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JOHN HOLMBERG/P-I PHOTO

After eight years in New York, choreographer/dancer Mark Morris has returned home to Seattle. He says he likes the lack of hassle here, although he distrusts it a little, and he likes the pieces he has done in this city.

Seattle's red-hot choreographer has dance world abuzz

By R.M. Campbell

P-I Dance Critic

The day was bright and sunny and the door to the Wallingford cottage ajar. The only thing disturbing the spring day was the loud music coming from inside.

Knock, knock. No answer. Knock, knock. Again, no answer. Stepping inside, I tried a hesitant hello.

My eye was squarely greeted with a picture of a handsome and kindly, bearded and long-haired Jesus in profile — the kind of sweet portrait familiar to children 20 years ago, an image shaggy flower children in the late 1960s emulated unconsciously.

There were other banal religious images about — ceramic Virgin Marys, for instance, grouped on top of a bookcase, lined with books such as the collected letters of Virginia Woolf and the many novels of Iris Murdoch. Miscellaneous furniture was tossed here and there. Records, tapes and a sound system occupied one wall. The only thing I knew for sure was that no decorator had ever stepped inside this living room.

I called out an even more hesitant hello.

"Hi!" Mark Morris bounced into the room, pants rolled up midcalf; feet, with socks, in sandals; two thin, silver rings, a smaller and larger, in the left ear; a friendly smile on his open face. The curly hair, long and dark, once so much a part of the Morris image, is gone.

After coffee was served and Morris rolled himself a cigarette, the obvious question to the man most people say is one of the most important young choreographers of the day was, "How does it feel to be back?"

Not only is the dancer/

choreographer in town for a series of performances of his ensemble, the Mark Morris Dance Group, tomorrow night through Sunday night at 8 at Washington Hall Performance Gallery — Morris lives here.

After eight years in New York, the hometown boy (John Muir Elementary School and Franklin High School) returned home last year to live. He likes water close at hand; he likes the lack of hassle, although he distrusts it a little; he likes the pieces he did while visiting Seattle. Reportedly, his cat is happier here.

"I don't like the way you have to live there (in New York)," he said.

Morris is red-hot at moment. He is the choreographer people who keep in touch with the avant-garde want to see. That venerable arbiter of taste, The New York Times, called him "one of the most gifted choreographers of his era."

The appearance of his company performing his choreography at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's much-acclaimed Next Wave Festival last fall was an occasion for dance critics with celebrated bylines in some of America's most prestigious journals to herald Morris' talent and future.

Arlene Croce of The New Yorker called him a "symbol of his times." Jennifer Dunning in the New York Times called him "the most promising heir to the mantle of the modern dance greats."

"Morris, at 28, is on just about every dance fan's short list of contemporary choreographers destined for history books," wrote New York magazine dance critic Tobi Tobias in Dancemagazine.

From Spanish dance taught by Verla Flowers — his first teacher

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Mark Morris is conquering the dance world

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— and Perry Brunson of First Chamber Dance in Seattle, Morris studied with Marjorie Mussman, Hannah Kahn and Jose Greco.

Morris has been around the block in the modern dance world. He danced with the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble in Seattle (1973-76), as well as Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn, Twyla Tharp and Laura Dean. With some companies, like Twyla Tharp, Morris' stay was brief. His stays with others, like Lubovitch, Dean and Kahn, were longer; about 18 months was Morris' outer limit. For the past couple of years, he has limited his dancing to his own company.

Ever since Flowers gave Morris opportunities to do little dances in her dance recitals, Morris hasn't really stopped dancing or doing choreography.

He has set works for such local companies as Spokane Ballet, the Seattle-based Kinetics and Pacific Northwest Ballet, the latter during its now-defunct Summer Invention Series.

Seattle Opera has commissioned Morris to choreograph Salome's "Dance of the Seven Veils" for its 1986 production of Richard Strauss' "Salome." There are also the Boston Ballet, the Joffrey, Batsheva Dance Company in Israel.

Most of his work is done by his own company, however, which dates on his resume to 1972 — with the first dance listed as "Barstow," for six dancers. He began this decade in New York, showing his work at Dance Theater Workshop and Merce Cunningham Studio.

He calls himself a romantic and a moralist.

"I know how I want a dance to look, its spirit," he said. "Some things are right and wrong."

The all-Morris program will consist of "Songs That Tell a Story," "Vestige," "The Vacant Chair," "Marble Halls" and "Lovers." There are 13 dancers in the company, including the choreographer.