



The Mark Morris Dance Group performs 'String Songs.'

Anything goes in Morris' brilliant choreography

By Anne Marie Welsh
Arts Critic

After Friday night's San Diego debut by the Mark Morris Dance Group, there can be no doubt at all that Morris — who took his bows in perfect fifth position in blue flip-flops — is a choreographer of absolute genius.

Whole worlds whirl by in his dances, for this celebrated 31-year old dance maker absorbs and confidently transforms material from everywhere in dance, music and life.

Morris is already great. But he's still enigmatic. And as his new, brilliantly distilled Poulenc piece showed, he's only beginning to hit stride.

Watching a group work such as his "Strict Songs" (dedicated to Liberace and commissioned by the Seattle Men's Chorus) or "Gloria" (a signature work to Vivaldi) makes you realize just how many dance languages Morris has mastered — everything from East European folk dance to the gestural expressionism of Indian classical dancing, to all of the modern dance tradition outside Martha Graham and most of what came later.

The allusions come and go naturally, almost insouciantly.

Morris thus restores the modern dance tradition to *dancing*, after Graham's penchant for theater and the post-moderns alliance with trends in the visual arts removed so much of the freely rhythmic quality from their movement.

In the earthy physicality of his dancers, the spongy lushness of their movement, the wit, lyricism and gleeful grotesquerie of his vision, Morris most resembles Paul Taylor.

But in the Poulenc "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano," Morris maintains that special humanity of Taylor and approaches the formal purity and musicality of George Balanchine. The Poulenc thus seems the most mature of the 16 Morris works I've seen, the one that makes me happiest to realize that Morris has decades ahead of him in which to match the fecundity of Balanchine, who made 450 ballets in his 79 years.

In the Poulenc, Morris has limited his movement ideas to four or five images that recur in strikingly different contexts organizing the work so tightly its progress feels inevitable. As in Taylor's "Esplanade" and other late works, "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano" also hints deftly at the real life of the company dancing it.

Morris, for instance, is in the center of a group pose when it opens. He wears bright yellow tights and a

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black turtleneck, and dominates the scene with his long trunk, fleshy behind and curly black hair. Everyone else is in lugubrious red and black. Soon they join to remove him from the stage.

Tina Fehlandt takes on Morris' position in the middle of the grouping. The clarinet melody grows weirder, almost ghoulish, and Fehlandt, who looks as if she could be Morris' sister, briefly seems a witch, her index fingers pointing, ordering others into semi-circles and poses, as if she were an infernal ballet mistress or the choreographer's alter ego.

Suddenly Morris twirls across the stage in chaineé turns with his arms flat out like helicopter blades. He disappears.

The second movement is mysterious, thrilling and so oddly beautiful it is almost painful to watch. Morris returns here rolling and undulating backwards through phalanxes of dancers, soundlessly commanding them into couples. Five pairs enfold each other, covering their eyes as he did (an image from the Orient and Balanchine's "Serenade"). They fold and unfold their arms like the goddess Shiva as Morris dances with curling torso around them.

Formal values are uppermost here, as in the dry, dazzling last movement of Balanchine's "The Four Temperaments." But the range of associations in the images is staggering. Movement becomes pure metaphor and so closely allied to the music that we seem to see the rippling woodwind melody dancing before us.

"Strict Songs" introduced the group in stylized bathing suits that reveal the characteristic good health — women with bosoms and behinds even — of this exceptionally controlled company. They run and fly, making bird forms whether aloft or lying down to music by Lou Harrison for men's voices and chimelike vibes.

"Gloria," which closed the program, may be too much of a good thing, though perhaps its density is the viewer's problem, not something inherent in the work. Among its most felicitous passages is the Agnes Dei section in which a male solo is counterpointed by an unrelated dancer merely walking across the back of the stage space. Another follows. Then another. Then a line of them.

Like the horse scratching his behind while Icarus falls from the sky in the Breughel painting, they give hope. Life goes on.