

# Morris keeps audience on its toes

*Mark Morris Dance Group's open-ended program excites, and disappoints*

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It is uncertain the modern dance world was in need of a great white hope, but when choreographer Mark Morris advanced on the turf a couple of years ago, even the most snobbish and narrow-minded of Eastern critics fell to their knees.

Two years later and after accumulating these worshipful accolades — declaring Morris the inheritor of the modern dance scepter from Paul Taylor, and all intervening post-modernists be damned — Morris and the Mark Morris Dance Group finally made it to the Southland.

Who is this man with curly locks, who thanks God in his program notes Saturday at Cal State Long Beach's University Theater and choreographs to Yoko Ono music as

well as to Henry Purcell?

His 12 dancers cut unconventional figures. By and large, they look like pedestrians first. Some have tremulous thighs, others can barely lift off the ground, few are svelte and yet all are directed, impassioned and musical.

As for Morris, in "Ballabili" — a parody of Egyptian dance and take-off of Verdi's opera "Aida," to whose music it is set — his exposed and pale belly pokes over his diaper-like shorts and his lower back is swayed. Dressed in a black suit for "One Charming Night," this physical misalignment is covered up, but still can't hide that 29-year-old Morris is somewhat rare: A man with a superior sense of movement and of music, whose work exceeds what first meets the eye.

As a choreographer, he pushes the limits yet holds tight to conventions. He is both a capricious flirt and a brain with honest intentions. His choreography is equal parts pretention to original invention.

Of the five dances performed, each was stylistically discreet. Yet more than once they revealed Morris as a robber of traditional forms. As Morris steals, however, he simultaneously pays tribute. It makes him rather enchanting — a

kind of choreographic alchemist who produces results that have integrity, wit and the all-essential message.

Take "Dogtown," set to a collection of Yoko Ono songs. The women dancers wear brightly colored brasieres, and share with their male counterparts the lower body apparel of bikini underpants over knicker length tights. The colors do not coordinate. The movement is staccato and rough; a single file of dancers, stiffly crossing on all fours, is repeated. Penny Hutchinson and Guillermo Resto begin to sniff each other's hind quarters. They roll over and hold their own crotches. Vulgar? Definitely, yet the crassness seems also to illuminate the mundane short-comings of Ono's music.

In the "One Charming Night" pas de deux for himself and longtime associate, Teri Weksler, the couple arranges themselves on a black seatee. She has previously danced a devastating solo section, portraying herself as restless and emotionally craven. He, looking astonishingly like Charlie Chaplin — with pale face, red lips and a tentative, schizoid, gestural timing — has appeared shy of the romantic commitment. When they do sit

down, he takes a steamy vampire bite of Weksler's neck. His body heaves and pumps.

The image is sensual and shocking. It further prods the conventions that Morris so far has played with — namely, until this point Morris has occupied himself with dainty baroque dancing and ballet in compliance with the Purcell accompaniment. He has seemed bent on propriety, and upholding civility.

"One Charming Night" — as with all Morris's pieces on the program — concludes with open-ended questions. But it is his strength that choreographically and musically everything is neatly tied.

The company's ensemble piece, "Gloria," to Vivaldi's choral music, again champions this virtue. And, again, there is a feeling of exaltation in the work — a kind of hurrah for mankind, as Keith Sabado writhes on the floor and the words "agnes dei" are sung, and the Mark Morris Dance Group walks behind him taking ordinary citizen, unself-conscious steps. The non-dancer qualities of the company are heightened. In their uniform-grey togs, they are more like us than people trained for the stage.

Sabado, on the other hand, is a perfected and stageworthy Christ figure apparently dying for our salvation. Morris seems to suggest that the "ordinary citizens" — we



Mark Morris and Teri Weksler in "One Charming Night" at Cal State Long Beach.

— ought to look up from our walks in life and can then find hope.

If there is any single impression after seeing Morris it is that, as a choreographer, he is an optimist. He is alert to the present. This extends to the dancers who listen to the music as though their lives depended on it, and the music seems therefore to stem from them as much as they from it. He favors moving on the moment.

There is also a moral certitude behind Morris, and a return to the old-fashioned modern dance values of the human body as conduit for

universal concerns, be they psychological, intellectual, spiritual or emotional. And that they are made evident if the dance and dancer can touch your heart.

Morris does this — particularly in the opening lyrical dance "The Shepherd on the Rock" to Shubert and in the beautiful 'evolution-of-man' sequence from "Dogtown." But not all the pieces on Saturday's program were as moving or immediate. Morris's intriguing ambiguity can create a vacuum — which is both the source of excitement and of disappointment.