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The Dance: Mark Morris Troupe

By JENNIFER DUNNING

IT was something of an event when the Mark Morris Dance Group performed Sunday afternoon and evening at the Bessie Schönberg Theater, 219 West 19th Street, where the company appears through Dec. 22. So crowded was the theater that those sitting on the floor in the first of three added rows in the evening were asked to tuck in their knees and shopping bags so the dancers could move.

There wasn't a trace of self-congratulation, however, in the superb performing or the choreography. Mr. Morris is of the Balanchinian school of dance-making. The dance is of the moment: if some of Mr. Morris's happiest inventions have fallen by the wayside over the years, elements reappear, used with the practical creativity of a good cook, in later works. There are no sets. The costuming, though stylish, is usually street or rehearsal wear. And movement flows from Mr. Morris in wholehearted response to music.

He is also aware of a world beyond the dance stage. And two of the pieces performed in the afternoon offered complex and stunningly communicated perceptions of social mores. The sensual "One Charming Night," danced by Mr. Morris and Teri Weksler, was a suite of solos and duets that on one level took a rather dark and sardonic look at sexual relationships.

Miss Weksler, waiting impatiently in the first dance, is joined by Mr. Morris, a wild-wheeling faun in a business suit and tie. There is little difference made between the genders in most of Mr. Morris's dances. Here, the intricate partnering and Mr. Morris's horrifying but funny mauling embraces of Miss Weksler suggested that this would not be the case here.

But each turns vampire toward the end. And who but Mr. Morris would set all this to songs for countertenor by Henry Purcell?

Equally horrifying sexual preoccupations and the spiritual death caused by unemployment were among the subjects of the five hard-driving songs by the Violent Femmes, whose new-wave rock serves as the score for a group work called "Lovey." A kind of diseased sexuality hangs over the suite of dances, as the performers, dressed in street and bedroom attire and underwear, flung themselves down passionately on rubber dolls scattered across the floor. A jobless father pushes his little girl into a bottomless well formed by her mother's upended legs.

Each responds to societal constriction, and the horror of the mocking, tightening vise and the behavior it engenders is re-created without apology or irony. Mr. Morris's sense of the universality of his picture is suggested in the fact that company members take turns at the different roles. Here, the solo roles were strongly performed by Keith Sabado as the father, Penny Hutchinson as the daughter, Susan Hadley as the troubled mother and Scott Cunningham as the onlooker.

The two dances can almost be looked at in sheer dance terms, despite the unabashed theatricality of their themes, expression and staging. The dances that completed the matinee program — recent or new work like all 13 pieces in the Schoenberg repertory — were pure movement dances that wove together Mr. Morris's own brand of natural moves and gestures. In "Prelude and Prelude," set to Henry Cowell's Prelude for Harpsichord and Violin, Mr. Morris physicalizes the texture of the score by opposing soloist, here Jennifer Thienes, with group in geometrically shaped dancing that ingeniously shifts spatial emphasis as the score is repeated.

The same look informs "Retreat From Madrid," with a sometimes teasing flavor of the mannerisms of baroque theater and dance that is called forth from Luigi Boccherini's score, after which the piece is named. Miss Fehlandt, Miss Hutchinson, Mr. Morris and Donald Mouton were the masked performers. The five dancers in "Frisson" could have been refugees from a Picasso circus, moving like jacks and teeter-totters through a stream of angling shapes and echoing planes. Set to Igor Stravinsky's Symphonies for Wind Instruments, "Frisson" required easy physical control and got it from Miss Weksler, Miss Fehlandt, David Landis, Mr. Mouton and Miss Thienes.

The matinee closed with "Vestige," a dark group work that is a surging evocation of Dmitri Shostakovich's Sonata for Cello and Piano in D. Its handsome staging, crammed with physical incident, needs to be seen at a greater distance and on a less-crowded program. In the evening, Rob Besserer offered an effective performance of "The Vacant Chair," a daring signature work. Mr. Besserer chose not to try for the idiosyncratic physical presence of Mr. Morris, the solo's first interpreter, but to perform it as a fluid exercise in sheer physicality.

Also in the evening, Mr. Morris took over the "Jealousy" solo in "Handel Choruses," rendering its cramped posing and reaching with the bound but ultimately triumphant edge that is characteristic of much of his choreography. Miss Hutchinson brought a grave simplicity to the "He sent a thick darkness" solo. And Lodi McClellan and Miss Thienes were touching and amusing as the heel-thudding, sweetly gauche ballerinas of "Minuet and Allegro in G," set wittily to a Beethoven score for two flutes. The sensitive lighting for both programs was by Phil Sandström.