



Dancers performed several Morris pieces in Berkeley show

Mark Morris dancers shine with originality

By Gay Morris

SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

BERKELEY — No wonder Mark Morris has attracted so much attention. Not since Twyla Tharp started making dances in the early 1960s has there been a choreographer so original, intelligent, complex and entertaining.

Morris brought his contemporary dance company to Zellerbach Hall Friday evening for the first of two performances. Founded seven years ago, the group was based in Seattle until a month or so ago. Now it will take up residence at the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, replacing Maurice Bejart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century. The Belgians are lucky people.

Friday's performance consisted of five short works, each in its way demonstrating Morris' considerable strengths. What is perhaps most striking about him is his sensitivity to music and to the smallest nuances of dance style.

For instance in "My Party," set to contemporary music of Jean Francaix, Morris created a series of dances that seemed inspired by line, circle, and square dances. But it wasn't so much dance steps as the most fundamental elements of folk dance structure, timing and dynamics that were recalled. The movement itself was all the choreographer's. Morris let torsos flop like Raggedy Ann dolls and he tossed legs into the air whenever the spirit moved him. The whole work had the insouciance of kids' games, even to the inevitable moment when the players fall on each other in a brief wrestling fight. Morris' humor, which was much in evidence throughout the evening, has the surprise of Paul Taylor's without the same degree of nastiness. There's still a little innocence in Morris.

"Deck of Cards," set to country western songs, consisted of three hilarious solos, the first for a toy truck manipulated by remote control, that slid about the stage to a trucker's lament. Morris appeared in an Isadora Duncan number, flinging his long hair back and emoting in melodramatic gestures, then Donald Mouton mimed his way through a song about a soldier who used a deck of cards to represent the Bible (well, it's country-western). As usual, these weren't simply throwaway entertainments, except perhaps for the truck, but dances grounded in a formal base of strictly limited gestures that were developed within the context of the music.

This understanding of movement in musical terms was felt most strongly in "Fugue and Fantasy" and "Marble Halls." The former, set to music of Mozart, used movement based on backward falls, linked arms, hands to throats as if being choked, and a strong diagonal focus, to create a work that at once revealed the form of the music and

Bach's score.

"One Charming Night" had Morris and Teri Weksler in a duet set to Purcell songs that combined the refinements of 17th century aristocratic dances with rape. The dichotomy was disturbing and fascinating. Morris again showed his mastery of the details of dance style as well his own virtuosity in performing the fiendishly difficult gargouillarde, a leap in which the feet whirl like an egg-beater.

Judging by Friday's concert, Morris is not so much concerned with creating a personal movement vocabulary as he is in remaining open and flexible enough to do anything he wants or feels is appropriate to the music. Although he obviously sets himself individual tasks, he doesn't play by any rigid rules of movement. He has learned a number of lessons from master formalist choreographers like George Balanchine, but the lessons are in attitude to the medium rather than in choreographic structure or style.

The Mark Morris Dance Group will perform again at 8 p.m. Saturday in Zellerbach Hall.