

# Mark Morris, Masterfully

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Mark Morris, the 28-year-old choreographic prodigy from Seattle, once told an interviewer, "I'd like—this may sound pretentious—to become a master."

Wouldn't everyone? The difference is that the gifted, outlandishly original Morris may actually make it. He founded the Mark Morris Dance Group, seen in its Washington debut in the Dance America series at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater Saturday night, in 1980. Since then, he's swept like a whirlwind through the dance world, leaving gasps of surprise, amusement and awe in his wake. Last December his troupe was presented in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, and earlier this year Morris—along with Teri Weksler, one of his dancers—was handed one of New

York's prestigious "Bessie" Awards. The Pacific Northwest Ballet, in his hometown, commissioned a work several years ago. Now the East Coast companies are signing him up, including the Boston Ballet and the Joffrey. In short, he's a hot number, the hottest around.

The fuss is well founded. To begin with, the range of his work is remarkable. Fueled partly by a promiscuous imagination, and partly by a motley performing background in ballet, ethnic dance and modern, he takes choreographic flings in wildly disparate directions. One of his pieces is about the death of Socrates, another about wrestling, another about classical Indian dance. There's nothing eclectic-looking about Morris' work, however. He assimilates whole batches of traditions and styles and converts (or subverts) them into something startlingly novel.

Among the unifying traits of his choreog-

raphy is a kind of sly irony. One of the dictionary meanings of the word is "an attitude of detached awareness of incongruity." It's these qualities—detachment, awareness, incongruity—that leap out at you, along with an impudent wit and boisterous physicality, from a piece like "Canonic 3/4 Studies," which opened the Terrace Theater program. Nine dancers, in black-and-white practice clothes and bare feet, seem to be going through a course of rule-book balletics. Except that everything is goofily askew. Dancers suspended on a raised foot stumble clumsily to the floor. A poker-faced man lifting two women repeatedly in quick succession scrambles up their intended directions. Yet the dancing clings almost adoringly to the music—a suite of piano exercises mostly in waltz time. Morris' musicality is so unerringly instinctive it survives even parody.

Another ensemble piece at the end of the program, "Marble Halls," set to Bach's Concerto in C Minor for Two Harpsichords (also known in a violin and oboe version), seemed at first to be pointing toward "straight" neo-

classical abstraction. And from a structural standpoint, that's pretty nearly what you get. But you also see 10 dancers, in white undershirts and ridiculous orange drawers, crawling on all fours or twisting and churning in distinctly unclassical ways. Outwardly, the work resembles "Esplanade," a Bach piece by Paul Taylor, to whom Morris has often been compared. Broad range, musicality, sinewy movement, underhanded humor and logically illogical form are attributes they share.

To these Morris sometimes adds a foxy outrageousness. In "Lovey," at once the most complex, fascinating and bizarre of the evening's pieces, dancers in various stages of undress play kinky erotic games with one another and with pink rubber dolls. The music is raw country-punk ballads by the Violent Femmes. The mood is almost gothic—one song, detailing incest and infanticide—is rendered as a graphic playlet. Yet the formal rigor and ironic detachment of the work keep it as far from vulgarity on the one side as from trendy superficiality on the other.

Another Morris characteristic is a deliberate, brute ungainliness—one thinks of the hippos doing pirouettes in "Fantasia," minus the Disney cuteness. This quality was crucial to the program's other two dances—"The Vacant Chair," a Morris solo spoofing cheery sentimentality (he mimics a gnarled oak in one part set to Joyce Kilmer's "Trees"), and a satirical rococo duet to Vivaldi, "Love, You Have Won," for Morris and Guillermo Resto. In both pieces, exaggerated decorum alternates with oafish disarray.

Morris himself is a mesmerizing performer, and like the other splendid dancers of the group he moves with an odd sort of pulsing resilience—like a sponge always popping back into fullness after a squeeze. As for his work, as much as anything else it's the mystery and unpredictability that offer such great promise. Morris' choreography contains the seeds of its own extension into the unknown. For those of us who've been wondering what lies beyond postmodernism, Morris suggests hope for a next step.