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TV DANCE REVIEW

PBS SPECIAL FOCUSES ON MORRIS' ECLECTICISM

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The newest episode in PBS' "Dance in America" series (tonight at 8 on Channel 24; at 9 on Channels 28 and 15; Saturday at 8 p.m. on Channel 50) begins with the obvious question: "Who is Mark Morris?" It then offers an hour of performance and interview segments by way of an answer.

When taped for this Danish-American project, Morris was only 29—the youngest choreographer to be given an entire "Dance in America" program. However, his extensive experience in ballet, modern and folk dancing is apparent in both the technical surety and conceptual eclecticism of his work.

Common to the seven short pieces danced by Morris' fine modern dance company: an unpredictable, yet persuasive musicality based on a powerful rhythmic pulse; strong gestural emphases that are usually drawn from the texts of vocal scores that he uses; a theatricality so bold that his works and performances can look florid in the intimate (and disorienting) closeups that are favored by TV director Thomas Grimm.

All the dances gain enormously from new scenery by painter Robert Bordo and designer Ves Harper.

The trio "Songs That Tell a Story (Robe of White)" and the group piece "Dogtown" both exploit a rough-hewn, colloquial pop style appropriate to their accompaniments, while the intriguing soloist-corps contrasts in "Prelude" and the intricate mirror-movement in the duet "Love, You Have Won" reveal a sophisticated development of ambitious structural gambits.

Morris' extraordinary presence and prowess as a dancer is most prominently showcased in the intense, contorted solo "Jealousy" and in the complex routines supposedly imposed by a nasty dance-master (Morris) on a hapless disciple (Penny Hutchinson) in the satiric "Tamil Film Songs in Stereo Pas de Deux."

The Paul Tayloresque "Gloria" closes the program with its overlay of pedestrian, athletic and pantomimic movement forms—all fused in a final sequence of great formal ingenuity. And, for once, Grimm manages to put his camera in the right place and leave it there.