

# Hot young dancer saves his energy for the stage

The voice at the other end of the line sounded fragile and vulnerable.

"Is there any chance you could call in back in half an hour? I've not fully regained consciousness and I've been sick and I'm trying to recover."

Mark Morris was at the other end of the line and he'd come back the night before from an extended tour with his dance ensemble that had included a performance in New York that was greeted with the now usual hurrahs.

Morris, who is 30 but who sounds like a teenager on the phone, has been variously described as a "curly-haired androgynously handsome" dancer-choreographer and as a look-alike for Michelangelo's David. There's nothing in his voice to suggest that this is the hottest young modern dance mind in the United States today.

Reviewers keep referring to him as "a new force in dance," but to talk to him you realize at once that he saves his energy for the stage.

The voice is positively languid in its slow drawl. He has that easy confidence allows him to field the most direct questions with the grace that only those who really know who they are can assume.

Originally from Seattle, Morris has been around the New York dance scene for about a decade now, dancing with other ensembles like Elliot Feld, Twyla Tharp, Hannah Kahn and Lar Lubovitch and if his background is eclectic, so is his choice of music for his pieces.

Since 1980, when he formed his own ensemble, he has set pieces to music of all kinds and all ages.

Critics have spoken lovingly of his piece to a Vivaldi *Gloria* and audiences have responded equally enthusiastically to a solo he composed for some Indian music by Sri Tyagaraja.

Between those extremes there have been pieces to the music of Satie, Brahms, electronic



Jacob Siskind

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tape, Yoko Ono, Shostakovich, country music, ethnic music from Polynesia and Thailand, Henry Cowell, Beethoven and Stravinsky, to name only a few.

For his program at the NAC Opera this evening, Morris has gone for Baroque, with music by Bach, Couperin and Pergolesi. It isn't that he has moved off in that direction particularly; he's simply put three works together that make a good program and they all happen to be from the same general period.

"These are all pieces I had wanted to do anyway and I put them together because I originally wanted to do the whole program on period instruments. We got a group of special instrumentalists together for a concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

"You know it is difficult to mix instruments from different eras if you are having live players. It just becomes too complicated.

"I had also wanted to do a program that included each of the principal musical schools of the period, Italy, France and Germany."

The group is not touring with live musicians, it is too complicated and expensive, but the recordings being used generally follow his philosophy.

He is, for example, using Baroque specialist Trevor Pinnock's recording of the Bach *Concerto for two harpsichords* for the performance of *Marble Halls*, the oldest piece on the program.

That work was originally created in 1981 for the Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv, whose members had all just



Mark Morris dances in One Charming Night

come out of the Israeli army. It has changed in the interval.

"It is slightly trickier than it was originally. My dancers are a bit more versatile than the army veterans."

For the Pergolesi *Stabat Mater* he is using a recording with a very small chorus and with a countertenor for the alto part.

The Couperin is more of a problem. The *Pieces en Concert* for cello and orchestra are a modern but romantic realization of the original harpsichord pieces and Morris used a simple cello and harpsichord backing for the BAM performances. On tour he is using the orchestral recording on which he originally set the piece.

"I don't like the orchestral arrangement. I think it sucks."

The Couperin and Pergolesi pieces were both premiered this year.

What should Ottawa audiences look out for in Morris's pieces? What does he consider to be the hallmark of his output to date?

"I require that people watch and listen at the same time, which is a lot to ask. This show

is quite formal, and I think that is the most important thing to tell them.

"Especially because I've had so much press in advance it is easy to decide what a show is going to be like before you get there. Like 'I'm sure this is going to be funny, or this is going to be... I'm going to like it' or 'I'm not going to like it.'

"There's not too much you can do about that and it is not going to make any difference.

"I can't decide about anything except what I see and that is usually very much different from what other people see. They have their own interpretations of what I am doing.

"You know, I have great dancers and I use really good music, and it just takes allowing the show to have its own effect. I think that's it."

Morris's voice took on an audible pout at this point.

"You can't really describe what you are doing. There are words that come up when you first have an idea and after a while those words go away and you end up with a translation into dance terms instead."