

'Dance in America' examines Mark Morris

By HELEN PEPPARD
Daily News Dance Critic

Tonight, thanks to PBS' "Dance in America" series, the American TV audience gets its first look at Mark Morris, a young choreographer who is being touted as the greatest thing since George Balanchine (and other extravagant claims).

The hour-long program gives a real sense of the man and his work, painting a rounded picture of a creative, rebellious, yet still modest, young man. It also reveals a personality whose almost belligerent homosexuality might turn off a large segment of the viewing public.

Parts of a half-dozen Morris works, danced superbly by himself and his company, provide a revealing look at his style and range. Director Thomas Grimm has photographed the dancing with a good eye for what the viewer needs and wants to see.

But instead of leaving a glow in the heart and mind, it leaves several questions, the first of which is: "Is this really a major new talent?" Without question, he is fresh and he can be amusing. But he also tends to be self-consciously cute and literal to

the point of discomfort. A shaking torso doesn't necessarily reflect a vocal trill accurately.

"Songs That Tell a Story" is a moderately charming piece in which three dancers pantomime the words of the Louvin Brothers' "Robe of White." It has enough invention and form to make a nice opener, and the expertness of the dancers (who include Morris) gives the piece added weight.

On the other hand, Morris and Guillermo Resto's "Love, You Have Won" — danced to Vivaldi's repetitive music — is full of movement mindlessly repeated, as if to say: "Vivaldi got away with it, so I guess I can too."

Morris has danced with some of the best, including Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch and Laura Dean, and his work shows it. His sense of form is well-developed, and even a piece as complex as "Dogtown," set to three Yoko Ono tunes, has logical shape and movement. But here again, such movement as crawling around on all fours comes across as a silly use of the title, rather than a reflection on the meaning of the songs.

Morris' folk-dance background is particularly evident in his solo, "Jealousy," in which his restricted body movement and beautifully expressive hands reflect subtle Indonesian influences. A mix of Indian dance

and ballet makes another fascinating combination in "The Tamil Film Songs in Stereo Pas de Deux," danced by Morris and Penny Hutchinson.

There's no doubt that at 29, Mark Morris has created an impressive body of work. The verdict is still out about how interesting much of that work will look down the road and how permanent a place it will have in even his own company's repertoire.



MARK MORRIS
"Dance in America"

THE FACTS

- The show: "Dance in America," on the series "Great Performances."
- When: 9: p.m. tonight.
- Channel: KCET Channel 28.
- Starring: Mark Morris.
- Our rating: B.