic Fellowship, Morris will be guest choreographer this summer at both the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C., and the Jacob's Pillow festival in Massachusetts. In the fall he will perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Given the dearth of gifted choreographers plaguing the dance world, Mark Morris is, as Dance-magazine said, "a bright star in an increasingly dim firmament" — and one who happily has chosen to set in Seattle.