

On Dance's Cutting Edge

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Mark Morris, who is both a dancer and a choreographer and a prodigy in both realms, looks like a cross between a mod cherub and a satanic imp. In repose, a tangled shrub of dark curly hair sits atop his broad face, with its clown eyes, imperious, aquiline nose, Botticellian lips and dimpled chin. It's when his hefty frame is in motion that the angel/devil polarity becomes most visible, however. His dance pieces oscillate between the same extremes, sometimes within a single work.

Morris takes another bound up the ladder of prominence tonight, when public TV's "Dance in America" airs an hour-long special on him and his 12-member contemporary troupe (at 9 p.m. on Channel 26). At 29, he's already the talk of the dance world. And not only the dance world—he's been the subject of major features in *Esquire* and *Connoisseur* magazines recently.

His company has been churning the waters at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's "Next Wave Festival" since 1984, and later this month a new Morris creation will be given its premiere in New York by the Joffrey Ballet, which joins a growing list of ballet companies that have sought him out. At the Kennedy Center last November, Morris confirmed for Washington audiences that all the fuss is well-founded with a knockout performance at the Terrace Theater, to which he'll return next May.

Tonight's video production, crisply paced and tightly but not oppressively crammed with material, provides a fine introduction to and overview of its subject. Seven solo and group works by Morris are seen in performance, their thematic breadth reflected in the choices of musical accompaniment, which range from country-rock to Henry Cowell, and from Vivaldi and Handel to Yoko Ono. In addition, Morris is shown in his Seattle home talking about his life, his work, his influences and his goals.

The opening, brief "Songs That Tell a Story (Robe of White)" has Morris, Donald Mouton and Guillermo Resto quivering and gesticulating quirkily to a lugubrious tune about a mother who receives a letter announcing the death of her "darlin' son." In typical Morris fashion, the choreography somehow combines irreverence, farcicality and old-fashioned sentiment. Morris often seems like the bad boy whose only means of

expressing his deepest feelings lies in poking fun at something.

One of the reasons for his popularity, though, is the resistance of his work to pigeonholing. The very next dance, "Prelude," is a bit of exotic erotica set to eastern-sounding violin and harpsichord music by Cowell. Morris finds out-of-the-way scores like this one and then proves his musical acumen in formal treatments of the utmost artistic sensitivity—it's hard to believe this music wasn't made for Morris' dance. The content is something else again—soloist Jennifer Thienes backs out of a line of tank-suited females wielding jade-colored fans, and as the line executes delicate, decorous patterns, she twists and writhes in some of the sexiest choreography this side of Las Vegas.

So it goes with Morris—you never know what's going to hit you next. The duet "Love, You Have Won," featuring Morris and Resto, both parodies and enhances the florid baroque aria to which it is set. The seven dancers of "Dogtown" (this is the one set to a Yoko Ono song), crawling around on all fours and casually pawing each other, show Morris at his most outrageously perverse, but also at a peak of invention. In "Jealousy," a Morris solo to choral music by Handel, he squirms around torturously, trying to escape the coils of an invisible serpent. "The Tamil Film Songs in Stereo Pas de Deux" is a mock dance lesson. And with the final group piece set to Vivaldi's "Gloria," Morris shows he can play it straight and handle large forms to boot, in a polyphonic structure of remarkable diversity, originality and depth.

Morris is no less precocious and unconventional in the interview portions of the program. He recounts how he started dancing at 9 after seeing flamenco master Jose Greco; how he went to New York and danced with the troupes of Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn and Laura Dean, but returned to Seattle because he was drawn to the city's quality—"mountains, water, city, water, mountains—it's like a sandwich"; how his choreographic models have been Balanchine, Taylor, Cunningham and Graham ("I'm not sure if that's homage or plagiarism"); and how he has done his best "to avoid the masterpiece syndrome" by just making one dance after another and hoping they get better. All it takes is open eyes to see that his hope, thus far, has been handsomely realized.