

DISTINGUISHING MARK

Choreographer Morris goes for baroque tonight at BAM

By MARY LISA GAVENAS

"I'm doing a story on Mark Morris, and..."

"You and everybody else!" snaps the Brooklyn Academy of Music's publicity director.

At the moment, dancer, choreographer and media darling Mark Morris is hotter than hot. When his company, the 12-member Mark Morris Dance Group, opens tonight at BAM's Next Wave Festival, *anyone* who has any pretensions to being *au courant* will have to be in attendance.

Early on, Morris received the blessing of the dance press. His performances, up until now at rather small venues, were praised in *The New York Times*. Two years ago, Arlene Croce of *The New Yorker* anointed him with two reviews which even gushed about his "androgynously handsome" appearance. And in October, he was the subject of an hour-long "Dance in America" special on PBS' Great Performances.

After the best-read critics gave their imprimatur, the rest of the press weren't far behind. Here was a modern dancer who not only read but read French critic Roland Barthes and used him as the inspiration for two pieces. Featured everywhere from *Vanity Fair* to *Vogue*, Morris, 30, was selected as one of the "men and women under 40 who are changing the nation" by *Esquire* magazine, which had profiled him in a previous issue. People who wouldn't be caught dead paying to see dance, began to recognize his shoulder-length black curls and eclectic old clothes, and the dancer who says "I've never spent more than \$20 on a piece of clothing" became a trendsetter.

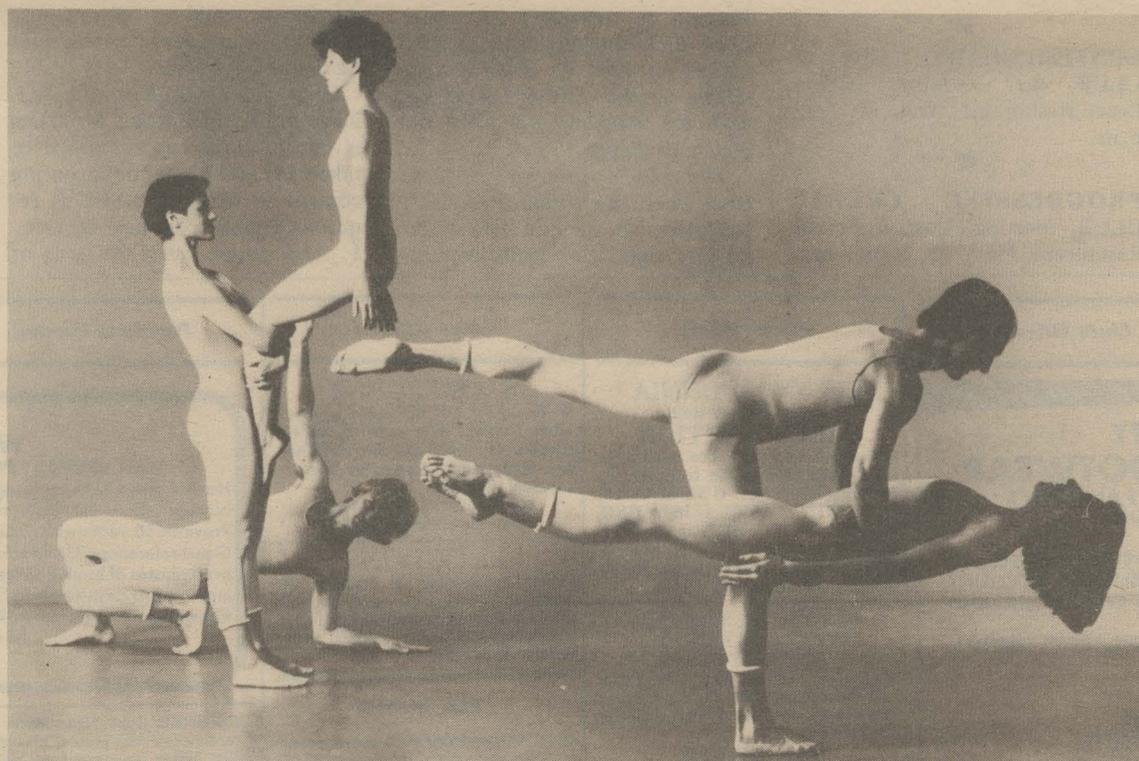
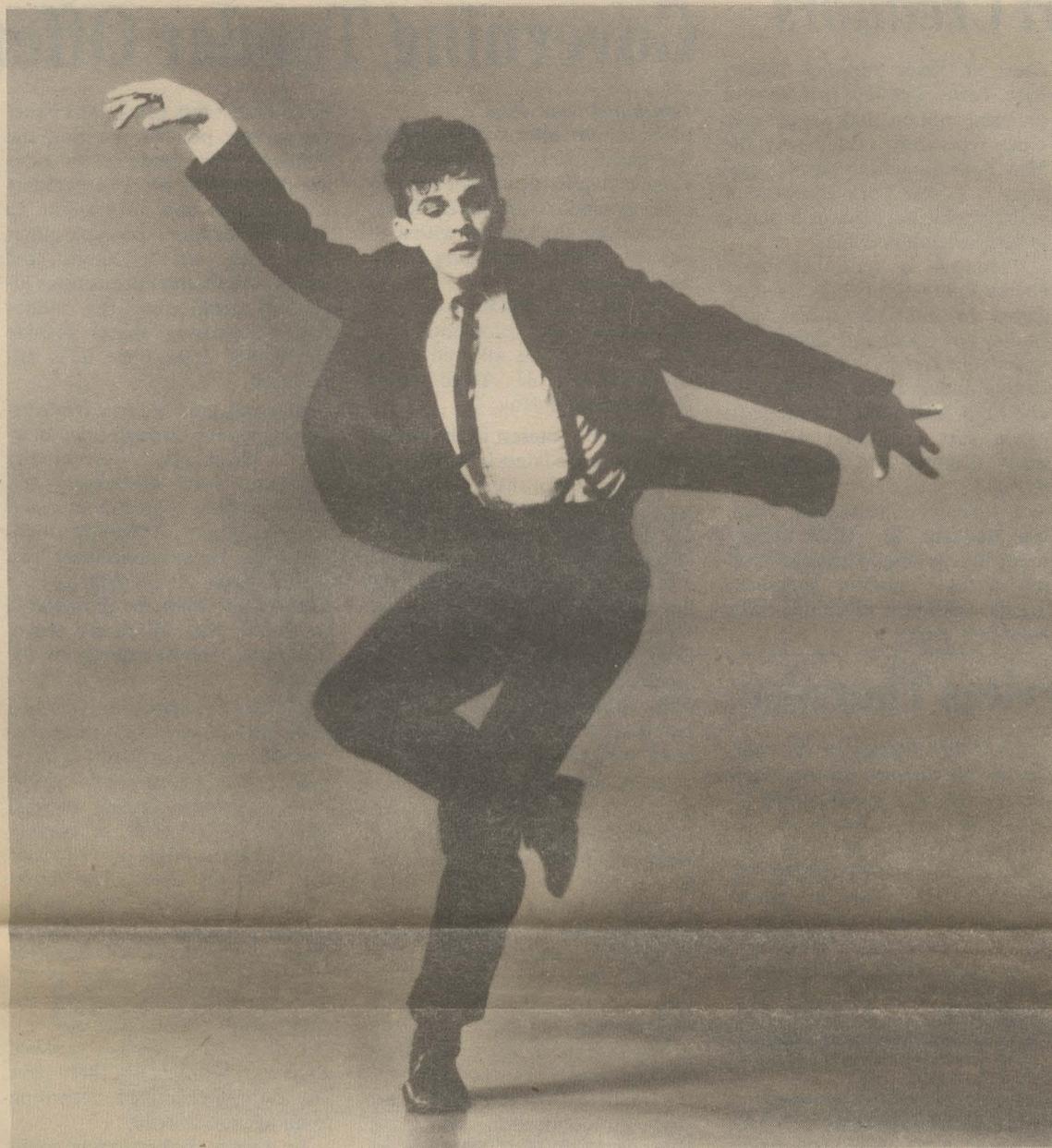
For the engagement at BAM, the allotment of press seats was the first to go, and even people reviewing the company were being asked to pay for the privilege. As one dancegoer put it, "I've never seen him, but this guy has been hyped beyond belief."

"A lot of people who wouldn't know me before are suddenly my best friend, which is all right—to a point," says Morris.

His company has never had a publicist, and he hasn't gone out of his way to attract attention. Until this fall, the company performed only to a limited audience. And, although his dancers are now based in New York, Morris himself chooses to live in Seattle—hardly the capital of the world by anyone's standards.

Like his best choreography, his best conversation is intelligent and/or funny. He tends to speak in absolutes—"This is... I love... I hate..."—that can make quotations sound like pronouncements from an *enfant terrible*.

He sounds especially sure of himself when he's talking about theater. Having just seen a New York City Opera performance of "X," he exclaims "Awful! People are afraid to say anything because they'll think you're racist, but it was just bad opera." Duck-



The Mark Morris Dance Group will appear at the Brooklyn Academy of Music tonight through Sunday. Top: choreographer Mark Morris. Bottom: the company in "Frisson."

ing and hiding his face as a choreographer colleague passes, he explains: "I love her but I hate her work."

Although he can be scathingly sarcastic, Morris never poses as a young cynic. He admires Lucinda Childs, Merce Cunningham, Lar

Lubovitch and, "of course, George Balanchine." And on certain subjects, he works himself into a state swinging between excitable and reverent. For example, he calls New York City Ballet "my favorite dance company on earth!" and would choreograph for them "in a second! For free!"

On the "Dance in America" special Morris is quoted as saying "I like to think that I've built on what's gone before me." He appeared with a folk dancing troupe, studied flamenco, and was a member of the Feld Ballet, Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn and Laura Dean companies before

starting his own in 1980.

All of the studies show up in his choreography. A phrase might start with a classical Indian gesture, continue with a balletic movement and end with a Paul Taylor-style jump. Like a pointillist painting, each component may be pure—but they all blur into one big picture.

He's used music from Yoko Ono, the baroque period, Indian film scores and country and western songs. "Esteemed Guests," a recent Joffrey Ballet commission, used C.P.E. Bach. The BAM program will use German, French and Italian baroque, played by the St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra.

Morris will wax rhapsodic about Bach's and Handel's "mathematical approach to spirituality" but end up focusing on their "profound humanity." Just as he will praise "the clear analysis" of Roland Barthes' essays but eventually talk about "a detachment that isn't cold" and their humor.

Although Morris's streetwear could win him a prize as the man least likely to describe his life's work as "highly formal dances," it has several traits in common with his choreographic creations: humor, imagination, and drawing on the past.

Morris shops Value Village in Seattle and Canal Jeans in New York, and has access to the lost-and-found bins in lots of studios. One recent ensemble included a striped shirt bearing only a vague resemblance to cotton; checked pants; two silver earrings in his left ear; and a short and snappy kelly-green jacket with three pins on the left lapel, one of which read "Honk if you're not wearing panties." His famous curls are now about chin-length, and he is now resigned to reporters quizzing him about his hair.

Morris claims he never dresses up—"I shave." Nevertheless, when it came time for a recent curtain call with the Joffrey, he appeared on stage looking rather natty, in a black and white checked jacket, baggy white pants and black and white shirt. His hair was somehow slicked back, and a segment of the audience immediately launched a discussion—not of the ballet—but the new Morris hairstyle.

Though not anti-fashion ("Well, sometimes when I'm in SoHo I'm visually assaulted by shoulder pads"), Morris lusts for Issey Miyake's clothes and other Japanese fashions that he cannot afford. "First I need to pay my dancers more. It's expensive to run a company." In his case, fame has preceded fortune—by quite a bit.

Drawing mixed critical reaction for his Joffrey piece, Morris knows a lot of people are waiting to tear into him. When he checked out British media darling Michael Clark's season at BAM, "It was terrible. I thought, 'Well, now I don't have to worry about him.'" With two world premieres on tonight's program, Morris says, "I know there are a lot of people who would just love for me to screw up."