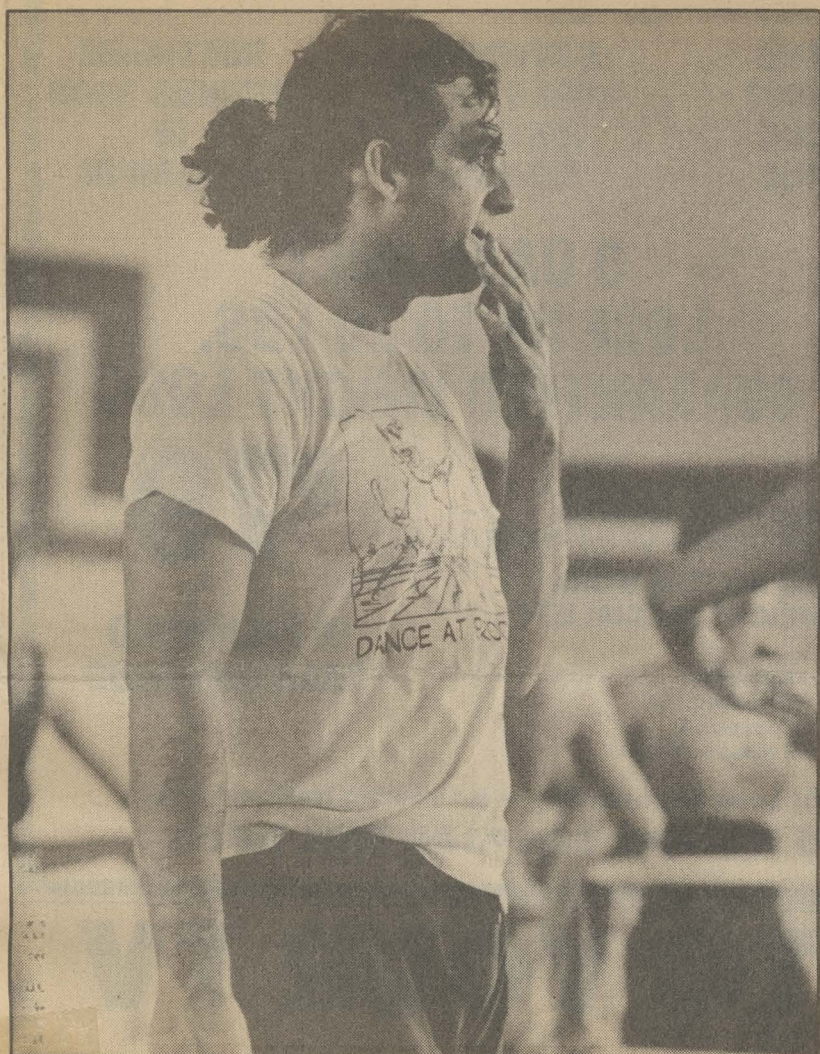


Bob Brown/The Richmond News Leader

Mark Morris paces like a panther as students work at the barre during master class at Virginia Commonwealth University Dance Center.



At 30, Morris is a middle-aged dancer but a young choreographer.

Morris the dancer molds visions into movement

By Deborah George
News Leader staff writer

Mark Morris: bright eyes, dark curly hair, big, muscular body. Bigger than most dancers, not long and delicate at all. Loves ballet, loves to teach dance, loves Jakarta cigarettes, Sprite to drink, and black coffee, even if it's from 7-Eleven. Vodka. Makes no excuses for being a dancer and smoking cigarettes. That's a boring story, he says. Everyone's heard it.

Everyone in New York dance circles has heard about Morris. He's supposed to be inheriting the mantle of the Great Modern Choreographers.

"I didn't say that," Morris says, smiling his extraordinary brash and bright smile. As long as he can keep making dances, the mantle he inherits could be Mickey, for all he cares.

"I love that people are watching my pieces," he adds, acknowledging that success has some benefits. Being able to afford personal management is also a great benefit, because Morris says he is horrible at time and bad at money. He gets that stuff wrong. In compensation, "I always get the stuff done that I do." Which is making dances.

He was right on time for his master class at the Virginia Commonwealth University Dance Center yesterday. He and his troupe of 10 dancers, the Mark Morris Dance Group, will perform in the final Fast Forward series offering at the Virginia Museum tonight and tomorrow night at

8 o'clock in the Museum Theater.

Morris is middle-aged for a dancer and young for a choreographer: he is 30. Yet he is not moving toward choreography because his performance days are on the wane. He's been messing around with making dances since he was a child in Seattle, and he says he made his first quasi-professional piece at age 15.

In fact he still likes that piece, Morris says, and wants to try it out on his company next year some time.

He has spent "not one second" in college. "And now I teach there. Ha-ha." He had classical ballet training, but he's also had flamenco, Indian dance, Balkan dance, and modern. He went to New York at age 19 but now he's back in Seattle.

Because?

"I love it. It's beautiful."

Seattle is kind of provincial, dancewise. Morris doesn't get to hobnob with his fellow wizards, but he didn't do that when he was in New York, he pointed out. And besides, he's kind of a commuter, buzzing between Seattle and New York, "so I like both places better."

Morris is snotty in an entirely engaging way. He smiles and even laughs when he says something abrupt or outrageous. He has an ingenious, precise vocabulary that prints out his meanings in economical bursts: Celebrity choreography, à la Twyla Tharp, is "Bankrupt," for instance.

Morris makes dances because Morris loves

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Morris

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music and sees movement when he hears it.

He roams all over the map, musically, from Bach to country and western to the Violent Femmes. He hears, then he sees, then he sketches and tries out what he sees, first on himself, then on his dancers. An uneasy transition period ensues — until they get the hang of what he wants this time — then he can relax and enjoy his dances the way they are supposed to look.

The dancers in the group, he says, get better and better. Save for a couple, they have been with the company since it was formed in 1980.

He picked them for their intelligence — “They all are quite intelligent. They’ve even read a couple of books before” — and for their ability to move and hear music.

Their movement sets them apart from most dancers Morris sees, who are “not even rhythmic.”

Dance training as it is now exacerbates that problem because ballet, for instance, has become entirely a matter of assuming positions, Morris says disdainfully. “All the movement has been squeezed out of it.” Though he has this modern mantle to wear around, Morris maintains he loves ballet the way it’s supposed to be. “I personally think there’s nothing better than a really good ballet class.” One with movement in it.

He also loves to teach ballet, and thoroughly rejects “ballet for modern dancers,” a type of teaching he finds “automatically insulting and remedial.”

Morris’ appearance in front of the VCU class yesterday was among his first after five months of no dancing. He broke his foot — his first fracture — and had only one leg available for work in the studio.

Instead of straining to get back into dance by imposing a regimen of physical therapy and dance exercise on himself, Morris says “I decided to be injured.” He didn’t dance at all while his foot healed.

The consequences of that choice were good and bad. “I’m obese,” Morris said. His body may have been going to the dogs by dance standards, but Morris’ vision sharpened.

“It helped my eyes a lot. I know a lot of stuff now I didn’t know before.” Not dancing forced him to observe how his dances hung on other people. Instead of demonstrating his ideas with his own form, he had to arc them from his head to his dancers’ bodies. It was an education.

For a choreographer into whose hands the dance media wants to thrust the powers of a potentate, Morris’ aspirations are simple and straightforward: “I want time to work on new dances and time not to do anything. But not too much of that.

“I like what I’m doing quite a bit,” he adds, in a startling switch to modesty and shyness. “Dancing has funded my life. People ask me what would I have done if I hadn’t done this.” He shrugged. “How would I know?”