

■ DANCE



The Mark Morris Dance Group's 'Marble Halls' is set to a Bach Concerto

# Mark Morris Buzz in Berkeley

BY MARILYN TUCKER

In the midst of a publicity push that has made him the most widely talked about dance artist to emerge on the American pop scene since Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris brought his Mark Morris Dance Group to Berkeley Friday and Saturday for the first local showing on a proscenium stage.

The company is Seattle-based, but not for long. Next September, the group becomes the first American modern dance company to become a state-supported resident company in Europe, replacing the departed Maurice Bejart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century in Brussels.

In the past couple of years, Mor-

ris has been proclaimed messiah by the New York dance mafia. He choreographed "Esteemed Guests" for Joffrey, presented here in July, and has been commissioned to do a new work for Mikhail Baryshnikov and American Ballet Theatre. He did a Dance of the Seven Veils for Seattle Opera's "Salome" last year and will choreograph Gluck's "Orpheus and Eurydice" for the same company next year.

Pretty heady stuff for a young man of 30. But what catapulted him in the public eye more than anything in recent weeks was his political realist choreography for the Peter Sellars' production of John Adams' opera "Nixon in China," presented by Houston Grand Opera 10 days ago.

So here he was in Berkeley with a company that operates from strength as well as delicacy and dancing up a storm, his once-cropped hair now grown back to its long, unruly curls, but held in place with a ponytail fastening.

Two things were especially striking in Friday's program of all-Morris works at Zellerbach Hall. One was his keen response to music, as fresh and persistent as Balanchine and Paul Taylor, but without the range of movement of the masters to whom he seems to pay such easy and frequent homage.

The movement owes a great debt to folk dance traditions. It has been called iconoclastic and free-wheeling, but it is basically quite formal in design, always operating at any one time within a strict and limited, even severe, line and framework.

More important to the immediate enjoyment of an audience, however, was Morris' sense of humor, cocky, outrageous and controlled by a homosexual sensibility to which he freely admits in his many interviews.

To see how he parodies heterosexual encounter in a dance like the duet "One Charming Night," you know you are dealing with an unnerving wit of one operating from outside traditional boundaries. Set to a group of Purcell love songs, sung with astonishing musicality and accuracy by an unidentified countertenor, the ballet makes jokes not only about romantic love, but the language of classical ballet.

The remarkable vocal conceits of the singer become precisely documented in the funny and precious

bodily ornamentation of the dancers. The traditional repetition of Hallelujah in a closing motet became the springboard for an orgasmic flight in which the dancers buzzed around like children aping airplanes in flight, a favorite device of Morris.

With Donald Mouton and a neat toy truck operated by remote control, Morris also appeared in an off-the-wall "Deck of Cards," each of the three — truck, Morris and Mouton — performing separately. Set to country-and-western jock music and an irreverent, achingly funny narrative about the biblical implications of playing cards (three is the Trinity, four the Evangelists, five the wise virgins), the movement plan for each section of "Deck of Cards" was exactly the same, for truck, for Morris in drag and swirling about in melodramatic Grahamesque cliché, and Mouton, the soldier caught with his pants down and apprehended for playing cards. Fabulously funny piece.

While each of the dancers in the Morris group are startlingly dissimilar in type, they exhibit an individual, often androgynous, strength that is captivating. They threw themselves into "My Party," a spirited tribute to folk dance forms, with an affection that was always pleasurable. After a succession of couple dances (all kinds — boy-girl, boy-boy, girl-girl), line dances, circle dances and reels, the piece ended with the formal bow-to-your-partner disintegrating into a roll in the hay. Morris again had the last laugh.

"The Fantasy," a straight piece set to music of Mozart, was less interesting in its limited range of movement, five dancers moving across the stage in tight groupings of physical grace notes of dependent movement. The repeated phrases resembled choreographed contact improvisation that was popular 10 years ago.

The final "Marble Halls," set to Bach's Concerto for Two Harpsichords and Strings in C minor, was an out-and-out tribute/parody to Paul Taylor and his "Esplanade." With movement becoming the literal depiction of the notes, Morris added his own quirky and campy touches. But after a while, "Marble Halls" became repetitive and tiring, despite nifty physicality and athletic grace of the dancers. It lacked the life-affirming qualities that distinguish "Esplanade" and Taylor's other pure-movement works so masterfully.