

Morris dances old and new

Mark Morris Dance Group

Meany Hall

July 23

THE MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP BEGAN and ended its Meany Hall program last week in three-quarter time, with two works the Seattle-born choreographer composed before becoming a dance-world celebrity in December 1984. In between came two new pieces which demonstrate that, celebrity or not, Morris continues to follow his own line of development.

The *Canonic 3/4 Studies* of 1983 is, despite its formalist title, in part a dance piece about dancing. The atmosphere of the studio, the experience of rehearsal define its mood, down to the score made up of snippets of generic dance-class waltz music assembled by veteran rehearsal pianist Harriet Cavalli. It is also a very funny piece. No matter how one resisted the tendency to laugh knowingly at any gesture out of the dance norm, Morris got past the defenses with his artful collage of smoothly executed sequences salted with falls, stumbles, and deliberate losses of balance.

What separates the work from a hundred others in the same humorous-opening-piece vein is Morris' economy in choosing movement material and strictness in deploying his choices. One whole movement might be subtitled, "Three Simultaneous Interpretations of the Phrase, 'Dancing in Circles,'" another "Contrast Between Identical Sequences Achieved Through Varied Displacement of the Count."

In this relatively early work there's little of the rigid, gridlike imitation which came to dominate Morris' movement repertoire like a tic in 1985-86. The brand-new work on view last Thursday, set to Mozart's C-minor piano fantasy, is extremely formal in structure, but literal imitation does not play a principal, exposed role in the composition. A quintet of performers, rarely moving far from each other and never departing from a diagonal from stage rear to proscenium, first present dense interactions with strong emotive overtones: holds, chokes, shoves, sharp turns away. As Mozart's discursive score unfolds, so do the performers and their repertoire of gestures. Movements which seemed part of group dynamics are articulated solo, taking on quite different "meanings" when so abstracted. As the music recapitulates, so does the group movement, but having seen all the interactions in isolation, we see them quite differently when reincorporated into the whole. *The Fantasy* is a powerful work that will bear repeated watching.

I don't know if *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* is in the same league. Originally created using UW dance students last winter, this work for five couples and principal male is weakened for me by its recorded Francis Poulenc score. Morris is too sensitive musically not to be affected by Poulenc's too-easy expressivity. The first and last movements are smooth, pretty, even brilliant, but they don't seem to be about anything much, emotively or even technically. The slow second movement went past me too fast, thanks to Morris' superposition of a complex solo for himself over some luscious partnering for the couples, which kept pulling my focus away from the solo. No matter how familiar I got with both halves of the piece, I think I'd still find one distracting me from the pleasures of watching the other.

By the second half of the program, my optical memory banks were already overloaded, so I don't know how trustworthy my responses are to *Bijoux*, a solo of 1983, or the 1982 group work *New Love Song Waltzes*. Teri Weksler is a terrific dancer, but the brevity of the individual sections of *Bijoux* (set to too-too-clever *Chansons* by Erik Satie) gave me little opportunity to notice much, except that Weksler's costume, like those of the company in general in other works, could benefit from more thoughtful adapting to dance purposes. The tight, flat top, high waist, and overfull skirt obscured her expressive torso instead of



MORRIS: DELICIOUS DISTRACTIONS.

setting it off.

New Love Song Waltzes (set to the second set of *Liebeslieder Walzer* for vocal quartet and piano for four hands by Johannes Brahms) aroused some comment when it was new for its occasional partnering of men with men, women with women in quasi-sexual duets to highly romantic music. This aspect of the piece struck me as almost painfully constrained this time round, but I don't know if the constraint was on the part of the dancers or in the eye of the beholder. Any apparent reference to the polymorphously perverse these days is bound to be tinged by elegiac overtones. The most vivid parts of the piece for me were the passages of simultaneous movement for all ten dancers, ten simultaneous solos blending harmoniously and expressively in a surge of movement energy that fills and overflows the stage. There aren't half a dozen choreographers working today that can produce work so expressive at every level from the individual step to the extended stage picture, or shift the viewer's focus so effortlessly, magisterially from detail to whole. Morris' gift is so huge that one tends to take for granted the immense contributions of his company of talented dancers, many of whom have worked with him for upwards of seven years. Their personalities are an inescapable and deeply enriching element in the experience of Mark Morris' dances. ■