

The Dance: Mark Morris Company

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

THE Mark Morris Dance Group, which performs through Saturday evening at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, opened there last night in the Next Wave Festival with two American premieres and a third work by Mr. Morris.

This statement of fact does little to convey the enthusiastic reception the packed opera house gave Mr. Morris and the company at the end — but it can, one hopes, pave the way for a statement of fact about the choreographer's work. In objective terms, Mr. Morris is more concerned with structure than steps. At the same time, he is also concerned with content — and that content does not run very deep.

Thus, his new "Stabat Mater," set to Pergolesi's most famous composition, is a numbing 40-minute demonstration of how an updated German movement-chorus would act out references to the music's liturgical text. His equally new "Pièces en Concert," set to François Couperin's music, is fey and clever, but its commentary about Baroque style suggests that Mr. Morris is more interested in style than content.

How then can one reconcile the popularity Mr. Morris has acquired in smaller performing spaces (this is his first appearance in the opera house) with the present state of his work? One answer is that Mr. Morris is himself so technically brilliant as a dancer, his presence so eye-riveting and his kinetic humor so sharp that one comes simply to see him. The pieces in which he appears gain immeasurably from his performance.

There is also the idea that Mr. Morris is "fun" — a word heard after "Marble Halls," which opened the program, and the Couperin work. These are light pieces, even if their underlying structures are seriously composed. Moreover, there is a communal fervor to the fine dancers Mr. Morris has assembled. The troupe recalls Lar Lubovitch's first company, with its counterculture aura — and in fact there are recent members of the Lubovitch company in the Mark Morris Dance Group (most notably, Rob Besserer).

This communal flavor is felt in the company's spirit — the way the dancers dance. It is also transmitted by the way Mr. Morris choreographs for ensembles. Starting his training as a folk dancer, he learned the secret of fashioning a collective image. If he only occasionally uses a literal folk step or pattern — such as a chain dance or round — he knows to fill the stage with patterns that have a strict completeness. There are no loose ends, and very often a stage filled with only 12 dancers seems to include many more.

An aspect of this basic approach is seen in "Marble Halls," where both



The New York Times/Jack Manning

A work entitled "Pièces en Concert." The dancers are, from left, Susan Hadley, Mark Morris and Rob Besserer.

The Program

PIECES EN CONCERT (American Premiere), choreography, Mark Morris; music, François Couperin; conductor, Michael Feldman with St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble; lighting, Phil Sandstrom; scenic design, Robert Bordo.

WITH: Rob Besserer, Susan Hadley and Mark Morris.

STABAT MATER (American Premiere), choreography, Mark Morris; music, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi; conductor, Michael Feldman, vocalists, Drew Minter with Julianne Baird; lighting, Phil Sandstrom; scenic design, Robert Bordo.

WITH: members of the company.
Presented by the Mark Morris Dance Group at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn.

the patterns (three lines of dancers that replace one another at times) and the dancer's gestures and movements are broad rather than nuanced. Dressed in lavender undershirts and orange shorts, the 10 bare-legged men and women could be selling the virtues of physical culture more than those of Bach's music. Yet they are dancing to Bach's Concerto for Violin and Oboe in C minor (Mauki Fukuhara, violin; Stephen Taylor, oboe) played by the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble conducted by Michael Feldman.

The rounded, natural style of the dancers contrasted with the refined classicism of the music is deliberate. The content becomes the play of casualness and formality, exemplified best in the fleeting duets of Keith Sabado and Ruth Davidson as well as the dancing of Teri Weksler. The variety added to these broad movements, repeated often by two units or in unison, becomes the work's saving grace in the third movement.

There is a touch of unexpected wit

— a dancer suddenly falling at the edge of a group — that is welcome. Yet Mr. Morris tends to confuse his audience. "Pièces en Concert," as a parody of Baroque style — danced by Susan Hadley, Mr. Besserer and Mr. Morris, does not work. When the performers drop "dead" and jump up into a squat, the sequence simply is not funny the fourth time around. As an entity unto itself, it says very little.

"Stabat Mater," with Drew Minter and Julianne Baird as the fine singers in the pit, took an schematic view of the Crucifixion as recounted in 13th-century poem to which the hymn is set. A curtain close to the edge of the stage showed a cross engulfed in flames for the first group section — actually a theme from which movement motifs were later to be extracted and used recurrently. This curtain was raised to reveal a backcloth with another painted cross which changed colors according to Phil Sandstrom's lighting. A final backdrop revealed a smaller cross that glowed occasionally as the dancers became more pictorial in their groupings.

Thus images of the Crucifixion and of the Pietà are recalled as the men in gray knit tights and women in gray leotards separate into trios and raise the body of a single dancer or comfort that dancer. Repetition of movement, however, finally takes its toll. Only the ending comes as a surprise. The abstracted mourning group breaks up into frozen poses from the previous choreography. A single man runs among all the other dancers.

The cast included Mr. Besserer, Miss Davidson, Tina Fehlandt, Miss Hadley, Larry Hahn, David Landis, Donald Mouton, Long Nguyen, Guillermo Resto, Mr. Sabado, Jennifer Thienes and Miss Weksler.