

MARK MORRIS ON 'FAREWELL' TOUR

By ROBERT GRESKOVIC

NEW YORK—When the Mark Morris Dance Group performs Oct. 22, 23, and 24 at Royce Hall, UCLA, it will be at the beginning of much more than just another tour.

By this time next year, the 31-year-old American, who has gained a great deal of attention and acclaim in a relatively short time, will be resident dance director of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, Belgium—the former home of Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the 20th Century.

In a recent interview, Morris happily accepted the suggestion that the current year of perform-

ances can be seen as his farewell tour. "What a lovely idea," he said. "I think I'll use it from now on."

Although a name incorporating both the title of Morris's 7-year-old organization and the identification of the Belgian state theater has yet to be decided on, Morris referred to himself as the "balletpolitik" and jokingly suggested "Emperor for Life" as his own title.

Politics will no doubt play some part in the European phase for this young American company. Morris is following the high-profile Béjart as the "official" dance voice of Belgium. Béjart left the Royal Theater in something of a huff after

being connected to it for more than 25 years. He is now based in Lausanne, Switzerland.

"Béjart was Belgium's most important export, next to endive," Morris said. "He was loved there, though not so much other places." The reasons for Béjart's departure include charges that Gérard Mortier, the theater's overall director, didn't really support dance. "But, the thing is," Morris said, knowingly, "Mortier likes music and Béjart mostly uses tapes and splices together weird things."

Music, it turns out, is the single most enticing element in Morris' new Brussels position. Money, he said, is a factor: the actuality of a year-round contract (even though the company is only required to perform in Belgium for two three-month periods a year and will be subsidized for tours to Paris, London and New York), and "health coverage that dancers never get in the States."

So, too, are facilities, a complex of studios for classes and rehearsals, plus a resident opera house having what Morris describes as "great acoustics," as well as another elaborate performance space in the nearby Royal Circus.

Increasing the size of his company from its current 12-dancer limit also interests Morris. He imagines going to a group of about 20 in the first phase of his three-year contract, then probably to 24 in the next. Still, enlarging his troupe "is not an emergency," Morris said. "I don't want to go more than double what I have now. I want to be able to know everyone's name and I'd rather have clearer pieces and work with people that I know really well."

But "music . . . live music," in Morris' most excited words, remains the crucial ingredient in the Belgian package. For his first season, the choreographer is planning to produce his first full-evening work: "L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato," a Handel oratorio. As he pondered the prospect, imagining the singers and musicians and his dancers, Morris saw the large-scale project as "more like an evening and a half" in dimension.

Relating his strong interests in



Members of Mark Morris Dance Group perform "Marble Halls." The troupe will appear in Royce Hall, UCLA, on Oct. 22-24.

music and musicality to the proclaimed "theatricality" now dominating the European dance scene, Morris said wryly but unhesitatingly: "I promise I won't start talking in my work. We're going to keep our collective mouths shut. I am interested in opera, but I'm not interested in dance-theater."

Morris' interest in opera is not new. Having already created dances for several Seattle Opera productions, he will choreograph Gluck's "Orphée" for that company this January. And coinciding with his company's UCLA appearances are the premiere performances of his dances for Peter Sellars' production of John Adams' "Nixon in China" at the Houston Grand Opera. (Morris and Sellars may become more of a team during the Belgium years; Sellars was responsible for introducing Mortier to the work of Morris.)

Musical considerations remained very much on Morris' mind as he discussed the most recent of his commissions outside his own company: a ballet that will have its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City during American Ballet Theatre's spring season. (A portion of it was presented as a "surprise" in the "Dancing for Life" AIDS benefit staged by the New York dance community on Monday).

Unintimidated by the fact that his cast for the complete work includes Mikhail Baryshnikov, Martine van Hamel, Julio Bocca and Leslie Browne, to name but four of the 10 Ballet Theatre dancers involved, Morris reflected on his aims.

"I accent things down in the *plié*, before the *relevé*," he said, but "everything goes up with them and



Choreographer Mark Morris will become the resident dance director of Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels next year.

it looks a half-beat early for me. They do positions instead of actions. I very often also accent something that's in the middle of a swing, and they always want to get to the end of it."

Then he added knowingly, "My rhythms are hard, always hard." After noting that he'd done the first five movements of this piece to piano etudes by Virgil Thomson in just four days, he paused to reveal his characteristic optimism and generosity, saying of these ballet dancers, "But they're all really nice, and they're getting it."

Overall, Morris sees his future work firmly connected with his past and his present. He can see no logic in expecting him to follow in Béjart's footsteps or to experiment with European dance-theater.

"I'm being hired," he said, "because of what I do, and I'll do that. I like to see people dance and I like to dance. I get bored with all the extra stuff, like talking." □