

3 works by Morris lack emotional content in slow movements

By Jacob Siskind
Citizen staff writer

There was a gasp of obvious disappointment when it was announced Monday evening that Mark Morris would not be dancing during a performance by his ensemble at the NAC Opera.

Morris was in many ways the chief attraction of the ensemble's appearance, most of the publicity centring on his eccentricities and his stage persona.

If Morris was indeed injured a few minutes before the performance began (there was talk at intermission of a broken bone in his foot and he could be seen hopping about the back of the hall during the second part of the performance) and it took him about 10 minutes to prepare another dancer to take his place on stage, the occasion also provided a perfect opportunity to look at his work as a choreographer without being influenced by his contributions as a dancer.

The three pieces on the program proved to have as many similarities as differences.

Morris is one of the few dancer-choreographers working today who actually listens to the music he uses for his productions. His choreography and his dancers breathe and phrase to the music. The movements never simply mimic the music but they respect the natural flow, even when they move against it in visual counterpoint.

There is also a hint of parody in everything that Morris does. This was as true in the Bach and the Pergolesi as it was in the Couperin, which was a send up from first movement to the last.

Morris has a keenly-developed sense of the ridiculous, though sometimes he does work a good idea far beyond the point of making a point and simply goes on repeating himself for lack of anything else to say.

But where the three works on this program seemed weakest, or, to put a better face on it, least convincing, was in the slow sections of the music. Here Morris seemed unable to draw on any real sense of emotional involvement or feeling for inner warmth.

In the *Stabat Mater*, he took such pains to avoid the sentimental and the obviously lachrymose that he stripped the piece of all emotional content. It was almost

Dance review

Mark Morris Dance Group
A program of three dances choreographed by Morris: *Marble Halls* to music by Bach, *Pièces en Concert* to music by Couperin, *Stabat Mater* to music by Pergolesi.
NAC Opera, Monday only

like watching a parody of an imaginary late Balanchine setting of this quite beautiful score.

As a choreographer he seems to have come to the conclusion that less is more. There is great economy in his vocabulary, especially in the *Stabat Mater* and this is commendable.

What he has not succeeded in doing is making the same repertoire of movements suit all of the emotional requirements of the occasion.

There are incredibly evocative visual images and the lighting often plays across the figures of his dancers with eerie effect.

He uses the stage area with great economy and intelligence and he sustains the flow throughout. What is missing is a sense of commitment to the idea of a *Stabat Mater*, as opposed to an evening of cleverly-connected movements and gestures.

There was humor and occasional wit in the *Pièces en concert* in which Morris starts off with a parody of French court dancing and continues with a parody of affectation and preciousness in dance itself.

The piece becomes more broad as it progresses, almost as though the creator feared that his audience might not get the point and felt the need to underline more heavily with each successive section.

The Bach piece, *Marble Halls*, is in some ways the most successful of this program. There is such unbridled energy flowing across the stage that you are overwhelmed by the sheer force of the movement.

Here too, though, the second, slow movement was the least convincing, threatening to become static rather than still, while the finale gushed with the energy of a geyser.

In all, though, the evening whetted the appetite for more work by this unquestionably talented choreographer.