

Joffrey Ballet: 'Esteemed Guests'

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

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Talent will out, we have been assured, but sometimes it ventures forth prematurely. Was it Groundhog Day Wednesday at the City Center? The occasion was the Joffrey Ballet's local premiere of "Esteemed Guests" by Mark Morris — a young modern-dance choreographer who has received considerable attention with his own troupe.

"Esteemed Guests" is, in classical choreographic terms, a beginner's ballet. What Mr. Morris might have made of this 24-minute plotless work to a cello concerto by Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach is always implied — in the structures and imaginativeness so obviously present. And yet the sum falls short of that promise.

This kind of mixed result, with the faint applause it elicited, deserves some explanation. Superficially, it would seem to be still another modern-dance choreographer biting off more than he can chew when attempting to use the idiom of classical ballet, toe work and ballet dancers in a major ballet company.

But unlike some current experimental modern-dance choreographers, Mr. Morris has considerable ballet training. "Esteemed Guests" is dedicated to his teacher, the late Perry Brunson, once the mainstay of the Joffrey school. Robert Joffrey, the company's director, also taught

Mr. Morris when he was very young in Seattle — their mutual hometown. A terrific dancer, Mr. Morris has always demonstrated a sure grasp of movement material in his modern-dance choreography.

"Esteemed Guests," whose title may or may not refer to the aura of a formal event in this ballet, suggests that the formality of ballet's idiom has inhibited Mr. Morris. Having decided to create a neo-classical ballet to Baroque music (Concerto in A for Violoncello and Strings), he seems uncharacteristically uptight.

Nonetheless, the opening image is spectacular. Spread out across the stage, five women in Santo Loquasto's knee-length shiny indigo leotards with black tulle skirts and five men in sleeveless black tops, black socks, and bare legs up to their own knee-length tights look fiercely pugilistic. Most of the men face the rear and there are two "red" couples in similar attire. The dynamism of the spatial arrangement is instantly telegraphed under Phil Sandström's excellent atmospheric lighting.

This first section (Allegro) also features an intricate structural interplay between dancers using classical steps. At the same time, the kind of modern-dance ideas that ballet choreographers would consider alien to their idiomatic code are used with an inventiveness that is not jarring. The ensemble's 10 dancers suddenly turn

into supports for the dead weight of their partners in the second movement (Largo). The women, especially, are placed feet apart and on the floor with their bodies stiff until they are raised and folded into jackknife position.

The fatal flaw is that such shapes and images in the second and third movement are repeated over and over — that in fact, the choreography repeats simply because the music does. There is also finally, a mismatch of warring esthetics. The ballet ends in the third movement (Allegro Assai) without warning: the dancers stop, throw back the head and lift an elbow up. This abruptness might work in the modular terms of today's experimental dance but here it suggests that the dance, unlike the music, merely ran dry.

Plotless dancing needs "interesting things" as George Balanchine once said. "Esteemed Guests" alludes to Balanchine's "Concerto Barocco" set to music by a greater Bach (Johann Sebastian) when it equates the first movement's two soloists — Deborah Dawn and Jodie Gates — with the cello, played by Frederick Zlotkin. Patrick Corbin and Philip Jerry are their counterparts in the last section while Leslie Carothers, leads the pairs in a cluttered asymmetrical second movement. Mr. Morris is too gifted to allow himself to become as literal as step-oriented as he is in "Esteemed Guests." Allan Lewis conducted.