

Making A Mark In Dance

The Kinetic Career Of a Choreographer

By Pamela Sommers
Special to The Washington Post

One look at Mark Morris, and it's easy to understand why the 30-year-old choreographer-dancer has generated equal parts adulation and controversy. With his shoulder-length ringlets, dark eyes and sinuous body, he emanates flamboyance, intelligence and romantic fervor. And when he dances, that effect is magnified tenfold.

From the mid-'70s to the early '80s, Morris' physical and kinetic allure made him stand out in any performance. He whirled and stomped in Laura Dean's ritualistic dances, proved a wellspring of lyricism and musicality for modern choreographers Lar Lubovitch and Hannah Kahn, worked for ballet maker Elliot Feld. He even trod the boards with a folk ensemble that specialized in the dances of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.

Since he began presenting his own dances seven years ago, Morris' rep-

See MORRIS, G5, Col. 3

THE WASHINGTON POST

SUNDAY, MAY 10, 1987 G5

Morris

MORRIS, From G1

utation has soared. Gushing forth one after another, these are works of startling range and structural clarity. Morris' musical choices—everything from Vivaldi to Henry Cowell to traditional Thai and Romanian music to Yoko Ono—often serve as the inspiration for his creations.

Yet there is also a distinctly theatrical bent to the work. He and his troupe, who appear Thursday through Saturday at the Terrace Theatre, move floridly, awkwardly, like adolescents, vampires, rutting beasts, unhinged cherubs. And though the steps and gestures themselves are not particularly ground breaking, the choreographer's juxtapositions and attitudes take a spectator by surprise.

"The trend now is to try to make up movement that has never been done before, to reinvent the human body," Morris scoffs. "That's ridiculous. There's nothing new. You can walk and run and turn around and fall. Balanchine would tell you that. So would Paul Taylor, or Vestris or Petipa."

It is late in the evening; the choreographer is speaking by phone from New York. He has spent the day rehearsing the company for its week-long run of his "Methologies," a trio of dances that grew out of essays by the late Roland Barthes. Morris is charged up, overflowing with opinions, sure of himself and curiously unfazed by his success.

"I don't feel very much different from how I always felt," he declares in his half-sardonic voice. "If you do what you want and what you think you do well, it's not a big surprise to be loved or hated. But it is a relief to have this be-

my only job—I no longer have to dance for other people, and I don't have to hustle. It's very pleasant."

"Pleasant," in fact, seems an appropriate word to use in describing this young man's existence up to now. Born and raised in Seattle, blessed with "fabulous" parents and two "fabulous" sisters, Morris was encouraged to dance from an early age. He was bitten by the bug at age 8, while attending a performance by the José Greco Spanish Dance Company. He studied flamenco, ballet, folk dancing and—instead of college—experienced an invaluable "hands-on" education with some of New York's most gifted choreographers.

"I learned loads of stuff from everyone I danced with," he says. "And though I studied keyboard and theory, my musical education has been mostly self-realized. I listen to music that I like and then study it. In fact, I'd rather go to a music concert than a dance performance. Most dancers, poor things, are just educated to count to 8, or to move in 3/4 time."

Needless to say, his own troupe does not fall into that unflattering category. "My dancers are highly versatile, mature and interesting artists," he says with pride. "I didn't have to audition them. Most have worked with me in other people's companies, and a lot of them have appeared in my dances since the beginning."

Though all of his dancers lived in New York City, these days Morris calls Seattle home. Why would Mr. Toast of the Town abandon the Big Apple at this critical point in his career?

Morris rattles off his reasons:

"My family is there. I work at the university. The weather is beautiful. And it makes me like New York better."

He maintains apartments in both cities, however, enabling him to spend several weeks rehearsing with the company before each of its appearances there and to take in lots of cultural events. This time around, he's already attended three performances by the Paul Taylor Dance Company and watched the American Ballet Theatre for the first time in 10 years.

All this concert-going has set Morris musing about his own work, both in practical and theoretical terms. Told that his "Esteemed Guests"—a piece commissioned by the Joffrey Ballet and premiered here during that company's recent season at the Kennedy Center—was uncharacteristically tame and predictable, he responds ambiguously:

"That piece was either loved or hated. It provoked more extreme reactions than any other dance of mine." Was the rather homogeneous look and style of the Joffrey dancers a problem? "They're nice dancers," he says. "I just didn't want them to freak out or look stupid."

Enough of past endeavors. Morris lives in the present. In addition to his company stints in New York and Washington, he is at work on the choreography for "Nixon in China," an opera by John Adams (directed by Peter Sellars), to be presented this fall by the Houston Grand Opera, followed by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Kennedy Center and the Netherlands Opera. Soon after, he'll create the movement sequences for the Seattle Opera's new production of Gluck's "Orfeo ed Eurydice."

As he digs into all of these projects, Morris ponders certain large and thorny issues. Does he consider himself a political being? Can one make major statements in dance terms? Can dancing change the world?

"I believe that one's politics are inseparable from one's art or work," he says. "But when you try to make a *major statement*, it's all over. The minute you say: 'Here is my big piece on incest or evil heterosexuals or the Ku Klux Klan,' you're dead in the water."

Dancing is "not like working for the Peace Corps," Morris adds. It creates ripples, not tidal waves of change. Yet it's undeniably his calling.

"If I were paralyzed from the neck down tomorrow," he says, "I suppose I'd still manage to choreograph somehow. I mean, I wouldn't go into Middle English love poetry, or become a lineman for the county. You do what you have to do."