

Entertainment SpotLight

Mark Morris: Something Happens

By Jennifer Kapuscik

Mark Morris is something of a dance sensation. In the last couple of years this Seattle native has been hailed as "The next of the major moderns;" the first worthy successor of Paul Taylor. Morris at 28 is considered "one of the most gifted choreographers of his era;" but he is not overly concerned with the assumption of the modern dance mantle. Mark Morris likes to dance, to share his creations with his friends.

This weekend he brings his company and his dances — "Musical, intelligent, lushly physical and informed by an endearing mixture of flamboyance and humanity" — to Chicago for four nights.

The following is part of Morris' discussion with *GayLife* of his work and his message.

GayLife: I've been really interested to read your press packet, and all the glowing things that people have been saying about you in the last few years. It sounds like you've been a real sensation.

Mark Morris: Yeah.

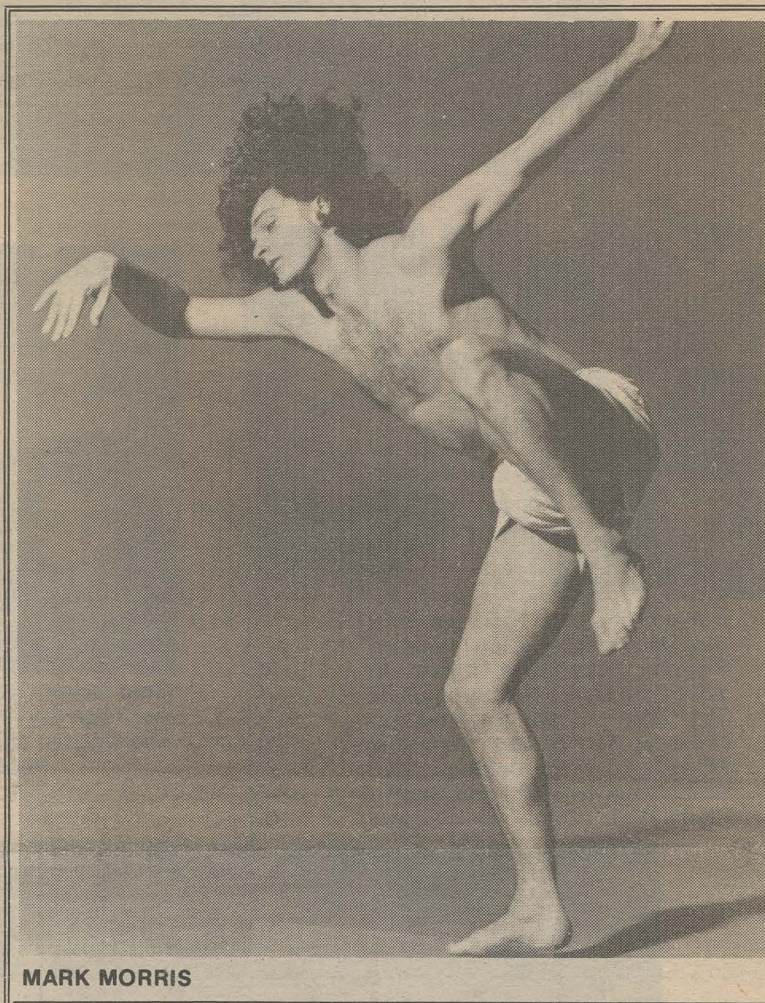
G: Has it felt to you like overnight, all of a sudden people know who you are?

MM: Well, pretty fast; pretty fast, not overnight. I mean, the dance world is a small one and I've been known. People knew who I was as a dancer. It's just now my mother's friends can say they saw something in *Vogue* or something.

G: You said your mother's friends, do people in your home town say "gosh, well I knew you were a dancer...?"

MM: Well I live in Seattle and I grew up in Seattle. Yeah, they know who I am.

G: I was going through the interviews and looking at the little quips and comments. Some writers



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call your dancing "Wierd," or they try to come up with words that will explain something that isn't really easily explained. How do you describe the kind of dancing that you do?

MM: Oh, God, well let's see...I don't. As tired as that response is...they're dances. It involves watching them. I would say that I've been accused of being "retro"

to a degree because I like romance and I like adventure and I like, you know, actual humans dancing. And I like music; I like how it feels to dance. That's always there, and that looks old fashioned to a lot of people. So that's one thing, and I don't deny it; I think it's great. Mostly I'm influenced by everything that I've done and seen and certainly by the dancers I

work with, who are excellent. I guess I have a pretty wide range. That's why I can't be pigeon holed as easily as some other people; because I don't have a style.

G: What you do is personal and unique but it's not a style that can be defined.

MM: Well I don't (define it), but people who watch my dances will see actions that I prefer so maybe that's a style. They'll see some things recur, some similarities; but that's just a preference. I try to make things as organic as possible and to a certain degree they have a beginning, middle and end, thank God. Something happens and it should be the exact thing that's supposed to happen.

G: Everybody always picks up on the word androgyn and uses it everywhere they can. How do you feel about being called androgynous, or your dances being called androgynous?

MM: Well I think that has to do with having had long hair, and the way that I treat the sexes in my dances. And it has to do with the fact that I'm a larger person and I can dance tiny. It's a range of actions that's usually not covered. And I encourage my dancers to be able to do anything. "Androgynous" doesn't really matter to me. I'm a man and I work with men and women, and we dance differently and were supposed to. I like that and I like also to allow them to have the choice of dancing other ways. Or I trick them into doing things that oppose their natural tendencies or abilities. That way it becomes what people call androgynous. I'm not seeking my other half.

G: That's a good point.

MM: I didn't choose anything, but that's what I do. I think just being in the public eye to a certain

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degree it's my responsibility to be gay. I always have been. With the publicity I get I think it's important that I state that. It's not that I give any diatribes in my work it's just a fact.

G: You're not putting out a political message through your dance as much as you are by being who you are?

MM: Right, but my point of view's built into my work.

G: You're also a feminist. Is that a different approach?

MM: I don't think you can be gay without being a feminist, at least not consciously. You can't be a conscious homo without being a feminist.

G: Right. Do you feel that the way that you choreograph is different because of your gayness or your feminism? As opposed to say someone who's coming at it from a really masculinist point of view? The way you deal with your dancers, the way you deal with your choreography, is that different?

MM: I've worked with a lot of different companies and the directors of those companies deal with people in different ways. And as director of my group I can do things the way I want. And I want to work with people I like and make up dances that present them in a way I think is good. I think maybe utopian to a certain degree. But they're just dances. There's no coming out process in it, it's just that I do it the way I think about it. It's not separate from my life.

G: I want to talk a little bit about music. People talk about you as a very musical choreographer. Do you see yourself as a musician?

MM: Well as a dancer I'm a musician. As a choreographer I'm a musician. I could poke out something on the piano if I had to and I read music and I follow scores. It's more of a conducting thing, more orchestration than it is musicianship in an instrumental sense. I deal with choreography from a musical point of view. Even if my work doesn't relate directly to the score that I'm using, or if I'm not using one, it's still structured musically, because I think that way makes sense.

G: And you use a whole range of musical styles. How did you get interested in Indian music?

MM: I was listening for a long time and then I toured in Asia with Laura Dean's company. What happened was that there was a parting of the clouds that enabled me to hear that music better and break the code; as much as I could as a westerner.

G: When you're approaching eastern music do you change your dance vocabulary? Do you try to pick up things from the native vocabulary or does that come out of the music?

MM: Well, if you do a dance to Indian music it looks Indian. I use a

different vocabulary for every piece. I refer to the culture. I'm not trying to make an Indian dance, but it refers to it. Like the Vivaldi piece we'll be doing in Chicago, it's not a baroque dance, but it's structured that way and it refers to it. It looks like it.

G: Is there a plot to your dances, do you look at them literarily at all? Or do you find that what comes through is more an emotional response to the music, as opposed to a story being told?

MM: I don't know what the difference is there. I rarely do narrative, but I do tell little stories in the dance. A story in the sense that it need not be literal to make sense. So my dances make sense, and I feel that they're complete in themselves.

G: The press spends a lot of time just describing your solo work? Do you feel somehow that these are more you than the group dances? Do you feel comfortable with the emphasis?

MM: Well the thing is that when I'm doing a solo I can't do it wrong. Cause I made it up and I'm dancing it myself. If I fall over it's okay. If one of my dancers falls over in a piece I'd scream at them. What I've been trying to do lately is move the two closer together. In my solos I've been much more private, much more overtly emotional.

G: How do you feel about the way humor interacts with dance. Are you a humorist?

MM: I guess. I have a sense of humor. I nearly never set out to make a piece that is comedic. It's just that people laugh at surprises. I think that people laugh when they see something a different way or something makes them uncomfortable. There are some surprises, and that's the humor part of it. All the dances are done straight and some of them are funny. I can never really tell when I'm doing a piece that people will laugh at.

G: You'll be teaching some technique classes in Chicago. How do you see yourself as a teacher? Are you a teacher/choreographer or a choreographer/teacher or are those two roles separate?

MM: Well I try to teach people how to stand up and how to dance better and how to increase their range as dancers. I mean I also get momentum from teaching because I'm making it up and I like to have to make things up on the spot. So I follow a very straight balletic structure in class but I make it up as I go along. It's all designed to make people dance better. It's not about me. It's about them.

Mark Morris will be appearing with his 11 member dance group at MoMing from Thursday October 31 through Sunday November 3. Mark will be teaching technique classes during his five day residency as well. For information about tickets call 472-9894, and to register for classes call 472-7662. MoMing is located at 1034 West Barry in Chicago.