

Morris' path runs best against grain

By Michael Fleming
Staff Writer

Mark Morris has so often been called an *enfant terrible* that one goes to a concert by the Mark Morris Dance Group half expecting to be poked in the ribs or slapped in the face.

No danger. Morris is a real choreographer, and the surprises, when they come, are woven tightly into the fabric of the dance.

Wednesday's concert at Northrop Auditorium was the company's first Twin Cities engagement. Some may have been disappointed that neither of the company's prize shockers, "Strip Tease" and "Lovey," was performed. But it was better perhaps for this first acquaintance to see the group's range than to wait for one knockout jolt.

Like many small dance troupes — the Morris company has 13 members — this one bears the strong imprint of its founder. Indeed, the key to much of what was seen Wednesday was in Morris' one brief solo, "Offertorium."

Morris is a striking, but not conventionally handsome figure: a stocky body, ringlets of thick black hair cascading down to his shoulders. And his movements radiated from the torso, with waves of ener-

gy spreading out to arms and hands, legs and feet.

In "Offertorium," the dance gestures worked not so much with the music as in counterpoint to it. The soaring, florid vocal line in one of Schubert's lesser liturgical works was matched with a body hunched, drawn in upon itself, struggling to burst free.

This agonistic stance of music and choreography was even more fully developed in "One Charming Night." The title derives from a Purcell song, one of a group of songs to which the dance is set. The scenario is drawn from Anne Rice's book "Interview With the Vampire." A young woman (Teri Weksler) sits alone, nervous, expectant. The vampire (Morris) enters, makes his approach, engages in his dance of life/death and finally carries the woman off in ecstasy.

It could have been played for chills or for laughs, but Morris blended the two so effectively that the viewer sometimes wondered whether to shudder or chuckle.

There was mirth in the audience as Morris made his flapping entrance, dressed in a black suit, hair pulled back. But as the vampire

moved in for the kill to the strains of Purcell's "Lord, What is Man?" I felt a twist inside that could not have come from any conventional mating of this scene with creepy-crawly music.

It is hard to find just the right word for Morris' choreographic stance. Camp, satire, irony? All of these are present at one time or another. The essence of his art, whatever you call it, lies in mocking the surface of the music while moving in harmony with its deeper currents.

Another choreographer might have taken Bach's C-minor Concerto for two harpsichords as the occasion for a neo-Baroque romp. Morris, in "Marble Halls," worked subtly against the grain, aping the melodic mannerisms of Baroque music while paying homage to its rhythmic soul.

Only in "Strict Songs" was the irony dampened. This work, set to music by Lou Harrison and dedicated to the memory of Liberace, struck an elegiac note in the first section, where hieratic postures melted into motion. The mood was sustained throughout, the dips, falls and gyrations of single dancers counterbalanced by the weight of the ensemble.

REVIEW