

MORRIS: He choreographed 'Nixon in China'

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Mark Morris Dance Group

Who: Five dances by Morris.

Where: Northrop Auditorium, Minneapolis.

When: Wednesday, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$9 to \$15; 624-2345.

"A guy sits in a chair onstage, tells you his life story and occasionally flicks his hand a few times to let you know it's a dance," he said. "They recycle the same dance generation after generation. I don't mean to be cynical, but I feel that way. Much of modern dance has become autoreferential and incestuous; only other dancers understand it."

Because of this attitude, he admitted, "There's a rather large element that would like to see me slip into quicksand."

Unlike most choreographers, Morris can read and analyze music, and his dances have been highly praised for their musical structure. His first love is vocal music — he's choreographing his third opera in Seattle — and his choices are often unexpected. He has choreographed a "Stabat Mater" and danced to both the country-gospel Louvin Brothers and the acid-rocking Violent Femmes.

Wrote the New Yorker magazine's Arlene Croce, arguably the most demanding ballet critic in the country, "He's an innovator and a traditionalist, a satirist and a romantic, and one can never tell in advance what side of him will be presented in any given work, or at any given moment in a work."

Morris' Northrop program gives an indication of his eclectic style: It opens with "Strict Songs" set to an Indian-flavored, contemporary Lou Harrison score originally commissioned by the Seattle Men's Chorus. Said Morris: "I slipped in some American sign language as well and it's a tribute to Liberace." The duet "One Charming Night," on the other hand, is set to music by the baroque composer Henry Purcell. "A vampire story in a 19th-century style," it was inspired by Anne Rice's book "Interview With the Vampire."

"Vestige" was created to a Shostakovich cello sonata. Morris called it "my most depressing piece, and one of my favorite dances." The finale will be "In Marble Halls," set to Bach's "Concerto for Two Harpsichords and Strings." Morris also will dance one solo, as yet unannounced.

"Are we really doing all that?" asked Morris. "That's a lot. I wonder if the program will have to be altered. It sounds really hard."

Morris still likes traveling and loves the spotlight, but he's got so much going on he admits he's not even sure when the company's going on tour. On this afternoon he has a meeting with the Seattle Opera to go over his needs for "Die Fledermaus" — "you know, all those details about champagne glasses and hairdos." He's still working on the new dance for Baryshnikov, a project he claims doesn't intimidate him at all: "It's great, but Baryshnikov will need the same kind of coaching the other dancers will."

Dancer Morris: From unknown to outrageous

By Mike Steele/Staff Writer

A few years ago, only Mark Morris' mother and a few dance-crazed friends in Seattle even knew who he was.

A whole lot of people know who he is now. Morris, 31, and his 12-member dance group make their Minneapolis debut this Wednesday at Northrop Auditorium under the aegis of the Northrop Dance Series and the Northrop-Walker Art Center "Discover" series — and they were lucky to get him. With the hottest dance troupe in the country, Morris is the most-commissioned choreographer anywhere and he's juggling more projects than a lunatic street mime.

Morris first hit the headlines when he was the hit of the 1980 Next Wave Festival at the

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Brooklyn Academy of Music. His troupe danced to the Vivaldi "Gloria," Morris did an East Indian solo in a loincloth and the evening concluded with a dance about championship wrestling, based on an essay by the French philosopher Roland Barthes.

Before Morris was 30, he was the subject of a full-length "Dance in America" program on PBS. He choreographed a king-size dance for the Joffrey Ballet and a larger one for the Boston Ballet, and he's just finishing one for American Ballet Theatre and Mikhail Baryshnikov. It was Morris who did the choreography for the John Adams-Peter Sellars opera "Nixon in China" — including the much praised "Red Detachment of Women" sequence in which the Nixons leap on stage and join the ballet.

And, in a move that has the international dance world buzzing, Morris' company is set to become the resident dance company of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, replacing Europe's biggest dance superstar, Maurice Béjart. When Morris bustles his company off to Brussels in September, it will become what amounts to the Belgian national dance company for about six months a year.

Morris has gone from being called "unknown" to being called "outrageous" to being called "the new Balanchine," a label the Balanchine-worshipping Morris calls "simply lovely."

Morris is a dance anomaly: outspoken, unpolitic, ironic and occasionally cynical, openly gay in a closeted field, a heart-on-sleeve romantic when he isn't being campily naughty — and he lives in Seattle rather than New York.

He did live in New York for a while and danced with Eliot Feld, Twyla Tharp, Laura Dean, Lar Lubovitch and Hannah Kahn, but he moved back to the Pacific Northwest just as his dances were exploding onto the scene.

"I got tired of living in New York," he said, speaking from his mother's Seattle home, where he still spends much of his time (his schoolteacher father died when Morris was a youngster). "It was too difficult and I didn't want to play dance-politics. I can live wherever I want and I like

coming back here. It helps, of course, that I can leave whenever I want to go to a place I like equally well."

Seattle and Morris have struck up a curious love-hate relationship. "They're proud of me because I've done well," he admitted — but they're not sure how to take this big, raw-boned man with the baby face and the propensity for dangling earrings, garish pedal-pushers and flamboyant behavior. In honor of his native city, he once premiered a work there in which dancers did unnatural things with dolls such as battering their heads on stage, causing large-scale walk-outs and much public teeth-gnashing.

"It's beautiful here but the arts scene is anesthetized," he said. "There's nothing very interesting. A lot goes on, but almost nothing's any good. It's the same as New York, only in New York there's a lot more of it."

Besides loving Balanchine, Morris greatly respects the work of Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Martha Graham and a few others, including movie choreographer Busby Berkeley. But he criticizes most choreographers for their lack of musicality and their inability to get beyond their personal hangups.