

Dance Review

Innovative Mark Morris

By Alex Bloomstein

BECKET

Perhaps because he doesn't fit neatly into a current dance/performance niche, Mark Morris, whose Dance Group opened a week of performing at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival Tuesday, has been hailed as one of the most innovative and promising of new choreographers.

The enigmatic Morris refuses to base his work on the pedestrian, fairly undramatic themes that have tended to dominate the work of his New York contemporaries, while also rejecting the narrative, theatrical or highly dramatic forms favored by many mainstream choreographers. Morris is attempting to sit on a very rickety fence between these two approaches, and in order not to fall over, he needs a lot of artistic and intellectual agility, much of which he fortunately has.

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Principally, what Morris has is a very defined sense of style; a style that shows itself in the shapes, the rhythms and dynamic variety, and, above all, the sense of space, pattern, and tableaux he employs. Currently, there are few modern choreographers who can work with an ensemble the way Morris can. The intricate patterns, the extremely complex physical ebb and flow, and the inventive partnering combine with the steps themselves to create rich and fascinating scenes.

These elements come together beautifully in "Strict Songs," a Jacob's Pillow premiere. To watch the effortless patterns and partnering is to appreciate Morris' artistic sensibility. The fact that it is the most recent work bodes well for the future.

This piece also seems to have a much needed subtext of sorts. The Lou Harrison score, though based on the music of Native Americans, has a distinctly Gregorian chant feel to it, something Morris appreciates and uses to his advantage. The movement has a meditative quality, weightiness of thought and a overall restraint that somehow suggests the dancing of a group of 20th century monks. It remains effective throughout.

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Unfortunately, the precarious position in which Morris has placed himself does mean a fall or two, and he definitely took them Tuesday night. Sometimes the sheer number of dancers onstage, the flurry of activity, can mask any serious choreographic problems. Likewise, style alone cannot carry every piece.

For Morris, as evidenced by "Deck of Cards," a duet, and "Jealousy," a solo, the danger is getting so involved in the style, the packaging, that what one is left with is a slick veneer that repeats itself. By injecting more recognizable humanity into the work, Morris could not only broaden his horizons, but further engage the audience.

"Deck of Cards," choreographed in 1983 to country and western songs/stories, features a solo for Morris as a woman, that seemed so unrelated to an excellent solo of movement accumulation for Donald Mouton, that it actually undercut Mouton's work, and trivialized what could have been quite powerful.

"Jealousy," another solo for Morris, was a fairly self-indulgent exercise in tortured posturing. Without at least a layer or two of humanity, the angst-ridden work became nothing more than a series of hollow and empty gestures.

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It is ironic that "My Party," a 1984 work, is perhaps the most interesting piece on the program while, at the same time, the least accessible to the audience. This is a piece that clearly

involves people and weaves nicely in and out between meaningful gestures and shapes. It was not well-served as the opening number of the evening and would have fared better had it come later.

"New Love Song Waltzes," which closed the program, was reminiscent of Morris's "Gloria." A vivid group work so packed with steps as to almost overflow, it was well-danced by the company. Among the dancers, Mouton and Teri Weksler, as always, stood out. They were joined by Ruth Davidson and Keith Sabado, who have never looked better.

The bigger the risks, the bigger the successes and the failures. The Mark Morris Dance Group, which will be performing this program at the Pillow through Saturday evening, is a company taking the risks, and is well worth seeing.