

Mark Morris, A New Force In Dance World, Hurtles on Stage

By JENNIFER DUNNING

THERE is a rehearsal going on at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Lepercq Space. Ten dancers rock and crawl like delicate beasts, tenderly exalted by the Vivaldi "Gloria," to which they move. Minuscule beneath the high ceiling, the dancers ebb to the sides, leaving a void filled with light. There is a crash as the choreographer hurtles onto the stage for a solo, his long, curly hair flying and one hand reaching to tug an earring. A startled member of the stage crew jumps. Affectionate laughter bubbles from the wings. Mark Morris has returned.

"Mark Morris: The Next of the Major Moderns?" a dance magazine trumpeted recently on its cover. Mr. Morris, a 28-year-old choreographer now based in his hometown of Seattle, first engaged New York audiences in 1980, when he showed his dances in one of the city's downtown studio spaces. This weekend, he and his dancers are performing in the Brooklyn Academy's prestigious Next Wave Festival — recognition of the fact that Mr. Morris is now considered one of the most gifted choreographers of his era.

His dances are musical, intelligent, lushly physical and informed by an endearing mixture of flamboyance and humanity. They also tend to defy categorization. This weekend, for example, audiences will see his "Gloria," a richly textured pure-dance piece; "O Rangasayee," a 20-minute workout of a new solo for himself set to music by Sri Tyagaraja, and his new "Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes," a group work set to synthe-

Mark Morris, a New Force in Dance



Mark Morris

Lois Greenfield

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sizer music composed by Herschel Garfein.

The first two dances were inspired, typically, by music. Mr. Morris had been carrying the Vivaldi score around in his head since his high school days, when he sang in a choir, studied ballet and flamenco and immersed himself in Balkan folk dancing, which he performed from the age of 14. At 20, he left Seattle for New York, where he found work with the companies of such choreographers as Elliot Feld, Twyla Tharp, Lar Lubovitch and Hannah Kahn.

Three Years of Listening

Touring in India with Laura Dean, Mr. Morris discovered Miss Tyagaraja's music. "I listened for three years before I decided I could tackle it," he said. "It's a complicated piece of music, but I wanted a hard solo that people couldn't possibly interpret as a joke." He said he wanted the dance to be a reference to Indian culture rather than a quotation.

And "Wrestling," as Mr. Morris calls it, came about when Mr. Garfein recommended that he read an essay by Roland Barthes on professional wrestling. "It's a great essay," Mr. Morris said. "Barthe stratifies wrestling, breaking it down to spectacle, theater, a suspension of disbelief."

Rehearsing the piece, the performers have progressed from giggling collapse to near aggression in a dance

that developed from exercises in wrestling moves. Mr. Morris is as interested in exploring gender identification as he is in music, and in "Wrestling" he continues that understated exploration. "But it's not an issue," he said.

'I Need a Manager'

Mr. Morris returned to Seattle last year so that he could work more spontaneously and informally. How does he feel about being the possible crown prince of modern dance? "I need a manager in a raccoon coat," he says ruefully. Mr. Morris does everything from his own bookings to costume designing. The costumes for "Wrestling" came from a New York sports store that he visited with his dancers. "They kept whining and thrusting stuff at me," he said. "I felt like a divorced mother taking her 10 children Christmas shopping."

He is suddenly, diffidently, a little solemn. "I've been making up dances," he said, "but now, it seems, I'm a choreographer. My job is choreography, with a capital 'K.' It's a pretty paltry job. Not like the Peace Corps. Now I'm allowed to do what I want to do. And I really love doing this. But I want things to be better. I want people to feel better."