

Mixed Messages From Morris' Troupe

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. "Marble Halls," "Pieces in Concert," "Stabat Mater," all choreographed by Mark Morris. Music by the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble. Wednesday night at the Opera House, Brooklyn Academy of Music. Through Saturday.

By Janice Berman

MARK MORRIS, whose company last performed at the Next Wave Festival in 1984, has returned, this time to the more formal, more prestigious Opera House, a setting for a choreographer who has been noticed.

He's been noticed, to say the least. But in this case the overnight sensation isn't going to don, overnight, the mantle of greatness.

Morris is still feeling his way. He is willing to try, and be moderately successful, in a variety of modes. Another way of saying it is that he co-opts like crazy. Last time he was at the academy, he did a stunning Indian-style solo, "O Rangasayee" that was effective because he had so clearly observed elements of Indian dance. This time, the major work was the 40-minute "Stabat Mater," set to the music of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, with a backdrop of large crucifixes. When Morris took his bow, he was wearing an enormous ivory crucifix. The outward trappings are all present, but the inner message seems to be missing.

"Stabat Mater" is a serious work with no focus, despite the presence of all those crucifixes. Its heaviness seems to crush the dozen dancers, interfering even with their technique. They look unsteady, even though part of the message seems to be that they should be unsteady, particularly in a recurring motif of lifts that are followed by slides to earth.

The curtain rises on a backdrop showing a large crucifix surrounded by abstract, curving suggestions of bodies. The floor space is narrow; it deepens as this backdrop — and a succession of others, all bear-

ing crucifixes — is raised. The dancing, however, seems curiously confined, even as the space grows.

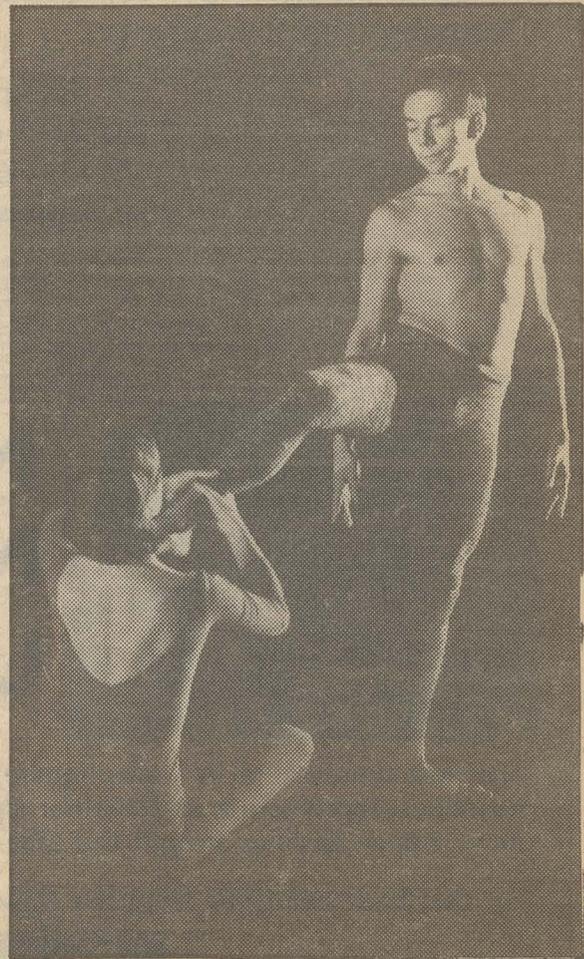
The music, beautifully played by the St. Luke's Chamber ensemble and sung by Drew Minter and Julianne Baird, is divided into sections, and after each section the dancers pause and regroup. Although each section is formal in structure, with dancers appearing in groups of four and later three, the movement is executed in an offhand, aimless way. It is impossible to tell whether this is intentional.

There are turns with outstretched arms, sequences where the dancers lift each other in seated poses, and moments where the dancers stand with their backs to the audience and one foot kicks the calf of the standing leg.

The liveliest moments come near the end of the piece, when the dancers form two lines and run in a serpentine relay from the back of the lines to the front. As the dance ends, the dancers are frozen in poses recapitulating several of the piece's motifs, and one dancer is running through these still figures.

"Marble Halls," set to J.S. Bach's Concerto for Violin and Oboe in C Minor, revised and expanded for the academy's season, remains one of Morris' more successful works, although here again the dancers looked rather unsteady in the passages calling for sustained work on one leg. They looked terrific, however, in the piece's final moments as they romped across the floor in intersecting diagonal leaps.

"Pieces en Concert," for Morris, Rob Besserer and Susan Hadley, is a happy little burlesque that skillfully incorporates and mocks conventions of courtly dances. The trio romps in a garden to the music of Couperin, and Rob Besserer very nearly succeeds in poisoning everyone, himself included. This is jolly stuff that ends up with two of the dancers obscured by trees as they take their bows. ■■■



Tom Brazil

Keith Sabado and Tina Fehlandt in Mark Morris' "Stabat Mater"