

Classically sublime, but not at all classical

By Sasha Anawalt
Herald dance critic

The Mark Morris Dance Group is hardly a discovery, though it may be a rarity. The 31-year-old Morris is probably the only choreographer of his generation really worth paying attention to in the '80s.

He's classically sublime, without being classical and understands the nerve of contemporary society, without being a modernist plagiarizing technique from those before him.

The 12-member company performed here last year at Cal State Long Beach, a disappointing program that exhibited mostly slovenly dancers in work that was ambiguous and strange. In the interim, the company, which returned to the Southland at UCLA's Royce Hall on Thursday through Saturday, has shaped up. The ambiguous quality is reinforced, the strangeness turned beautiful.

Though his company seems to have grown wise to his movement idiom — part

modern, a dash of baroque, a little folk dance and an inkling of ballet — it is Morris himself who best absorbs it. As a dancer, he is an oddity, because he is large and he looks old. But in "Deck of Cards" Saturday, he moved with such sensual alacrity, arms seeming to invent new directions and legs buoyantly supporting his hefty torso, that he seemed to draw new laws for physical possibility.

There is nothing quite like Morris on stage. His lineage must come from Isadora Duncan, it seems. In "Deck," dancing in a dress with his long curly hair hanging loose, the comparison is obvious. How else to explain that kind of natural instinct? His body reveals movements in such a way that it's impossible to imagine there was any other choice. Yet, then again, there is always a consequential edge of invention, suggesting that the mind is at work. He just hides the effort well enough to stupefy.

What applies to Morris the dancer also applies to his choreography. The work, as

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Performing in "Deck of Cards" dancer/choreographer Mark Morris moved with a grace that's unusual in so large a dancer.

Morris

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so many before have noted, is intensely musical. But what did not come across until Saturday's performance at UCLA, was just how effortless he makes the choreography appear, as though it were a vivification of the music.

In the opening "My Party" (1984), four pairs of dancers perform to Jean Francaix's String Trio. The choreography is similar to a square dance; the women even wear skirts that jut out from their waists and end above the knee like square-dancing attire. They form parallel lines, circles, and pairs. Rhythmically, Morris has unearthed the bouncy, jouncy tempo of a do-si-do from Francaix's classical music. He has also sorted out the moods, layering "My Party" with meanings other than dancing for the sake of dance.

When the company links arms in a circle, pushing their flexed feet over the rim of the arms and squatting on the floor, it's almost ritualistic. They've made an impenetrable human chain. Their focus is on the ground. The lighting (always pertinent, always defining the dancers, by Phil Sandstrom) suggests magic and harvest-time, rites of passage and death. The strings of Francaix's music seem almost on the verge of breaking at this moment. Everything contrives toward tension. It makes you in the audience feel responsible not to break the focus. This is smart, wonderful choreography.

Last year, Morris thanked God in his program at Cal State Long Beach. This year, he left the gratuity out and simply bowed at the program's conclusion with hands clasped in prayer. He even knelt down before his dancers.

I wouldn't pretend to guess at what Morris, who can be irreverent and bombastically witty, believes, but the quality of his

choreography does lift a person's thinking to a higher plane. In "Marble Halls" (1985), for example, to J.S. Bach's Concerto for 2 Harpsichords and Strings, the dancers in their ecstatic flying passages and the line of them at the back of the stage washing their bodies with round-hand gestures, make one think that humans have a greater dignity than initially meets the eye. They seem so powerful and joyous.

But what is also amazing about Morris' program is the variety. He doesn't bottom out; one idea is explored and made finite, yet Morris always shows that that same idea has infinite possibilities that your imagination can investigate long after his dance is complete.

"One Charming Night" (1985), which Morris and Teri Weksler also performed last year, is both open and shut in this sense. It's a riotous dance that is gruesome and frightening. Morris seduces the innocent Weksler, biting her neck and she his wrist. Is he a

saturnic apparition? Or is this just a study of a cheap affair?

In "Deck of Cards" (1983), the same duality exists. We, laughing, wonder if we should be. A miniature truck with headlights runs around the stage by remote control. Next, Morris in drag performs an agonizing solo to some country-western song. Then, Donald Mouton appears in soldier's costume minus the slacks, looking exactly like Oliver North. Mouton repeats some of the gestures of Morris' solo — index fingers touching, hands looping through one another — only his phrasing is jerky and wooden, and his tempo is faster.

Somehow out of the flip humor, sympathy for these characters arises. It's that old Morris ambiguity again. He lets you know everything, while sustaining the mystery. The distance between the known and unknown may or may not be spiritual, but it very definitely is crucial to the vitality of dance — and that is something Morris has restored.