

A refreshing style of modern dance

By Allan Ulrich
Examiner dance critic

SO YOU say you're weary of cookie-cutter choreography? So you claim you've had it up to here with Mercism, Grammitis and Tharperie? So you insist you want something really different to cure the old dance monotony blues?

Relief is at hand. Take two hours of Mark Morris, and try, just try, to get a good night's sleep.

Morris is the Seattle-born and resident choreographer who has in the past year become the critical darling of the Eastern dance press. Why fight the tidal wave of adulation? Morris and six members of his current company are making the most extraordinary Bay Area debut of the season at the New Performance Gallery through tomorrow evening, as the final entry in this season's "American Inroads" series. Reservations are advisable. There's enough nourishment in Morris' inspired dementia to feed the hunger for weeks.

Morris is a boyish 28, has toiled briefly in the companies of Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean and Eliot Feld, yet his choreography doesn't resemble theirs in the slightest. Till recently, he sported long, curly locks that cast him in the image of ambisexual, Pre-Raphaelite angel, the headliner on some discarded religious painting. His

dances are marked everywhere by sophisticated musicality, bizarre wit and flagrant theatricality. If all holds, he is destined to be a major force on the post-modern dance scene.

You want an American original? Try "The Vacant Chair," the solo plunked right in the middle of the second half of the concert. A lectern holds a spotlight photo of a chair. The music is George F. Root's wheezingly infamous hymn. And there stands Morris, clad only in white Jockey shorts and a paper bag on his head, hurling himself into military stamps and aggressive salutes as the home-and-hearth platitudes drone on.

Joyce Kilmer's yucky "Trees" bles from the speaker, and a withered specimen of flora appears on the lectern. Morris tears the paper bag from his head, turns his back and crunches up his torso and extends his limbs, while trailing bits of paper from his fingertips. Then, a drawing of a bed, and Carrie Jacobs Bond's moldering "When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day," which unleashes a session at a mock barre and a wildly careening dance of joy. The best way to skewer a cliché is to act it out.

Morris' vocabulary is not wide, but his muscular body gathers such velocity and possesses such conviction in its own powers of persuasion that his movement acquires an elfin, almost spiritual grace. "Love, You Have Won," a brilliant duet for Morris and



The Mark Morris Dance Company is making a dazzling local debut at the New Performance Gallery

the shaggy haired Guillermo Resto, interprets Vivaldi's cantata, "Amor, hai vinto," note for note. In 17th century blouses and britches, the pair simul-

taneously send up and exalt the music's traditional sentiments.

Every trill and mordent of the score is met by a twitch of the wrist, a

twiddle of the finger, a shake of the fist. And the dancing, mostly mirror-image in form, is fabulously articulate and precise, as the two meet the floor,

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leap through decorous jetes, strut and preen through complicated whiplash swivels of the knee. Is love merely a matter of narcissism, or what?

Morris does not appear in the four group pieces, yet his signature is omnipresent. The disturbing "Prelude and Prelude" proposes a geometrical solution to Henry Cowell's Prelude for Violin and Harpsichord, as the company, in varying states of nudity, dallies with Japanese fans as it spreads out in lateral lines in abruptly phrased segments.

The other works deal — profoundly — with popular music. In "Lovey," five songs by the Violent Femmes plunge the company into a punk nightmare, as Resto, David Landis, Tina Fehlandt and Lodi McLellan lend a knowingly atavistic touch to the cataclysmic lyrics, dancing on the edge, destroying four rubber dolls in the process. The Louvin Brothers' Western numbers welcome Armageddon with Christian righteousness, and laughter turns to horror as the company's rustic cavortings assume a menacing fatalism. Lastly, and charmingly, "Celestial Greetings" uses Thai popular songs for a Virginia reel excursion trading in cultural parallels in the manner of Balanchine's "Square Dance." Perhaps it's too long, but I wouldn't have missed a moment.