

Morris breaks the rules with elegance and fun

Dance review

By Robert Merritt
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Nothing is quite what it seems with the Mark Morris Dance Group. Just when you think you've got them figured out, they do something that completely reshapes the possibilities of dance and you start all over again.

Performing last night before about 400 people in the first of two concerts to conclude the Fast/Forward series at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the 12-member company continually offered challenges. And, in the process, they showed why they're the hottest modern dance ensemble in the country.

There were four works on the program, each drawing from an entirely different source and an entirely different set of rhythmic rules — traditional Thai music, country and Western songs, Hopi Indian chants and, in the second half, Vivaldi's "Gloria."

The 30-year-old Morris, who formed the group in 1980 and does all of the choreography, acknowledges the rules, but the rhythms are a challenge. Anything that hints in the least bit to tradition is only a tease for the eclectic movement — unique, unprecedented and joyful movement — that the rhythms inspire.

Not only has Morris brought elegance back to the sharp edges of modern dance, but he's also brought back the fun. Combining a strong sense of ballet with a full appreciation of all that modern dance has experienced between Martha Graham and Twyla Tharp, he finds his own way with humor and a new set of kinky values.

"Celestial Greetings," which opened the program, is a perfect teaser. The Thai music is filled with anticipated images, rhythmic repetitions and, in Morris' mind, all sorts of possibilities. Using six members of the group, he captures the spirit of Asia, the forms of its sculpture, the fluid lines of the music and he does it all using modern dance idioms.

And that certainly sets the stage for "Deck of Cards," in which nothing is what it seems. Using the songs of Jimmy Logsdon, George Jones and the title cut by T. Texas Tyler, he opens the three movements with a toy truck, operated by remote control, dancing around the stage.

The second movement is about a honky-tonk girl, but who's dancing on stage — it's Morris, wearing a skirt, flipping around his long hair and creating a comic vignette of pure melodrama. And in the third, dancer Donald Mouton plays a soldier explaining how a deck of cards served as his prayer book in the field; he's in uniform, only he isn't wearing any trousers.

"Strict Songs" carried things a step further into the realm of the abstract. Building on Hopi chants, the ensemble moves in and out of narrative context. The chants draw up moody images of ritual, but the dancers quickly move beyond this, expressing pure movement as if they are robotic machines designed for this purpose.

"Gloria" not only capped the evening but also seemed to be the culmination of Morris' eccentricity. The music conjures up religious symbols, and Morris plays with this. He gives you all the symbols you could ever want, but he caresses them with movement so elegant and so pure that it is mesmerizing.

The concert will be repeated at 8 p.m. today.