

DANCE

Mark Morris brings his rising star to shine on MoMing's dance stage

By Robert Greskovic

Mark Morris, at 29 a darling of the contemporary dance scene, describes his nearly sold-out Chicago debut at the MoMing Dance and Arts Center [Thursday through next Sunday] in simple, straightforward terms: "It's a 12-person show."

To the greater dance world, Morris has been visible for only about five years, appearing to growing critical acclaim with variously sized groups of dancers on programs of his own choreography. But to Morris himself, his dance career began when he was 9, once he started studying Spanish dance with Verla Flowers in his native Seattle. From there it was a steady stream of learning, performing and making up dances as he continued to study folk, modern and ballet idioms.

Though Morris looks upon his dancing years with pride and fondness, he is aware that the past few have been especially significant.

"Now I'm recognized as a choreographer," Morris says. "Now I'm part of a line of choreographers because I'm mentioned with people that I never saw and that I worship—which is interesting, because I never decided to become a fabulous choreographer and have a company and tour the world and do pieces for other ballet companies."

Morris views the recent interest in his work with unguarded, unaffected amazement. "I mean, at one time, I thought I wanted to dance with them," he says as he prepares to create ballets for the Joffrey and Boston ballets, to name but two of several current commissions.

Morris's performing career includes work in the companies of Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn, Laura Dean and Eliot Feld, as well as experience with the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble.

For his "first show" in 1980 with the Mark Morris Dance Group, Morris says he did a kind of retrospective. "I asked dancers that I worked with from every company I'd been in and people from class who almost never performed." He has maintained something of that experience ever since, stressing that his organization is a group.

"It's looser than a company," he says. "It started out as a group of friends whom I liked working with. If you couldn't rehearse because of some conflict, you weren't in the show, but it didn't mean you couldn't dance with me."

Morris voices strong admiration and praise for his dancers. Though he likes touring less as a director than he did as a dancer, he says, "I want my dancers to be seen." He



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groans when asked what he looks for in dancers, but then tries to answer. He likes his dancers to be "adult," he wants "a great range of dynamics." Generally, Morris says, he likes a range of dancer types, but he admits, "I like big people; we call ourselves the big butt dance company, because if you do it enough you get a big butt." He says his dancers "have to be very strong—my dancers are down in their floor stuff, they have to know the bottom of things."

So far Morris has created numerous group pieces as well as solos. The solo works are mostly for himself.

For his Chicago repertory, Morris has included group works and a solo. "I like the Bach a lot," referring to "Marble Halls," a dance for 10 to J.S. Bach's "Concerto for Two Harpsichords in C Minor" to be performed at MoMing.

"Lovey," a dance for eight or four dancers [depending on the number of dancers touring] is set to songs by the Violent Femmes. Morris says he created this dance "in a way that I don't always make up my dances. I tricked myself. It's very open. It can be very different; it's not improvised at all, but there are choices." He says he started thinking of this dance with a Poulenc clarinet sonata in mind, then changed to the male pop group just before rehearsals began.

The title of "Canonic 3/4

Studies," which Morris describes as set to basic ballet class music, suggests the choreographer's musical integrity: "They're not all waltzes, that's why its called '3/4'."

For most of his dances, Morris creates the costumes, as well, because, he explains, "There's no budget." His costumes, however, are often influenced by his choreographic instincts.

Morris's dances can involve wickedly funny or bizarre ingredients, such as the baby doll props he uses in "Lovey," but he doesn't see himself as a jokester. He hopes, no matter what, that his audiences will watch his work "without deciding on what it's going to be about first—you see the first image, and it's funny, or it's ugly, or something is wrong with it that you haven't seen in a dance concert before, maybe. But you get over it and you watch it. Maybe there's something else to see!"

For example, referring to his own beginnings as a dancer with companies in New York City when he was 19, Morris says, "You can stick your legs all over the place and look cute in tights, but the problem is that you don't know one thing."

And, thinking of his own work with the dancers he greatly admires, most of whom are over 30, he concludes: "It's nice if you can pull that off."