

Mark Morris Dance Group falls short of its dazzling image



DANCE

■ **Mark Morris Dance Group**, last night and tonight at 8, Bagley Wright Theater (\$12-\$16; 628-0888).

by **Carole Beers**
Times dance critic

Mark Morris Dance Group, true to its (mostly East Coast) media image as the hottest modern group going — or at least, led by the hottest dancer going — dazzled a capacity crowd last night in the 850-seat Bagley Wright Theater.

That the emperor sometimes had no clothes, that the dances themselves had too much length for the weight, variety and originality of their ideas, didn't seem to bother many persons. Mainly, it was applause, cheers, even whistles as the 13-member troupe presented its annual Seattle gig, using 16 students from its summer workshop at the University of Washington.

Morris himself is a fascinating dancer to watch. At 29 and at his physical peak, the man displays an uncanny sense of the theatrical. He uses everything, in an engaging variety of dynamics — now fast, now slow-motion, now stamping into the ground, now floating. In his hands, the grand gesture or the no-less-significant arching of an eyebrow work to powerful effect. In a phrase, he romances the audience.

He also knows how to use music, to deploy dancers about the space as notes on a blank music sheet, to create ironic twists and satires that, just when a piece is about to get too serious (is he afraid he can't sustain that mood?), he tosses in a pratfall, or

an easy jibe at all the dance conceits that have gone before.

But this, refreshing as it is in an otherwise pretty bare time for modern choreographers in *any* city, still isn't enough. One longs for Morris, Seattle native and New York visitor, to trust his thoughts and follow them to sublime conclusions without — predictably — sabotaging them with humor that often completely misses the mark.

God knows we need plenty of wit and an offhanded feeling in the arts, in dance. Morris has the talent for it. But to make so many pieces the same — something false there. If you're going for humor, go for it. If you're attempting something else, let's see you do that without dissembling.

Last night the group opened with "40 Arms, 20 Necks, One Wreathing" to Herschel Garfein's music (on tape, as was all music last night). This was basically an academic exercise for 16 students

in black maillots and the company members in pink ones.

It had an early-Balanchine feeling, with diagonals employed exhaustively, rows of dancers extending or crooking limbs this way and that — although not fully. The Morris dancers had lovely muscle-group isolation and interesting persona, but can't seem to extend the line into infinity.

One Morris pose, the ironic arabesque, or modified dog-at-hydrant pose, emerged in this piece and was repeated through the succeeding "Handel Choruses" and "The Shepherd on the Rock."

Of the works I saw (deadline pressures sent me out before "Gloria"), the outstanding feature seemed to be Morris' literal musical responses. You heard a note, you saw it danced, just the way it was shaped. In an era when few know music, let alone respect, Morris stands among the few.

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