

Dance: Mark Morris At Brooklyn Academy

By JENNIFER DUNNING

THERE are few if any choreographer-performers in New York who would dare to come out on the stage dressed in a loincloth for a 20-minute solo that draws upon the exotic vocabulary of Indian dance. But Mark Morris did, on Wednesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Lepercq Space, where he and the Mark Morris Dance Group are performing through Sunday as part of the Academy's Next Wave Festival.

And there wasn't a giggle as Mr. Morris moved through his new "O Rangasayee." Now being talked of as the most solidly promising heir to the mantle of the modern dance greats, Mr. Morris is revealed in his dances and performing as an unassuming artist who luxuriates in music and the physicality of movement.

Sometimes extraneous-seeming elements set off that flow of pure physicality, as is the case with "O Rangasayee." Set to and inspired by a vocal score by Sri Tyagaraja, sung on tape by Smt. M. S. Subbulakshmi, the solo reverently uses the poses, gestures and dynamics of Indian dance as a departure point. Mr. Morris's hands are painted red, in the traditional fashion, and his feet are outlined in red. The nodding of the head, the hunches and barrel-shaped slow pivots, and an attack that is, at times, deceptively diffident, are all familiar to anyone who has seen Bharata Natyam.

But the dance grows steadily more abandoned and less obviously formal. And as it builds, there are suggestions of pain expressed in our own vernacular. A livid body seems to hang suspended as if in crucifixion. A mouth gaping open and crooked limbs suggest unstylized affliction. The body rocking appallingly on the floor at the dance's end might be an aged fetus. As sternly staccato as the singer's voice that leads him on, the solo is also as hypnotic.

Everything is stated in the dance's opening pose, a hulking crouch almost unrecognizable as human, with the shaking of Mr. Morris's long curls, all that is visible of his head, to hint at Indian influence. But the dancing that follows never seems long-winded. It provides a chance to watch an extraordinarily gifted, serene performer in action. It also allows the observer almost to participate emotionally in the unfolding of a dance that seems, characteristically, to be Mr. Morris's gift to himself, an exploration that is at once private, bizarre, and utterly extroverted and familiar.

Mr. Morris takes a familiar form and makes something new of it again in his new "Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes." The "extraneous" element here is professional wrestling and its moves, plays and rituals. Intrigued by an analysis of the sport as spectacle written in the 1950's by Barthes, Mr. Morris and the composer Herschel Garfein have created what seems at first to be a chic post-modernist evocation of the wrestling ring.

Dressed in bright, stretchy bits of fighting gear, Mr. Morris's dancers stalk through headlocks, crashing flips, heavy lifts and stunningly powerful catches, moving to Mr. Garfein's atmospheric mix of ring sounds, muted electronic clatter and brooding synthesizer chords. Men heft men, women throw women, and women and men wrestle equally with each other. It is aggression caught in bright amber. But Mr. Morris burrows along to another level, breaking sequences into wittily disjointed sequences that have the telling truth of Muybridge's photoanalyses of movement.

We laugh at the showmanship of it all, presented on a platter. Then gradually the show grows harder-edged and wearily brutal. "Here's America," a ringmaster's voice intones, but so softly as to save that moment from sentimentality. The hands raised in victory become belligerent-looking and lonely. The wrestlers wrestle with themselves, immobilized, on their backs. One figure remains at the end, caught in a pool of dim light, pounding the floor slowly, again and again — signaling, in the growing dark, enraged, victorious defeat.

In "Gloria," which completes the program, Mr. Morris revels in Vivaldi's "Gloria in D." He plays with patterns like stage-crossing lines of bodies and flung juxtapositions of groups with each other and with individuals. The fallen are helped to rise, and the risen fall but soar in ground-skimming jumps. The lighting of Phil Sandström, here and throughout the program, contributes much to the dance. And Mr. Morris's very fine dancers are themselves worth a trip to the Brooklyn Academy. They are Rob Besserer, Scott Cunningham, Ruth Davidson, Tina Fehlandt, Penny Hutchinson, David Landis, Donald Mouton, Guillermo Resto, Keith Sabado, Jennifer Thienes and Teri Weksler.