

RISING STAR MARK MORRIS KEEPS AUDIENCES JUMPY WITH DANCES ABOUT NEARLY EVERYTHING FROM SOAP TO SALOME

In a high ceilinged rehearsal studio in the recesses of a downtown Manhattan warehouse, Mark Morris is leaning against a mirrored wall, intently studying the movements of 10 sweaty bodies. He is wearing baggy, lime-green sweatpants and brown cloth slippers; a worn orange T-shirt hanging from his muscular shoulders suggests a trace of beer belly. Pungent smoke wafts from his Indonesian clove cigarette, and he breaks his concentration only to reach for a large can of Foster's Lager that stands alongside a pulsating music box. Morris is drilling his troops in his newest dance called—get ready for this—*Soap Powders and Detergents*, created from the unlikely source of a Roland Barthes essay. "Faster!" he bawls as the dancers churn in unison like 10 misshapen Maytags convulsed in a collective deep rinse. Suddenly five men in bed sheets appear and begin to encircle a cluster of women in a clothesline version of a Maypole dance. Morris stops, then starts them until he gets what he wants: a perfectly wrapped cocoon of female bodies, through the top of which dancer Penny Hutchinson suddenly pops out. Even the company is startled. "Wow!" says Guillermo Resto. "So that's what's supposed to happen."

Morris, at 29, has emerged as one of the freshest choreographers in modern dance just that way—by keeping audiences wondering what's going to happen next. Dance critic Arlene Croce of the *New Yorker* has heralded him as a "spellbinder." *Esquire* has touted him as one of its 116 men and women under 40 changing the nation. ("That must be a joke," he laughs.) Much more important to Morris, people are flocking to catch his 12-member Mark Morris Dance Group. The Boston Ballet commissioned *Mort Subite*, which opened last month. The Joffrey has signed him to choreograph a piece for the fall, and his hometown Seattle Opera has asked him to design a new

"Dance of the Seven Veils" for its production of *Salome*. Mark Morris is in.

What sets Morris apart from the current crop of aspiring Paul Taylors and Martha Grahams is his grasp of astonishingly divergent forms—from Scandinavian couple dancing to Yugoslav folk dances—and his ability to graft them onto complexly structured works, with a twist. To all this, he injects an admittedly homosexual sensibility. In *My Party*, a rousing piece that conjures up high school dances, men dance first with women partners, then pair with other men while women partner women. "He's a little crazy," laughs dancer Keith Sabado, who cavorts with cloven-hoofed whimsy in a solo composition that Morris set to Handel's *Messiah*. Morris (who dances in many of his own works) has choreographed music by composers as varied as Yoko Ono, Vivaldi and the country gospel Louvin Brothers, but not all his dances are intended to charm. In *Lovey*, four to eight dancers fiddle sensuously with small dolls while rock music from the Violent Femmes pounds in the background. "When I first did that piece in Seattle in 1985, people booed and walked out," recalls Morris. "They saw it as a diatribe on child abuse and pornography. The point was for the dancers *not* to interact with each other, only with the dolls. If there was a message, it was that people should be nicer to each other."

Morris' choreographic imagination blossomed early. The youngest of three children in the musical household of Maxine and William Morris, a Seattle teacher, he says, "I would run around the house making up dances to my favorite pieces. People would nod and say, 'Oh, very nice, Mark.'" He began studying ballet and folk dancing and at 14, joined a semiprofessional Balkan folk-dancing company. "We sang, we did really rigorous Bulgarian, Yugoslav and Greek dances. It was a wonderful group."

After high school Morris ventured off

on a backpacking trip through Europe and settled in Spain to study flamenco. Instead of art he found "Vegas shock." Franco was in power and, says Morris, "the atmosphere was oppressive. I had a friend we called Swanson because he had bleached blond hair like Gloria Swanson. When he was arrested on the street for being too femmy I left. I couldn't take it." Morris moved on to New York, where he quickly landed a job with the Eliot Feld Ballet. "We left on a South American tour, and I thought, 'Hey, I must be good enough after all, because here I am in the hotel casino gambling with my per diem.'" "

Over the next 4½ years he worked with three innovative companies, Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean and Hannah Kahn. "I learned lots from all three," he says. "Naturalness, rhythm, structure." In 1984, Morris, who had been choreographing for an ensemble of friends, was invited to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Their performance stunned the dance world. Morris appeared clad in a Hindu loincloth, his hands and feet painted crimson, and danced a 20-minute solo set to an Indian song. "I knew I was witnessing something extraordinary," says company member Donald Mouton, "the first glimpse of artistic genius. Afterward I saw a woman in the lobby with tears streaming down her face."

During the past year the Morris troupe's fees have jumped from what company manager Barry Alterman calls "the poverty level to adequacy." They are rehearsing a TV special called *Dance in America*, to be shown in Denmark this fall. Next is a four-night gig in Boston, after which they will hop a plane for five performances at the Vienna Dance Festival. "I'd be morose if I weren't doing this," bubbles Morris. And what lies around the artistic bend for the choreographer? "Opera," he declares. "I want to do opera because the dancing in it is so bad." Wagner may never be the same. **SUSAN REED**

Photograph by Lois Greenfield

