

ARTS & FILMS

Morris unleashes endearing fantasies

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP - At the Boston Shakespeare Company theater, last night. Program repeats tonight. Presented by Dance Umbrella.

By Christine Temin
Globe Staff

A grown man who acts out the sappy lyrics of Joyce Kilmer's immortal poem "Trees", clad only in his underpants, with his hands holding crumpled brown paper bags which act as quivering leaves, has got to be a fairly eccentric character. Mark Morris' eccentricity was in full force last night, as the much-praised, 28-year-old choreographer made his Boston debut.

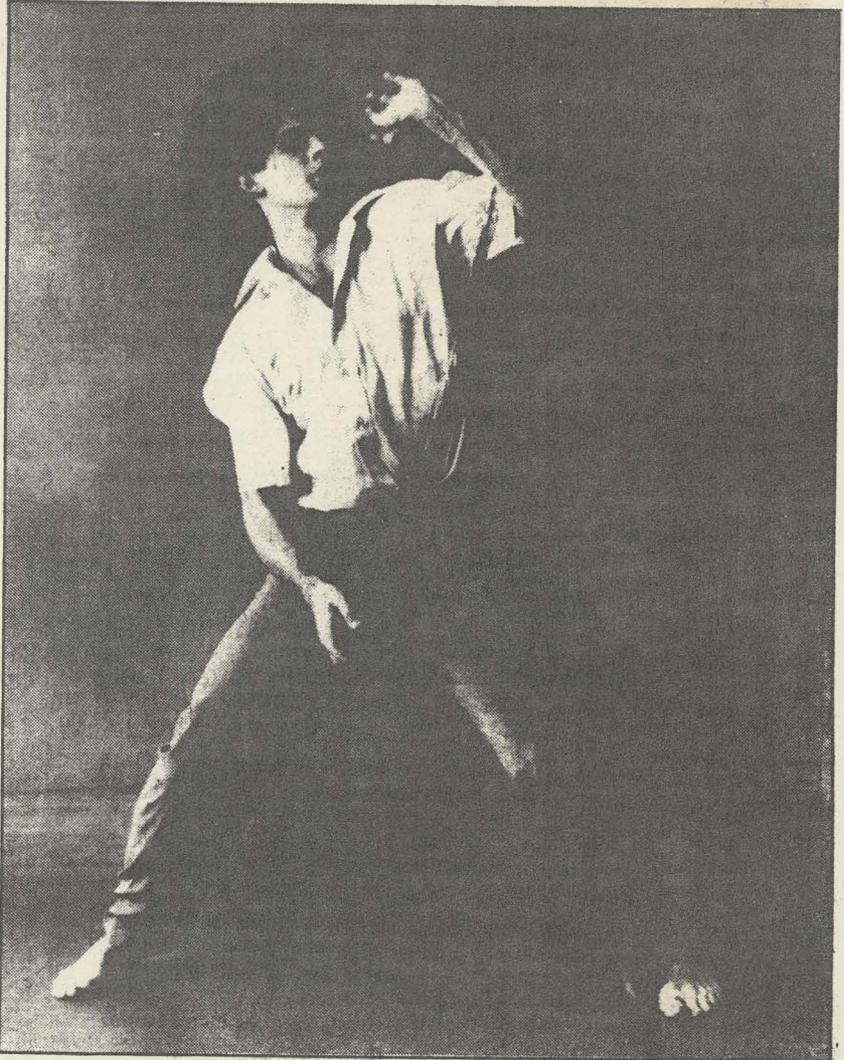
DANCE REVIEW

The "Trees" dance, wherein Morris faces away from the audience and lets the little upward lurches of his body suggest the brave struggle of the tree lifting its arms toward God, is part of a longish solo called "The Vacant Chair." The Edward Gorey-esque title alone tells something of Morris' mock solemn style, a style which is contemporary - only the decade which produced Boy George could turn out a choreographer like this - but also deliciously rococco in its excesses and surprises.

Take the surprise of the "set" for "The Vacant Chair" - a music stand placed downstage, bearing simple drawings of a chair, a tree, and a bed. Morris changes the set by changing the drawings: Suddenly the grander forms of scenery seem, well, overdone.

His ingenuity is again evident in a group piece called "Prelude and Prelude," which features six dancers and six fans. When the dancers have finished snapping the fans open and shut, they clench them in their teeth in order to get on with the choreography: Now doesn't that make sense?

Morris dances with the seriousness of purpose of a solemn 5-year-old in a kindergarten play. In "Love, You Have Won," a duet to a Vivaldi Cantata, the choreographer and Guillermo Resto wear the knee breeches and ruffly white shirts of foppish 18th century



Mark Morris in "Dad's Charts."

PHOTO BY LOIS GREENFIELD

dandies, and affect mannerisms to match. Every gesture is either operatically overblown or deliberately downplayed. Either the two men are swooning, with the backs of their hands lifted to their brows in the classic fainting pose, or they are daintily flicking a leg behind themselves, in a barely discernible wisp of a gesture. If I had to give a caption to their fists pounding in doll-sized anger, it would be something like, "Unhand me, you brute!"

There are seven dancers in Morris' company, but he's the one we want to watch. He's the goofiest and least inhibited of the lot, as he tears into his heavy, clunky,

ragged choreography. Both he and his dancers - an intentionally mismatched bunch who look like ordinary folks yanked in off the street - perform with a child's rash, unheeding enthusiasm. When they leap, their torsos wobble or hunch forward instead of staying poised above their legs - this makes their effort apparent, and makes them seem eager and vulnerable.

The most immediately endearing aspect of Morris' work is not the diamond-in-the-rough movement, as much as the feeling that he is acting out very precious private fantasies and inviting us to join in.