

Choreographing humor, surprise into dance

By Tom Hogan
For The Patriot Ledger

"I want people to watch my dance and be surprised and laugh maybe," says Mark Morris. The rising young modern dance choreographer had his way Friday night at the Boston Shakespeare Theater. The dance was consistently surprising and frequently funny.

Morris, who is based in Seattle and has captured the attention of the dance world in the past few years, has a keen mind and a sly wit that shine through most of his work.

His solo, "The Vacant Chair," demonstrated his thoughtful brand of humor at its best. It opened to the first of three syrupy romantic lyrics sung by a Caruso-like tenor. "We shall meet but we shall miss him, there will be one vacant chair," the singer crooned. He proceeded to tell a banal tale of a man who "carried the banner in the fight," a symbol of "manhood's might."

Morris quickly punctured this empty-headed nonsense. As the light

Dance

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. At The Boston Shakespeare Company Theater, 52 St. Botolph St., Boston, Friday.

came up, we saw a crudely drawn picture of a chair on a music stand. Behind it stood the tall, broad-chested Morris, clad only in white briefs, with a paper bag over his head. He moved slowly and grandly in time to the music, with what would otherwise have been a series of elegant gestures, were it not for the paper bag.

Simple-minded clichés were also satirized in "Songs That Tell a Story," a trio featuring Morris with Donald Moulton and Guillermo Resto. The three denim-clad dancers dropped onto their backs whenever the inspirational country songs mentioned the grave and quickly crossed hands to their chests when the singer

promised they'd be "covered with clay."

Subtler humor pervaded "Love, You Have Won," an extended duet for Morris and Resto, set to Vivaldi's cantata by the same name. Every run and trill of the soprano's arias was matched by grand gestures of the dancers' hands and feet — gestures that were at the same time graceful and amusingly extravagant. The two dancers were dressed in black knee-length trousers with white lace-trimmed blouses, reminiscent of Pierrot costumes from the *commedia dell'arte*.

The choreography seemed to laugh at as well as admire the extravagant stage conventions of that era. In one especially dazzling leap, both dancers tucked their feet up behind them, then suddenly scissored one leg forward in a mid-air split before landing.

Similar virtuosity marked the nine rapid solos of "Bijoux," a stunning

piece set to art songs by Erik Satie. Teri Weksler's ability to drop to the floor and recover instantaneously was fascinating.

When Morris abandoned the humor or became too cerebral, he was less effective. This was the case with the evening's opening piece, "Prelude and Prelude," a formalistic dance the audience seemed to find cold and inscrutable.

By contrast, the warmth and charm of the concluding dance, "Celestial Greetings," earned long and noisy applause. Here the company (minus Morris) danced in a flowing, bent-kneed homage to Thailand. The piece had the look of ethnic dance, but with subtle touches that were Morris' own.

Lucky dance students at Harvard will get to study Morris' techniques this summer. Let's hope audiences in Boston won't have to wait too long before seeing him dance again.