

WEEKEND OF DIVERSE DANCE

MORRIS SOARS

By MARTIN BERNHEIMER, *Times Music/Dance Critic*

*Avant-Garde Hero and Company
in Debut at Cal State Long Beach*

Los Angeles caught up with Mark Morris on Saturday night, thanks to the the enterprising dance department at Cal State Long Beach. It wasn't a moment too soon.

One approached the University Theatre with a certain trepidation. The 29-year-old choreographer-dancer from Seattle had been hailed up and down the nation as the eighth wonder of the world, as a spunky *enfant-terrible* genius, as an iconoclastic superboy blessed with a startling vision of *Angst* fused with raunch fused with spirituality. Could he really be that interesting?

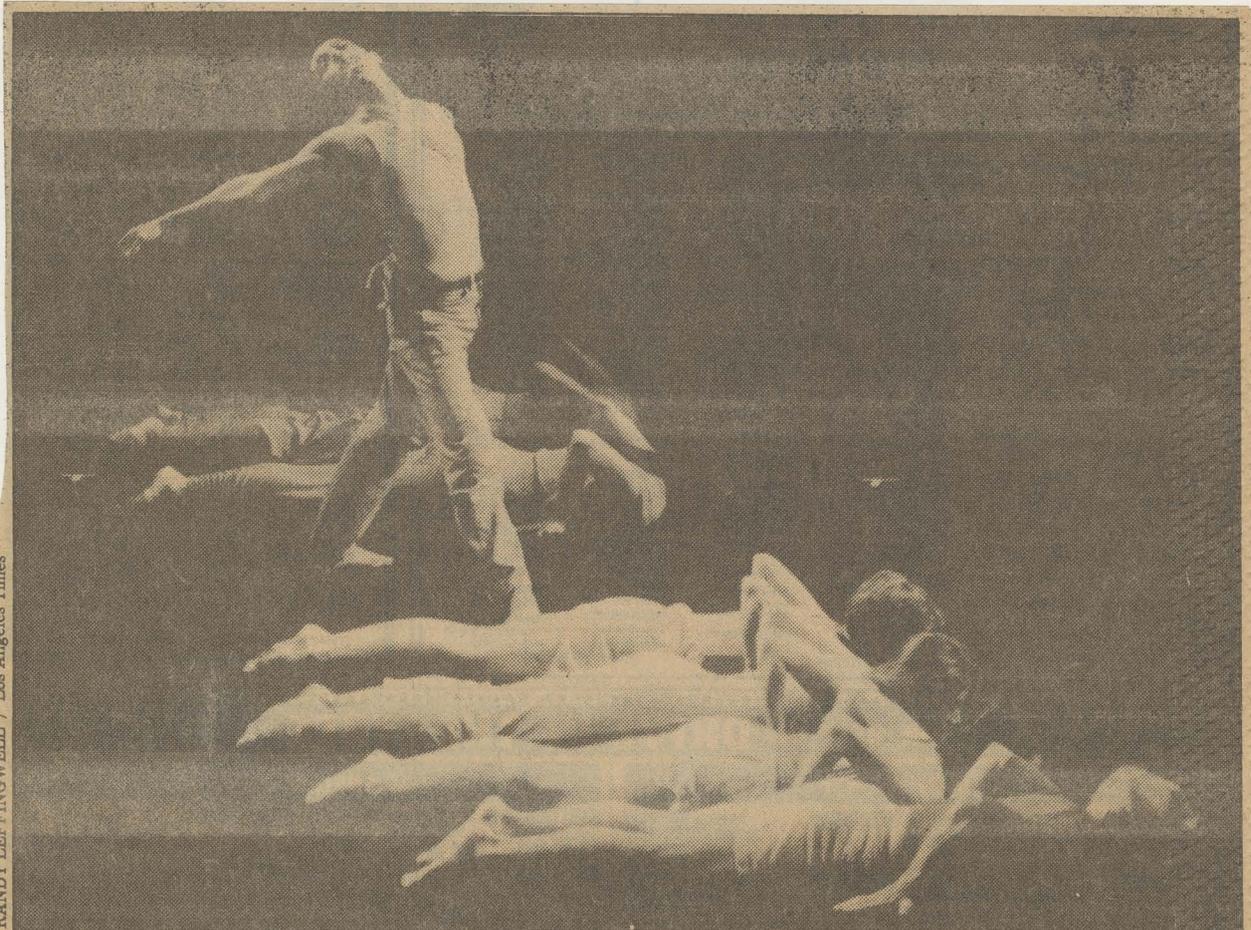
He could.

His Long Beach program did not offer the shock appeal that has marked some previous Morris endeavors. We saw no erotic abuse of plastic dolls. There

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RANDY LEFFINGWELL / Los Angeles Times

David Landis rises above crawling colleagues in Mark Morris' "Gloria" at Cal State Long Beach.

MORRIS DANCE TROUPE AT LONG BEACH

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were no adventures in skin trade or audience alienation. There was, however, ample evidence that Morris commands a probing mind and a gutsy spirit.

■ He is an original.
■ His dances aren't pretty. Nor, for the most part, are his dancers. That is beside the point.

■ Inventing an arrestingly ungainly movement vocabulary almost as he goes along—a vocabulary that reveals the varied roots of modern dance, ballet, ethnic dance and strident athletics—Morris likes to concentrate on wry social comment and bold expressive contradictions.

Even when he pretends to court lofty purity, he cannot suppress undertones of black humor.

He works his company of 12 as if it were a corps of 50, reinforcing sexual ambiguity and treating his women and men as muscular equals. He asks the impossible in terms of speed, spasm and contortion—and gets it.

He creates clarity amid seeming chaos, flirts with profundity without pausing to congratulate himself for any potential discoveries, re-

spects the rhythmic and dynamic definitions of the music he seizes.

Most important, perhaps, he savors the ever-redeeming impact of economy and theatricality. A point here may be overstated, an impulse there may be blurred. But even when Morris miscalculates, he miscalculates with flair, and he doesn't overstay his welcome.

In "The Shepherd on the Rock," which opened the program, he uses Schubert's quaint bucolic sentiment (via a grotesquely over-amplified tape) as an excuse for a fast group frolic. The lyric fluidity of the Lied finds tense, even cynical counterpoint in the frenzy of the chronically happy mock-peasants.

In "Dogtown," set to delicately bizarre songs by Yoko Ono, Morris combines funny anthropomorphic charades with clever satiric flourishes with a neatly brutal gender battle. The pack of seven dancers—brashly clad in bras, bikinis, tights and assorted accessories—crawls, sprawls and copulates with awesome energy.

In "Ballabile," Morris thumbs his nose simultaneously at the conven-

tions of operatic indulgence, balletic *divertissement* and ancient-Egyptian caricature poses, all to rambunctious tunes from Verdi's "Aida." Somehow, he manages to balance ridicule with affection.

His skills as a dancer, and actor, come into focus in "One Charming Night." In this deliciously weird pas de deux, a sexless countertenor chirps pristine Purcell on the ubiquitous tape while a sinister Morris and a quasi-virginal Teri Weksler execute a dance of feverish love and, we think, ecstatic death.

"Spectre de la Rose," meet "Dracula."

The evening closed with "Gloria," a frenetic yet powerful translation of Vivaldi's religiosity. Here, Morris goes for Baroque with an intricate, ultimately climactic series of quirky contrapuntal maneuvers. The virtuosic dancers jump, run, grope, slide, fall, stretch, and stumble in group rituals that eventually achieve an eerie kaleidoscopic catharsis.

It sounds tasteless, but it isn't. It shouldn't make sense, but it does. Mark Morris knows what he is doing.