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Dance

Mark Morris' Masterly Steps

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Coming off an evening of choreography by Mark Morris such as the one at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater Thursday night, you get this impulse to hold your breath.

"Wait a minute," you're saying to yourself, "we all thought the age of giants was over for modern dance. The times that bred Graham, Cunningham, Taylor—they're gone. This can't really be happening."

You're itching to follow through, throw caution windward and hail Morris as a postmodern messiah, come to restore faith in the fabled dynasty of American dance creativity.

A contrary impulse, however, rooted in critical reserve and skepticism, fights back. "Now hold on," it says. "Morris is 30 years old. His company only goes back to 1980. Sure he's gifted, brilliant, exceptional even. But let's not go off the deep end here."

Nevertheless, in the face of such prudence, one yearns to respond with a "what are we waiting for?" You see a work like "Gloria," the finale of the Terrace program, and you know from the gut it's the real thing. A work of choreographic genius. Thrilling, original, profound, superb in conception and structure. Whole careers have been made on far less than this single opus.

Even "Gloria" gives one pause, though. There's this almost paradoxical mixture, as in most of Morris, of the traditional and the weird. The flagrant androgyny of it all, the subversive humor and the drastically stylized ornamentation of the movement, expressing itself in ornate curvilinear filigree—all these suggest that Morris may represent not a classical, but a mannerist phase. Maybe he's the possibly decadent end of something, rather than a new beginning?

On the other hand, the cumulative impact of Morris' output is extraordinary, as is his sheer prodigality and range. This was the second appearance by the Mark Morris Dance Group at the Kennedy Center; the first was in 1985. In between, we've also seen a public TV "Dance in America" special on Morris, and, just last month, the Joffrey Ballet staged his subdued but sturdy "Esteemed Guests" here. In all, Washington has been exposed in two years to 14 works, awesomely diverse in tone and format, yet only a fraction of what Morris has done. His appeal, moreover, is broad-based. A work such as "Gloria" provokes the kind of spontaneously vociferous demonstration one associates with rock concerts, from an audience not in the least cliquish.

Whatever Morris' ultimate position in the dance-his-

torical scheme of things turns out to be, it's certain that he's a startling phenomenon, and that many decades will be spent in taking his measure.

"Gloria," set to Vivaldi's "Gloria in D" for chorus and orchestra, with its liturgical text, shows off Morris' wares resplendently. The opening is a stunner: The curtain rises on darkness; a propulsive, octave-leaping rhythmic phrase is heard from the instruments alone; light then reveals a man inching along the floor on his belly toward the audience, and a woman alongside him, advancing erect but with odd semaphoric gestures of limbs and torso. Darkness returns in a shocking instant, as the choral voices suddenly enter proclaiming "Gloria, Gloria in excelsis Deo," and through the entire rest of the section, we just listen to the ecstatic, self-sufficient music.

It isn't until the ensuing "Et in terra pax" section that dancers again take the stage, and the belly-slinking motif ("in terra" is Latin for "on Earth") is adopted and expanded on a large scale by the cast of 10. The belly-slink recurs in formally significant ways, especially toward the end of the piece. It's one of an amazing gallery of movement motifs—ranging from waving arms to balletic beats to a lateral walk across the stage—Morris introduces, extends, inflects and varies, tying them all together in a choreographic structure of astonishing coherence and power.

The movement, in "Gloria" as in so much of Morris' work, seems to spring from the music in compellingly instinctive ways. One viscerally feels the pressure of a musical phrase, the march of the music's rhythm, in the velvety unfolding of bodies, the wrench and swing of muscles, the mutating arrangements of dancers within the stage space. In the way he responds to music, Morris reminds one as much of Balanchine as of Paul Taylor, whose weighted, physical idiom is a clear influence on Morris.

At the opposite end of the Morris spectrum there was "Deck of Cards," a fabulously entertaining duet that also starts in darkness, broken in this case by the headlights of a tiny, toy trailer truck tooling around the stage, as a country-western singer croons about liking his "highways straight, and my women with curves." A second ballad brings on Morris in drag, incongruously evoking a backroads Isadora Duncan. After a third song introduces a soldier (in military jacket and undershorts) jailed for card-playing, and his hilariously "pious" alibi, the "woman" and the truck return for a final, crazy image.

Equally off the wall was the opening aperitif, "Celestial Greetings," a mock tribal frolic set to ludicrously kitschy pop music from Thailand. The remaining work, "Strict Songs"—dedicated to Liberace, commissioned by the Seattle Men's Chorus and set to music by Lou Harrison—was another story, a kind of euphoric, Shangri-La ceremony invoking imagery running from early modern dance to oceanic waves to stylized Eastern wrestling arts, blended into a movement tapestry of spellbinding intricacy and beauty.

It's apt that Morris should call his superlative company of dance artists by the term "Group," harkening back to the socially conscious, idealistic, questing dance world of the '30s. He and all his dancers are fit heirs of the grand pioneers.