

*Mark Morris
review*

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP AT DTW

Joanna Ney WBAI Arts Extra Dec. 13, 1985 airdate

It doesn't take long to sense that Mark Morris is an authentic choreographer with an unmistakable style of his own. He seems to have absorbed many different dance influences without being in the least a slave to them. Morris is a native of Seattle and has moved back there after performing with several modern dance companies, the Eliot Feld Ballet and a Balkan dance troupe. As a dance maker he does not indulge in a wide variety of steps or combinations of steps. In fact, initially the impression is one of sheer simplicity but his sophistication lies in his response to music and his use of dynamics and mimetic gestures. He also exhibits a sly, almost subversive sense of humor.

The Mark Morris Dance Group is performing at DTW'S Bessie Schonberg Theater and they are splendid. The program consisted of solos, duets and ensemble pieces to music ranging from Handel to Victorian parlor songs. My personal favorite was "Marble Halls" set to Bach's Concerto for Two Harpsichords. In its driving energy, its falls and recoveries and its use of groupings it had an affinity with Paul Taylor's "Esplanade" but Morris's emphasis is less on pure athleticism than on pattern and gesture. In this, as in the other pieces on the program, the movements are not conceived as strictly male or female. A strong ambisexual tone pervades all of Morris's work, as well as a heightened communal sense that I associate with Lar Lubovitch with whom Morris danced in the late 70's. "Marble Halls" is a beautiful dance and I especially liked a section in which the dancers crossed on the diagonal in continuous jumps with one hand to the hip and the other flung back. This

movement was repeated a number of times and it remains in my memory as a ^{N image} ~~moment~~ that is formal and free at the same time.

Another interesting work was "Handel Choruses." Handel, on the face of it, lends itself to majestic ensemble dancing but Morris has taken a more daring route and produced four solos and fairly eccentric ones at that. Keith Sabado is given small, intense movements--he sways from side to side with hands outstretched or framing his face like a camera taking a snap. Ruth Davidson clutches and claws at her thighs and ankles, Rob Besserer strains upward as if trying to find his way in the ^{void} ~~dark~~ and Susan Hadley spins and undulates and leaps with a joyous air. Both Besserer and Hadley are recruits from other companies--he used to dance with Lubovich and Hadley with Senta Driver's Harry and they are both superb dancers.

In a solo called "I Love You Dearly" Guillermo Resto, a kind of surrogate Mark Morris with a similar sensuous but powerful body, performs a lilting dance to a Rumanian folk tune. With his black shaggy haired head thrown back he crosses the stage with a heel-to-toe stomping of the feet. The dance is divided into sections, each with a different motif. Here Morris's training as a folk and flamenco dancer can be seen to advantage. The steps have a pronounced folk quality but look new born.

The prize for the most peculiar dance on the program goes to a solo performed by Morris and called "The Vacant Chair." To a musical accompaniment of sentimental Victorian tunes Morris comes up with a dance that is mysterious and arresting. We hear a ^{Soulful} ~~suspense~~ rendition of a patriotic song as Morris emerges in white jockey shorts with a brown paper bag over his head, ^{like a helmet.} He

places a drawing of a chair on a music stand and embarks on a ludicrous journey, thrashing about with stiffened hands, crashing to the ground, springing up ~~into a heroic~~ into a heroic stance with one arm thrust upward, finger pointing, like a demented knight called to battle. Clawing his way out of the bag he replaces the drawing of the chair with another of a tree. As Joyce Kilmer's sugary "Trees" wails on, Morris contorts his upper torso, extending his arms down like limbs of a tree, while his gnarled fingers trail shreds of paper. Finally, using the image of a bed as a take-off point he stomps, staggers and careens through another Victorian ditty, "The End of a Perfect Day." No, this is no valentine to Victoriana but it is a strange and unsettling experience.

In a duet to a Vivaldi cantata, Morris, who has shed his Pre-Raphaelite curls for a harder-edged punk look, dances with Guillermo Resto. In their black tights and flowing white shirts they manage to evoke as well as parody Baroque manners and mannerisms. They imitate each others' gestures and compete in jumps, struts and twisty turns. ~~Displays~~ ^{Displays.} ~~of physical prowess~~ alternate of ~~physical~~ physical prowess with effete posturing, providing an intriguing note of ambiguity. In Morris's canon all sorts of contrasting emotions can and do co-exist.

Morris is only 29 years old and still developing but there is a conviction in his current work as well as an engaging waywardness that place him in a category by himself. His bizarre antics never seem merely show-offy. They are part of an odd but vastly entertaining dance sensibility unlike any other around. You can still catch Mark Morris at DTW this weekend. Adventure and weirdness like in wait.