

## DANCE

## The Morris Flair

BY Nanci Hoetzlein

**M**ark Morris does not look like a member of that physically refined breed of artists called dancer. Dressed in baggy bermudas, wordy T-shirt and a bright maroonish pair of socks, Morris stalked into his master class at Helen Newman Hall giving the impression of a high school wrestler who had switched to organic gardening halfway through college in the '60s. And that's exactly what's so refreshing about him. His loose, broad back, wry comments and modulated hand-clapping soon had the dancers moving in subtle nuances previously unexplored by them. His uninhibited animation allowed the class to combine spontaneous laughter with concentration and effort.

Mark Morris is a hot phenomenon in today's dance world. The dances in his program vary widely, yet each is stamped with a trademark strikingly his own. Much of his work is sophisticated and uplifting, especially those dances which he refers to as coming from his "Baroque Period." These pieces, such as *New Love Song Waltzes*, to music by Johannes Brahms (*Neue Liebeslieder Walzer*, opus 65), show the true affinity Morris has with Western classical music. He translates the music into contemporary dances filled with innovation, complexity and exciting interpretations. When the movements are lush or lovely or hauntingly humorous, we are transported to a higher plane. Some of his pieces contain only fleeting moments of this flair. When the movements become coarse or sarcastic or overly repetitious, we wonder why. Whether or not Mark Morris is a choreographic genius remains to be seen. At age 31, he has plenty of time.

**NH:** Where does your motivation come from for your more religious dances, such as the Vivaldi pieces?

**MM:** From the music.

**NH:** So first you find certain music that appeals to you and then you start working with it?

**MM:** Yeah, I'm drawn to particular kinds of music. I don't know if I'd call them my religious pieces as much as maybe my obviously spiritual pieces. I don't feel any differently about them than I do about any others because I approach making dances the same way all the time. I'm basically a pantheist.

**NH:** Do you ever have an idea first and then look for music to express the idea?

**MM:** Yeah, but it's hard for me to recall how I made up a lot of these pieces.

**NH:** What do you think of the term postmodern?

**MM:** (Laughs) It doesn't mean anything.

**NH:** Can you categorize your work at all?

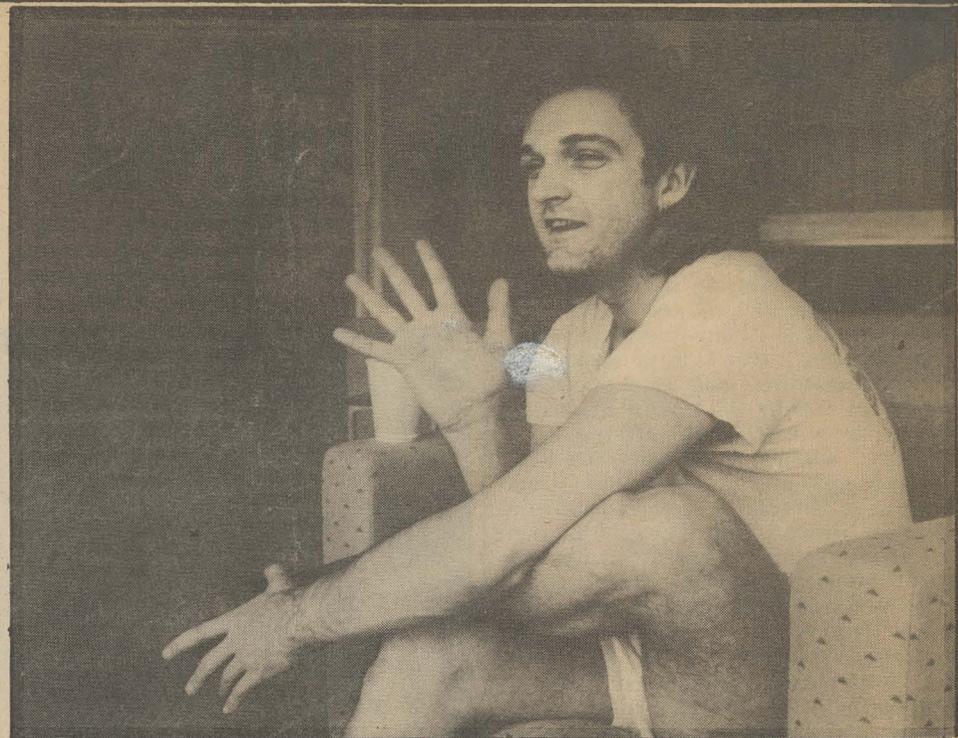
**MM:** No. Maybe I'm like a post-neo-romantic expressionist. Something more like that. If I'm one of those, I'd be a modernist, not a postmodernist.

**NH:** So are you against the term postmodern in general or more for yourself?

**MM:** I use it as a joke. The only dancer I'd refer to as postmodernist with dignity is Lucinda Childs. In every other way, it's like, ugh, it means I don't want to see it; it's more for a classy audience. I don't want to listen to it. It's sort of mauve and mint. That's fine. Michael Graves is postmodern. Perfectly acceptable.

**NH:** What about your use of gesture in your dances. There seems to be an element close to classic mime.

**MM:** I hate mime. I'm one of those who thinks that all mimes should be exterminated. I like gesture and I like the gestural traditions of Eastern dance a lot more, because they're real and they're



photo/Geoff Donovan

abstracted through history and through tradition, not just stylized to make it like a trick. You know, like pulling the rope business. I'd been studying American sign language very briefly because I was crippled and I was doing a piece with a men's chorus (which we're not doing here), so I was going to have some signing in it. But then I thought that was incredibly stupid because it's easier to make ten people look like the ocean than it is to sign the wave.

**NH:** Have you thought of starting a school?

**MM:** Yeah, sure. I'd love to do that. "But first, a school..." I'm really pro-ballet and I don't think it's usually taught very well... Everything just gets so rigid and weird, so a dancer moves in whatever discipline that is.

**NH:** So you're saying it's not that ballet is rigid...

**MM:** No, ballet is fabulous.

**NH:** ...it's ballet dancers who are.

**MM:** Ballet teachers teach rigidity. And

dancers don't ask questions.

**NH:** Does your success surprise you?

**MM:** No, but the, uh, what's the word, the size of my success does... this enormous press avalanche, which is fine, but when you say he's the greatest choreographer since the wheel, then that automatically sets it up for the opposite thing...

**NH:** But you must have known at a certain point that what you were doing was unique and of quality.

**MM:** Well, yeah, sure. That's what I wanted to make up. I wanted to make up dances of quality, so I did. I mean, you do what you can.

**NH:** What else do you want to tell us?

**MM:** It's always just this: I want people to watch dances; mine in particular, but a lot of other people's in general. The very hardest thing is to listen and watch at the same time. So much dance for so long was not about that. □

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