

Mark Morris shows rich gifts to dance

By Anne Marie Welsh
Arts Critic

LONG BEACH — Mark Morris is the most talked-about choreographer since Twyla Tharp. Word of his prodigious talent swept out of New York soon after he organized his company in 1980. The group drew crowds to a succession of the right venues, earning the sort of thoughtful raves that come from reviewers only about once each decade.

The Mark Morris Dance Group finally performed in Southern California Saturday night — in the little theater at California State University, Long Beach. And the fuss, I am happy to report, has been justified.

In the abundant variety of his dances, Morris sums up most of what's been important in modern dance and shows us, gleefully, the post-Tharpian future. This is one hot choreographer whose flame — because it illuminates our lives — is going to last.

His rich, voluptuous dances call to mind the variegated tradition outside of Martha Graham — Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey, Paul Taylor, Alvin Ailey, right up to Lar Lubovitch and Hannah Kahn. The choreographer's early training in folk dance and ballet has also left its mark. Large, fleshy and long-torsoed as he is, Morris moves with exceptional subtlety and can execute steps — the *gargouyard*, for instance — that are seldom seen outside the ballet classroom, yet are fully assimilated into his choreography. This one appears in the marvelous vampire duet, "One Charming Night."

Familiar as Morris' work feels, it is also startlingly new. You leave the theater with a shock of recognition, as if your vision had been cleansed. It feels as though these dances have long existed, but Morris has finally made them clear, communicative and complete.

He has often been compared to Paul Taylor — his "Gloria," for instance has certain superficial resem-

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blances to Taylor's "Esplanade," Morris' "Dogtown" to Taylor's "Private Domain." Just 30, Morris is nearly a master, and he does share with Taylor an unerring musicality, a delight in ungainly physicality, a deep humanism and a taste for humor and grotesquerie. Both have built companies by projecting their personal dance qualities onto a group.

What's fascinating — and one of the truly peculiar traits in Morris' group — is that his women seem to be projections of what he would look like if he were born a girl: tall, wide-hipped, big-breasted, the triumph of mesomorphism. The celebrated Teri Weksler is the only wraith onstage. Without getting literal or making contemporary fact an issue, Morris also outlines a community — six men, six women — with room for every sexual preference.

Morris' musical taste is equally wide-ranging — from Yoko Ono's back alley screeching for "Dogtown" to the Vivaldi Gloria in D that accompanies his signature work "Gloria" and the triumphant march from Verdi's "Aida" for his new and deadpan Denishawn spoof, "Ballabili."

His "The Shepard on the Rock," set to jaunty Schubert songs, evokes the pastoral scenes of Eliot Feld's "A Footstep of Air," but with less artifice. The setting might be Appalachia and the central dance motif (a mime gesture transfigured) has the dancers square their hips and undulate their torsos around an invisible barn door.

David Landis, the compact, concentrated dancer from San Diego, led the cast in this Schubert work, an enigmatic sextet that, like so much else in Morris, has sinister undertones amid the comedy.

Next year, the company will dance at UCLA and probably here. If you care about where dance has been and where it's going, plan to be there.