

Morris keeps troupe trying new challenges

By Michael Fleming
Staff Writer

One look at Mark Morris' list of accomplishments is enough to make a rival choreographer go back to waiting tables. Consider:

■ In 1980, at 24, he formed his own company, based in Seattle.

■ Four years later, his troupe scored a knockout triumph at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, instantly putting him on the Ten Most Trendy list.

■ In 1985, he was featured in *Esquire* magazine as one of the movers and shakers under 40.

To complete his baptism into the mainstream, the Mark Morris Dance Group was featured in a 1986 "Dance in America" broadcast. Later that year, Arlene Croce, *The New Yorker's* formidable dance critic, devoted a full column to him under the headline "Choreographer of the Year."

Most recently, when it appeared that Morris had scaled every peak, another came into view. It was announced late last year that his company would be in residence at the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels, replacing Maurice Bejart's Ballet of the 20th Century.

Is all this an example of the publicity mills working overtime? Will Mark Morris' star fade as quickly as it rose? Dance lovers in the Twin Cities will have a chance to decide for themselves when the Mark Morris Dance Company makes its local debut Wednesday at Northrop Auditorium.

Meanwhile, Morris is not sitting back, waiting for accolades. When we spoke by telephone last month, he was back in Seattle, having just choreographed Gluck's "Orfeo" for the Seattle Opera.

"Don't mind if I can't speak," he said. "It was a late night last night." That had been the "Orfeo" opening, and at noon, Seattle time, Morris was just pulling himself together.

Had all the attention gone to his head?

"Dancing has never been such a big deal to me, compared to real life," he said. "I like reading the critics, like Arlene Croce, especially when she trashes someone. But very often, I don't understand reviews. I read them, and they tell me what the writer in question saw. But as a choreographer, what I think of and what I see are not the same thing."

Morris' conversation is like his choreography: a burning idea at the center that shoots out sparks in every direction. At any moment, chaos may seem to reign, but in the end, the design holds and one goes away satisfied, if a bit dazed.

"My basic concepts are musical



Mark Morris
Accomplishments pile up

ones," he explained. "Everyone has to put on their thinking caps to listen and watch at the same time."

Morris arrived at his current pinnacle by a winding path. Growing up in Seattle, he began to study both ballet and folk dance at the age of 14. He joined a Balkan folk company there, then took off for Europe, where he had a fling with flamenco.

Spain did not suit him, however. The current style of flamenco dancing seemed watered down and commercialized. And as a gay man with both feet out of the closet, Morris found the entrenched homophobia under the Franco regime too much to deal with.

Next, back to the States, where he settled in New York. There he performed with several modern dance companies, staying a short while with each before moving on. He still has words of praise for all his mentors: Eliot Feld, Laura Dean, Hannah Kahn and Lar Lubovitch. From each he discovered not only an individual approach to choreography, but a bit of what would become Mark Morris.

His own company of dancers — 12, in addition to him — has always been more than an institution. It is not a cookie-cutter company, but all his dancers have common traits, ones that go back to Morris' own qualities as a dancer and a person.

"I look for dancers with coordination, musicality, the ability for quick study. And ones who are not too young," he said. "I like to work fast and hard, and I expect a high level of work. I don't spend a lot of time telling people how terrific they are. What they are more likely to hear from me is 'Yecch,' or 'Don't do that.'"

At one point, Morris said, he

could have moved toward either ballet or modern dance. He even had a brief period of hero-worshipping Balanchine. But the Morris style, as it has developed so far, is at the opposite pole from ballet.

His works, even those without a clear-cut plot, have roots in everyday life. "Soap-Powders and Detergents," to cite the most obvious example, takes a humorous look at routines of washing and cleaning. And in all of Morris' dances, men and women must be equally athletic, equally capable of being in charge.

Neither of the company's most controversial works will be on the Northrop program. Not "Lovey," in which the dancers do unmentionable things to plastic dolls, and not "Striptease," for which they peel right down to the skin.

Aside from the most-talked-about shockers, however, Twin Cities will be given a panorama of the Morris style.

"Four Strict Songs," set to music by Lou Harrison, is "basically a nature study, corny as that sounds," the choreographer said.

"Vestige," which uses the last three movements of Shostakovich's D-minor Cello-Piano Sonata, is "real depressing and dark." It has been out of repertory for several years, and Morris is just putting it back together, a process he always finds a bit frightening.

"One Charming Night" envelops the sort of contradiction Morris thrives on: songs by Henry Purcell, paired with a scenario drawn from Anne Rice's "Interview With the Vampire." "It is a love-death, along the lines of a pas de deux, with the variations mixed in secretly," Morris said.

And in "Marble Halls," he returns, as he often does, to the music of the Baroque, here Bach's Concerto for two violins. He warned, tongue-in-cheek, that it involves some "heavy mathematics."

Also on the bill is a solo by Morris, to be announced. Even as the demand for him as a choreographer has grown, Morris has not given up dancing. On stage, he can enter a whole range of characters: male or female, comforting or threatening.

With plans for the company's tour well in hand, other projects loom. In May, a "Fledermaus" for the Seattle Opera, for which Morris will be the stage director. And in September, the long-awaited move to Belgium.

Where does this leave Morris?

"Alternately elated and terrified," he admitted. "I don't know if I'm nervous or not. I have a lot of music to study, and I try not to repeat myself. As much as I can, it's second to second."