

Morris brings his eclectic, progressive style to McCarter

By MURIEL FREEMAN
Courier-News Writer

Mark Morris is a postmodern choreographer/dancer whose arrival on the dance scene has signaled the passage of generations. In the relatively few years since he founded his Mark Morris Dance Group in 1980, he has become a master of assimilation of the best that has occurred in dance in the past, thus becoming our guide to the future.

He is called by many "The Crown Prince of Dance" and was cited by *Esquire* magazine as one of the men and women under 40 who are "changing the nation." This adulation for the 30-year-old Seattle native brings him to the McCarter Theatre in Princeton tomorrow night at 8 p.m. as part of the theater's "Cutting Edge" series which introduces inventive and experimental artists trying new disciplines.

There is no all-purpose formula to his work. However, he is particularly noted for his effective use of music in the diversified works he has choreographed for his 12-member company, relying on everything from reggae to rock, from Bach to The Beatles. His themes range from the death of Socrates, to child abuse to classic Ameri-

can Indian dance.

In a telephone interview from his New York headquarters, Morris concurred that music is everything when he is creating a dance piece. "My structure is based on the music I use; the dances are the visualization of the music," he said. "I make up steps to accompany the rhythmic motif that appears somewhere in the music."

In addition to his tasteful choice of music, Morris aficionados claim his unusual subject matter and off-the-wall humor has endeared him. Parody with a soupcon of sympathy seems to be the hallmark of his deft touch.

Some inkling of his pungent wit is seen in works such as "Ballabilli," in which two dancers carry a third like a huntsmen's prize boar to the music from the "Triumphal March" from *Aida*. In "Shepherd on the Rock," Morris satirizes heterosexual love by mismatching fat ladies and wimpy men to the throbbing strains of Schubert's music. As a change of pace, he offers punk profanity in "Dogtown," which some find shocking. He speaks to audiences in many tongues.

Queried about the so-called Morris "backlash," he took it in stride. There was a shrug-of-the-shoulder in his voice when he replied, "If I am being lauded, then expose myself to those

who think of me as a charlatan, I have to rely on the majority of those who come to see my work and apparently enjoy the statements I make. I want audiences to look and listen carefully at the same time and try to determine the message I am trying to get across."

As to Morris' own favorites among his work, he said "It is always the most recent works. Right now, it is 'Stabat Mater' which I presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and 'Strict Songs' which I presented in Seattle."

Morris dancers, whom he describes as "old" at 29 and 30, are mostly colleagues whom he has met while working as a dancer with the *creme de la creme* of modern dance: Eliot Feld, Lar Lubovitch, Twyla Tharp, Hannah Kahn and Laura Dean. "In modern dance we are less subject to tyranny than in classical ballet," he explained. "We don't start training as early as ballet dancers and even though we are a wild group, we last longer. However, I'm in charge and although my dancers are brilliant, I'm very demanding and work everybody very hard. But we all like each other."

Morris returns to his Seattle origins where he lives and works, preferring it to the more hectic milieu of

the New York metropolitan area. He started at age 6 to invent movements to music, not realizing that it was called "dance." He'd make up stories to go with the movements — which he says he still does today. Robert Joffrey was one of his early teachers.

Described by John Gruen, the senior editor of *Dance Magazine*, as looking like a cross between Sean Penn and Boy George, the tall (5 ft. 11"), burly Morris has had extensive training in flamenco and Eastern European ethnic dance, especially Bulgarian and Yugoslavian. "Actually, my mother has never recovered from the fact that I didn't become a flamenco dancer," he commented.

Now catapulted to the status of pop celebrity, a role he cherishes, Morris is in constant demand with major companies commissioning his works. He launched the "Dance in America" series last fall with a 60-minute program. He has choreographed for the Joffrey Ballet, Boston Ballet, Dance Umbrella, Jacob's Pillow Dancers, and for the Seattle Opera's production of "Salome," the "Dance of the Seven Veils." His aforementioned favorite work, "Stabat Mater" set to Pergolesi's music, was the highlight of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's 1986-87 season.

The audience tomorrow night will



MARK MORRIS

see a group of four dances: "Canonic Three-Quartet Studies," set to music of various composers; "Deck of Cards" for two male soloists to the music of George Jones, T. Texas Tyler and Jimmy Logsdon; and "Celestial Greetings," a dance for six women set to the popular music of Thailand. "Gloria," in which Morris

uses religion, one of his favorite dance subjects, has become his single most-acclaimed work. It is set to Vivaldi's *Gloria* in C.

Tickets are \$12, \$13, \$15, \$16 and \$21. Call (609) 683-8000, today and tomorrow from noon till 6 p.m. for tickets and information.