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Morris dancers triumph with energy & wit

By R.M. Campbell
P-I Dance Critic

The old adage that you can't go home again doesn't seem to apply to Mark Morris. The Seattle-born choreographer and dancer and his company, the Mark Morris Dance Group, opened the first of five performances last night at Washington Hall Performance Gallery.

The evening was a triumph of energy and confidence, irreverence and pungent wit, virtuosity and bravado. And there is more — a wide-ranging imagination at once fertile and free.

Morris left Seattle in the mid-1970s for New York where he danced and choreographed, choreographed and danced. It was not long until he was hailed as a hero of the new and "the most solidly promising heir to the mantle of the modern dance greats."

That taken care of, he returned to his native city last year.

DANCE REVIEW

The Mark Morris Dance Group last night at Washington Hall Performance Gallery in an all-Morris evening: "Songs That Tell a Story," "Vestige," "Lovey," "The Vacant Chair" and "Marble Halls." Members of the company include Morris, Donald Mouton, Guillermo Resto, Ruth Davidson, Tina Fehlandt, Penny Hutchinson, David Landis, Shannon Loch, Lodi McClellan, Long Nguyen, Keith Sabado, Jennifer Thienes and Erin Matthiessen. Lighting design by Jeff Bickford. Because all the previously scheduled performances are sold-out, a Monday night performance at 8 has been added.

He was 27.

The move back to this outpost of culture was considered a daring move in some circles. It is an indication of Morris' independence.

Five pieces were presented at Washington Hall. All are pretty new. The oldest, "Songs That Tell a Story," was first performed by the Kinetics Company three years ago; the newest, "Lovey," was premiered last night. Two are from last year: "Vestige" was commissioned by Spokane Ballet

and the University of Washington, where Morris has taught; "Vacant Chair," a solo for Morris, was premiered last year in London. "Marble Halls," commissioned by the Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv, was premiered in January.

Morris is a generous soul. He loves a show. He can entertain, he can satirize, he can be serious. He moves his dancers — 13 last night, including himself — in the most emphatic ways. His rhythms are relentless, his definition of time and space hard-edged. He can smother you in blackness or dazzle you with color. He loves the outrageous but doesn't indulge himself.

He obviously loves music, all kinds of music. Last night, he set dances to such diverse pieces as the Shostakovitch Cello Sonata and Bach Double Harpsichord Concerto in C Minor (BWV 1060), as well as the music of the Louvin Brothers and Violent Femmes. Morris' solo is done to Victorian parlor songs.

There is much to like in Morris' work and his company of

wonderful dancers. He seems to be without cant, without pretension. He seems open and natural. He is unpredictable. "Songs that Tell a Story" does not lead one, stylistically, thematically or emotionally, to "Vestige." He can surprise within a single movement of a work, within a single phrase.