

Morris' Dance Troupe is Surprising and Unusual

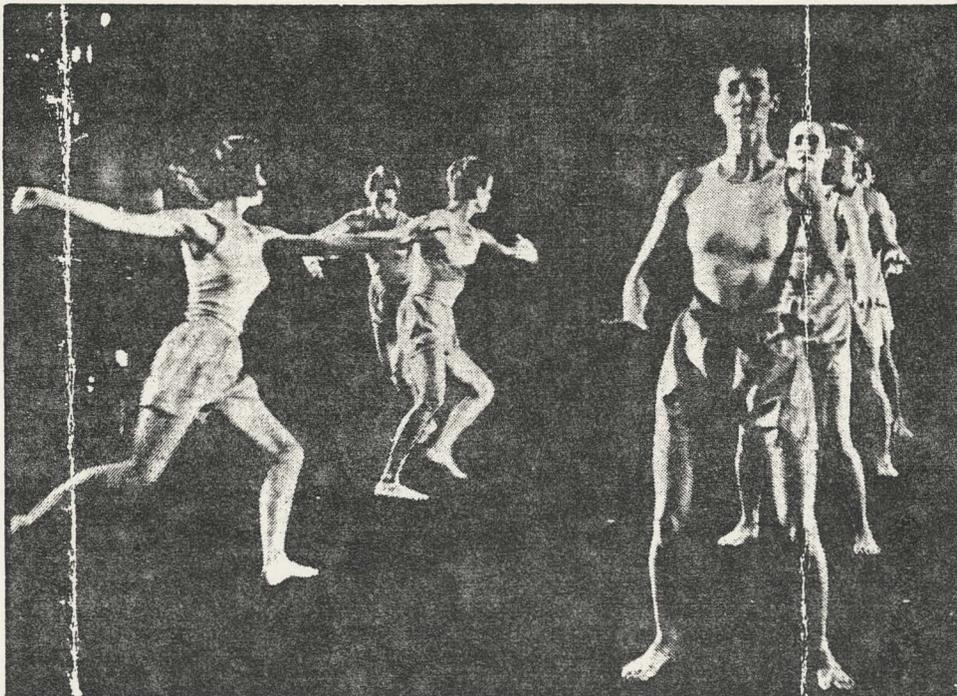
BY DORIS DIETHER

Mark Morris, now at the Bessie Schoenberg Theater for a three-week engagement, is billed as a Seattle-based choreographer, but he is certainly known to New York audiences from his appearances with New York companies, ranging from Eliot Feld's modern ballet group to performances in Laura Dean's minimalistic modern dance pieces. For these two programs here, he has enlisted some exceptional New York dancers—Guillermo Resto, Keith Sabado and Teri Weksler, for example—to augment his West Coast contingent of Tina Fehlandt, Penny Hutchinson and Lodi McClellon.

All of the works on the two programs are choreographed by Morris, and he also dances in some of them. As a performer, Morris is rather like a dance version of Liberace, an eccentric extrovert who carries his gestures and steps almost to the point of burlesque. This is not to say that he isn't a good dancer. You don't get into companies like Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch or Kathryn Posin unless you know your stuff. It's just that, as a performer, he always stuck out in the crowd.

The two programs give us a chance to see Morris, the choreographer, in various moods. Program A was billed as chamber works and Program B as group pieces, but, in fact, both programs contain works from each category. Although not all the works presented were equally exciting, there were no real duds. The finale numbers on each program, both group works, were especially interesting.

Program A concluded with "Marble Halls," set to Bach's Concerto in C Minor for Two Harpsichords. Throughout the first portion of the work, Morris divided the dancers into three groups. The dancers stayed in their assigned third of the stage,



The Mark Morris Dance Group in "Marble Halls," at the Bessie Schoenberg Theater. (Brazil Photo)

three on each side and a center line of four separating the side groups. The side groups sometimes mirrored each other's actions, while the center group created its own patterns. For the second movement, Morris shifted six dancers to the rear, to dance either in unison, or in groups of three, or alternating patterns. Center stage was occupied by three men and Tina Fehlandt, the men sometimes moving like huge caterpillars or other insects across the stage. The final movement was a madcap one, the dancers dashing back and forth across the stage. It was similar in a way to the break-

neck sequence in Paul Taylor's "Esplanade."

"Vestige," the group work which closed Program B, was more free-wheeling, to Shostakovich's Sonata for Cello and Piano in D. The dancers were on and off the stage in solos, duets, groups, and sometimes linked together by their hands like a chain which came and went. But, unlike so many of these dances, where the comings and goings seem random and unfocused, here all the movements were part of an overall pattern. Even though you may not have deciphered the pattern, you knew instantly

when the dancers would leave and others come on, although where was the question. The slower middle movement ended with each member of the group in turn freezing into position.

In contrast to "Marble Halls" and "Vestige," both of which used natural, free movements, "Frisson" took its cue from Stravinsky's more angular "Symphonies of Wind Instruments" for a dance with rigid movements and structural design. Tina Fehlandt, David Landis, Donald Moulton, Jennifer Thienes, and especially Teri Weksler, became like parts of a machine. They moved from place to place on their toes, legs and arms stiff and bodies bending from the base of the trunk. Weksler was picked up like a mannikin, tipped sideways, raised in the air, and returned to the floor. The make-up of the patterns and groupings kept changing, but always cued to the musical phrases.

Macabre humor showed up in two of Morris' pieces, both set to songs. In "One Charming Night," set to five songs by Henry Purcell, Morris was a vampire who hypnotized and then killed Weksler, bringing her back to "life" as another vampire. One of the dances to a piece by The Violent Femmes, told of the murder of a daughter (Hutchinson) by her father (Landis). The repeats in the music were echoed by similar repeats in the dance patterns. The series of five songs dealt with loneliness, with doll babies as props.

A series of four solos to Handel choruses was less sinister. Keith Sabado was excellent in his humorous solo to "All we like sheep have gone astray," from "Messiah," while Morris strutted and posed in "Jealousy," from "Hercules." Humor also ruled in three short solos by Rob Besserer to

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George F. Root's "The Vacant Chair," Carrie J. Bond's "When We Come to the end of a Perfect Day," and Rasbach's musical setting of Joyce Kilmer's "Trees." In the last, Besserer seemed to grow like a tree, sprouting leaves and then shedding them.

Two of Morris' works were based on gimmicks, the interest being in figuring out the gimmick. In "Prelude and Prelude," the first playing of Henry Cowell's Prelude for Harpsichord and Violin was accompanied by a line of dancers along the right side of the stage in various stages of dress and undress, each with a fan, repeating a set series of moves in sequential order while Hutchinson danced a completely different solo centerstage. (I understand the solo role changes from one performance to the next.) As the Prelude music ended the dancers shifted, the group spread out across the stage while Hutchinson went to the right. On the repeat of the music, Hutchinson began the set series of moves while parts of her solo were incorporated into the group's movements, which were again sequential.

A duet for Morris and Resto, "Love, You Have Won," to the Vivaldi cantata "Amor, Hai Vinto," was a study in how different body types can change the look of the choreography.

As a choreographer, Morris is surprisingly good. He uses not only the phrasing of the music to set the choreography, but also the mood. Both programs are equally unusual and entertaining.

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP: Wed. through Sat., Dec. 11-14 & 18-21, 8pm; Sun., Dec. 15 & 22, 3 & 8pm. \$8/TDF plus \$2. Bessie Schoenberg Theater, 219 West 19th St. 924-0077.