

The young choreographer is a hot number

By Nancy Goldner
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I suppose it's a sign that dance has hit the big time when the name of a young choreographer is bandied about as if he were the latest rock star to blitz the airwaves.

Not that Mark Morris is about to be offered a Hollywood contract, or that the praise he has received reaches the hyperbolic heights of some rock criticism. No, dance critics tend to be a cautious lot: One tempered her assessment of Morris' talent by saying that "he could yet become" the Isadora Duncan of our time.

Although not yet certified as Duncan's equal, Morris currently is enveloped in the unmistakable aura of hotness. In 1984, after his troupe appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave festival, he was the subject of deep analysis in the *New Yorker*. In the last year, he has been featured in the trend columns of magazines with a more general readership, such as *Vogue* and *Esquire*. And (for what it's worth) people I know who are as up on dance as they are on the price of corn futures nevertheless find him lurking at the edges of their subconscious. "Who is this Mark Morris, anyway?" will pop out at the end of a conversation.

It's a good question. From what I've seen of his work, most recently a few weeks ago at the small but prestigious Dance Theater Workshop in New York, there are several Mark Morris'es. One Morris makes respectful ensemble dances in the manner of — and perhaps in homage to — the great but uncelebrated modern dance pioneer Doris Humphrey. These dances are very good, but their intentional impersonality and their emphasis on complex structure hardly explain why Morris has seized the imaginations of the reputation-makers.

Another Morris is witty. One of his solos, in fact, is so clever it already has been called his signature piece. It might be premature to assign a signature to a 29-year-old who's only been choreographing for five or six years, but haste is part of the hot-number syndrome.

Be that as it may, "A Vacant Chair" is indeed a sure stroke of ingenuity. Set to three bathetic ditties, the dance proceeds to shred them. The funniest of the satires takes off on a song set to Kilmer's poem about the lovely tree ("I think that I shall never see . . ."). The tree is represented by Morris' back, hunched and twisted like a gargoyle's. As the tree begins to grow in the song, his arms sprout from his back and hang lifeless in the air, like stumps. When the tree blooms, two crumpled paper bags suddenly blossom from Morris' gnarled hands, then fall to the floor in a desolate silence that is devastatingly funny but true to the awfulness of the poem.

The verse is, of course, a sitting duck for trashing. Does Vivaldi deserve the same treatment? "Love, You Have Won," after the Vivaldi cantata to which the dance is set, is cast for two Pierrot figures who scamper and preen as Pierrot figures are wont. Morris' bright idea is for their moonstruck mannerisms to play against music that is virile, triumphant. By creating such an unorthodox juxtaposition, he is testing his power to make the audience hear familiar music through a distorted but true inner ear, leading us, one assumes, to the "inner" Vivaldi. It's this self-testing, gambling nature of Morris that some people have

found endearing. They adore the outrageousness of his spirit, just as others adore the outrageousness of Prince.

To my eyes and ears, the Vivaldi caper is not bold, but foolish and fat-headed. Does he really think that the testimony of one Mark Morris can override the testimony of Vivaldi?

What actually happens in this dance is that Vivaldi doesn't budge an inch; he won't be feminized into a Pierrot-like sound and, as a result, the choreography is not musically insightful but totally irrelevant.

One can see the impulse toward drag in other Morris dances, too, although it often is manifested in less outlandish contours than the Vivaldi piece.

In the most innocent expression of androgyny, Morris practices sexual equality. Like many choreographers now, he is interested in figuring out ways for women to lift men. And some of his dances can be performed by either sex, a practice that asserts that there is no such thing as "male" and "female" choreography.

A dance like "My Party," however, shakes the sexes up in forms of liberation that are more provocative and hostile. "My Party" is cast for four couples, who dance together in ballroom style. In the last section of the dance, each couple embraces. Here is how Morris pairs the couples: a tall woman with a short man; a short woman with a much taller man; two women; two men.

Only the steps themselves have festive cheeriness. The women are dressed in deliberately unflattering renditions of ballerina attire. They look ugly. The two opposite-sex cou-

ples move together without grace; how could they not look clumsy and foolish? The two couples of the same sex are about the same height, which means that they can move together harmoniously, which, of course, is Morris' point.

You can read "My Party" as a witty if somewhat mean-spirited parody of social conventions; you also can read it as a gay-liberation tract. What's disturbing about the Morris phenomenon is that my commentary on his work plays the wit and overlooks the message.

The problem isn't necessarily what Morris is saying but his public unwillingness to acknowledge that he is saying it.