

Mark Morris is a renaissance man

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According to American journals such as *Dancemagazine* and the *New York Times*, the Mark Morris Dance Group is hot. Really hot. He and his twelve dancers have résumés which read like a who's who of contemporary US dance—they've previously belonged to or worked with Lar Lubovitch, Bill T. Jones, Rosalind Newman, Hannah Kahn and Karol Armitage, among others.

Morris and his company gave their Canadian premiere at the National Arts Centre on Monday, November 24, presenting a programme of three pieces which displayed Morris' athletic, optimistic choreography. "Humanistic" might actually be the best way to describe Morris' artistic philosophy, in the Renaissance tradition of showing the beauty, glory, grace and potential of man and woman.

The first piece, *Marble Halls*, set to J.S. Bach's *Concerto for Two Harpsichords and Strings in C minor*, was an uplifting celebration of movement. Morris' patterns were very precisely designed, and the dancers moved in perfect time to the music, executing their steps with mathematical precision.

One of the generalizations made in dance is that American choreographers have a tendency to be very loose and athletic on stage, to run faster and turn harder. Morris certainly seems to fit this generalization, and his dancers were well-outfitted in their orange shorts and purple tops. Morris' movements, however, also harken back to the court dances of the 17th century; the gavotte and minuet-like steps were easy to spot. Overall, *Marble*

MARK
MORRIS
DANCE
GROUP



Halls is an exuberant, uncomplicated work that set the tone of the evening quite aptly.

Pièces en concert displayed Morris' puckish, quirky sense of humour. Danced Rob Besserer, Susan Hadley and Tina Fehlandt (taking the place of Morris himself), it is a gentle poke at the conventions and poses of ballet, particularly heavily-costumed melodramatic ballets. François Couperin's *Concert Pieces for Cello and Strings* was the catalyst for the often silly movements of the silk-costumed dancers. With happy, dumb grins on their faces, they

would execute frappés and jetés, to the delight of the audience.

One particularly humorous sequence involved Besserer holding what was obviously some form of narcotic catnip in his hands as he led Hadley and Fehlandt around the stage. When they got near his hands, they would peck like ducks until, overcome, they theatrically collapsed. When they rose again, they danced more clumsily, knocking over the potted trees on stage and running into one another.

Burlesque ballet it may have been, but the audience appreciated it.

After the intermission came Morris'

newest piece, *Stabat Mater*, set to the choral voices and music of Giovanni Pergolesi. This is humanistic dance at its apex, obviously influenced by Morris' Christianity (the programme notes thank God, along with others). The backdrop features large crosses which rose throughout the piece; each raised drop providing more space to dance until the entire stage was utilized.

The dancers moved in groups on and off stage; as one group finished, they would run off stage to be replaced by another. Morris' choreography was graceful and fluid, including some interesting partnering but it seemed somewhat unsatisfying overall. He didn't exploit as much of the stage as he could have, and often the movements repeated themselves. Maybe it was a result of using Pergolesi's music, which is very slow and dignified and stately. The dancing quite aptly fit the definition of humanism, which seeks to show the higher glory of humanity.

It was unfortunate that there were noticeable flaws in the dancing of *Stabat Mater*—missed cues, misplaced steps, and one dancer very obviously losing her balance for a moment. These problems detracted from the appeal of the piece as it was.

Morris is a good choreographer, quite good. But he's not as spectacular as the advance clippings might have led one to believe, at least as far as this programme showed. What Morris displayed is a strongly American style of choreography, which emphasizes strong, fast movement. It's interesting to speculate as to what drives him; he might be defined as a contemporary Renaissance choreographer. I don't think he'd mind the tag.