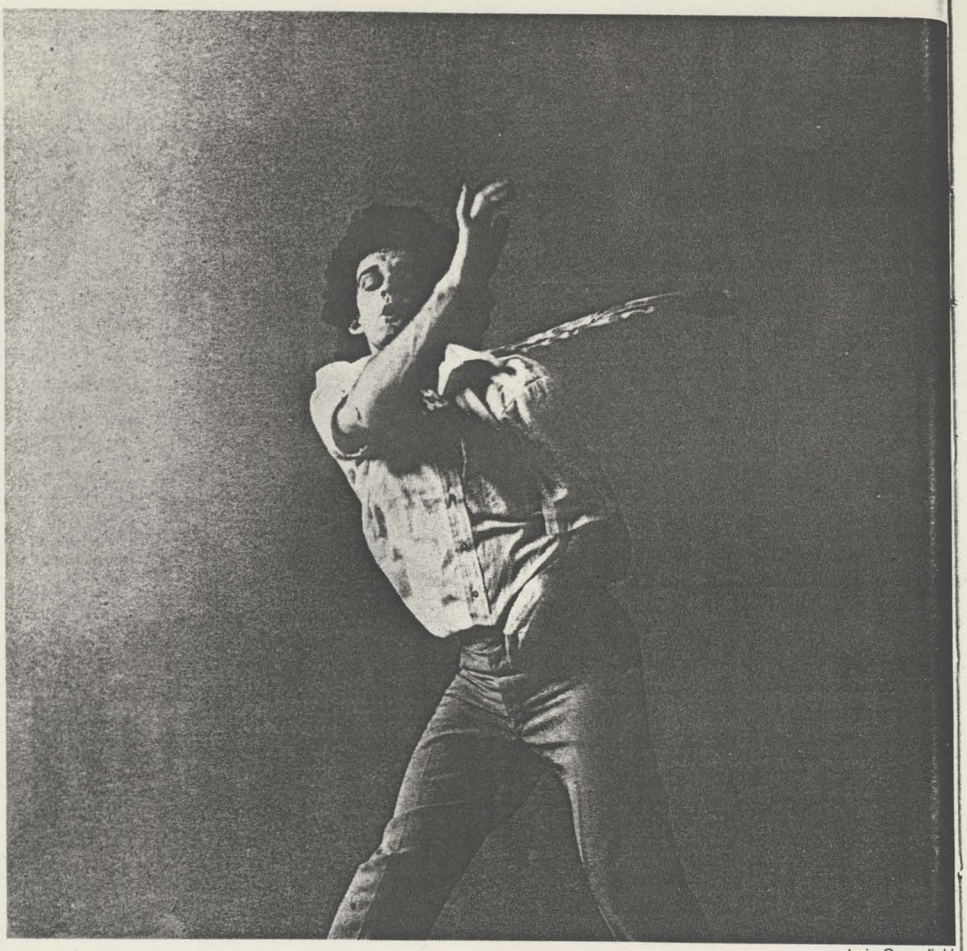

Lois Greenfield

DANCEVISION

by John Gruen

The vision of Mark Morris frying shrimp in his family's Seattle kitchen as he talks about himself and his choreography is enough to set the tone of Morris's television debut on WNET/PBS's *Dance in America,* aired last October. There he is, over a hot stove, telling us about his early flamenco lessons, dancing with a Serbo-Croatian folk troupe, taking ballet and modern classes in his native Seattle, then moving to New York City and dancing with the companies of Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, and Hannah Kahn before forming his own company—the Mark Morris Dance Group. And, suddenly, there's his mother saying how glad she is nobody is televising *her* while she's cooking.

The refreshing informality of this and other offstage moments gives a potent idea of Morris's unpretentious personality and easily prepares us for a sampling of the works that have made him the talk of the dance world.

Since founding his twelve-member group in 1980, Morris has received extraordinary critical and public attention for dances that in structure, theme, and musicality contain the stuff of potential greatness. Like Balanchine, he goes to choreography with inspired eclecticism, unafraid to assimilate past styles and making music the bottom line of everything he creates. Indeed, his musicality is such that a simple country song holds as much choreographic promise as a major work by Vivaldi or Handel. He can take a nasty, abrasive song by Yoko Ono (*Dogtown*) and turn it into choreographic gold simply by following the song's droning, off-the-wall content. Or he'll be struck by an unknown Indian film score and make a sly, tongue-in-cheek dance lesson out of it, as in his *The Tamili Film Songs in Stereo Pas de Deux.*

Swinger: As evidenced by a recent* Dance in America *profile, thirty-year-old choreographer Mark Morris "has learned to blend simplicity with craft, excess with clarity, athleticism with subtlety. His steps are never contrived, but follow their own logic. What we see is real dancing—weighted, resonant, authoritative."

Whether working with the down-home *Songs that Tell a Story (Robe of White),* with music by the Louvin Brothers, Henry Cowell's *Prelude,* or Vivaldi's *Gloria,* Morris invests his dances with an element of discovery—searching and finding movements that are at once appropriate to the music and rhythmically unexpected. Recalling Paul Taylor's exuberance and Balanchine's sense of form, Morris adds his own brand of manic energy to choreography that is unnervingly self-confident.

Any Morris dance seems to start out with the premise that movement is one huge question mark, so why not go all out in seeking an answer? Why not do the obvious when the obvious is called for? Why not propel the body into spiraling convolutions when the music demands it? Why not follow an inner rhythm when the musical rhythms seem to call for a physical contrast? Indeed, why not dare *anything* as long as form and content are all of a piece? The point is that, at thirty, Morris has learned to blend simplicity with craft, excess with clarity, athleticism with subtlety. His steps are never contrived, but follow their own logic. What we see is real dancing—weighted, resonant, authoritative.

As a dancer, Morris clearly leads the pack, if only through sheer magnetism. Although all his dancers move with lucid strength, Morris has a touch of the bizarre about him. Tall, burly, even a bit awkward, he invests his movements with particular passion—a kind of compulsiveness that makes watching him entirely fascinating. In his solo *Jealousy,* to a chorus by Handel, he makes a virtue of exaggeration simply because the music and the words are themselves an expression of agony. What saves the solo from being mawkish is the honesty of the movements. Morris does not so much comment on the music as live it.

In his staged works, Morris almost never uses scenery. In this television introduction, there's a good deal of it. Scenic designer Ves Harper has adapted visual backgrounds conceived by artist Robert Bordo, presumably to lend the dances a certain visual vividness. They're fine, although hardly necessary, despite a press release claiming that "Bordo's designs will offer viewers the visual 'reference points' necessary to follow television's quick-cut editing demands"—whatever that means.

The danced portions of this sixty-minute *Great Performances* presentation were taped in Denmark, where things are apparently cheaper to record. The result is a very polished job, with television director Thomas Grimm providing cogent, sensitive attention to the proceedings. Writer Holly Brubach's commentary is, as always, intelligent and to the point. Knud Vissing's editing is first-rate. Judy Kinberg and Grimm were the program's attentive producers. □

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