

Morris, Men's Chorus pair for music and dance

by Melinda Bargreen
Times music critic

Leaning artistically on a cane, puffing away at his clove cigarette, Mark Morris is getting ready to unleash upon the world his latest choreographic work, which premieres Thursday in the first of three Seattle Men's Chorus concerts.

The man who brought nude dance to Boston, the irreverent innovator who has become the hottest property on the American modern-dance scene, has been on ice himself since November. Yesterday the cast came off after surgery and the implantation of a metal pin in Morris' fifth metatarsal of the right foot ("It feels foreign, but not horrible"). He fractured the bone during a performance when he landed a jump "and just felt it explode."

The good news is that Morris, even with the pinned metatarsals, does not set off metal detectors in airports.

The bad news is that he won't be able to stage what he ironically calls "my triumphant return to the stage" until May, when his troupe plays Manhattan with the same dances that set Boston aflame a year ago.

Don't expect the ordinary from Mark Morris. A gay artist who reveres showmanship as well as more conventional artistry,

Morris is dedicating his new dance to Liberace, "not only because he was the most high-profile recent AIDS death, but because of his incredible generosity toward audiences. I hope my piece has some of the same spirit of openness and generosity."

The new work is set to Lou Harrison's "Four Strict Songs," which will be sung by the Seattle Men's Chorus with the Northwest Chamber Orchestra in performances Thursday, Saturday and Sunday in Meany Theater. Composer Harrison will be in the audience for the performance of his 1955 work, which involves a specially tuned piano and tuned water bowls (Harrison is bringing his own bowls with him so the sound will be exactly right).

The programs also will include the Northwest premiere of David Conte's Invocation and Dance, Choral Hymns from Holst's "Rig Veda" and four Copland arrangements of folk songs. Morris, Harrison and Conte will offer a free 7 p.m. round-table discussion in Meany's Studio Theater preceding the Thursday concert.

The events are the latest in a series of programs of unusual merit and initiative undertaken by the 120-voice chorus and its direc-



Jimi Lott / Seattle Times

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Mark Morris oversees rehearsal of his new work, set to "Four Strict Songs," which will be sung by the Seattle Men's Chorus.

Dancer is preparing comeback from injury

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tor, Dennis Coleman, who also will be leading the December premiere of a new work commissioned from the composer Gian Carlo Menotti (best known to the public for his operas "Amahl and the Night Visitors" and "The Consul").

This week's concerts will have the Mark Morris Dancers performing in front of a transparent scrim, which separates the chorus and orchestra from the front of the stage. Conductor Coleman describes the music as "really beautiful; Mark heard it years ago and was very enthusiastic about creating a dance to it. I think it's a masterpiece that will stand up over time."

Nobody outside the company has seen the dance yet, but Morris describes it "a piece for 10 people, five men and five women, that also has some signing — the performances are signed for the hearing impaired — and reflects the text, which is a nature study."

"It's very active, with endless jumping. I like to jump, and I couldn't when I was making this up. There is some geometric movement, with washes of action that aren't in strict time."

"I like to think it's beautiful."

Morris himself is preparing the arduous task of getting back into shape after months of enforced inactivity. For him, the work of rehearsing with his company is usually more than sufficient to keep in top trim, but now he also is heading for the gym to work out — carefully.

Creating the new choreography wasn't much different when Morris was laid up, because he has often choreographed works in which he doesn't appear. The rehearsal process is different, because he can't show dancers what he wants. With the Harrison "Four Strict Songs," Morris began the process by listening to the music for a long time, following the complicated score.

"It's difficult to keep track of," he admits. "It has hard numbers. The first week of rehearsal we didn't use any music, just worked on the action. I threw out a lot of steps that didn't work."

"But I'm very happy about the dance. I finished it a week and a half early, which must be a record for me."

Morris and his troupe will begin a new tour a week from tomorrow, stopping in the Midwest and the East, concluding with performances in New York.

"I would rather go to Asia than Ohio," he admits, "but I am happy with the balance of work I have now. There is the University of Washington connection (Morris recently completed a teaching residency there, and will offer a workshop here this summer), and the touring, and some time in New York, and then the opera things."

Morris will make his stage-directing debut with Seattle Opera next season, and already has done some choreography for the company. He will work this summer with *enfant terrible* stage director Peter Sellars on a production of "Don Giovanni," and later will juggle troupes of Asian acrobats

and belly dancers for a Houston Grand Opera production of the new opera "Nixon in China," which opens in October.

Meanwhile, Morris pushes back his trademark mop of dark curls, grabs his cane and his cigarettes and heads off for more rehearsals. Anything he wants to say to the public?

"Tell them to come to this," he says. "I hate it when people say, 'I didn't see your new piece, but I heard it was great.' If you love the arts, you go to performances."