

Mark Morris Dance Group

Who: Five dances by Morris.

Where: Northrop Auditorium, Minneapolis.

Review: Morris' Minnesota debut concert was far more elegant and musicianly than his outrageous reputation prepared people for. It's highly individual yet with a firm sense of roots and tradition and always beautifully crafted.

Star Tribune/Friday/March 11/1988

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Mark Morris dance group in "Marble Halls." The piece has become a special favorite with audiences.

Morris dancers reveal elegant, musicianly side

By Mike Steele/Staff Writer

So much publicity has been given to Mark Morris' puckish, campily outrageous side that audiences aren't fully ready for the sweepingly elegant, musically sensitive side that dominates his dance-making. For his Minnesota debut concert Wednesday at Northrop Auditorium, the outrageous Morris was barely evident while the elegant, musicianly side was triumphant.

Except for his idiosyncratically disturbing duet "One Charming Night," a sardonic suite to Purcell songs that slowly transfigured two intricately and often humorously intertwined lovers into vampires, Morris' work tended toward the romantic and neoclassical and toward pure dance.

One can see Morris' dance roots in his creations — Paul Taylor's weight and leaping, lunging moves in "Strict Songs"; Merce Cunningham's elegance and incident-packed structure in "Vestige"; Balanchine's flair for baroque propulsion and musical dynamics in "Marble Halls." Yet he turns them into his own style by interjecting them with unexpected colorings, personalized flair and unexpected, offbeat accents.

Morris isn't a glamour-puss and he doesn't have a glamorous company. Though he's a superb craftsman and may be the best there is at flowing transitions and seamless structures, he seems less interested in pretty images than in the nerve ends and raw feelings of the music. Like Balanchine, to whom he's often compared, he understands the workings of music and has a sixth sense about fleshing out the internal dynamics of a score, its harmonies, counterpoints and occasional dissonances.

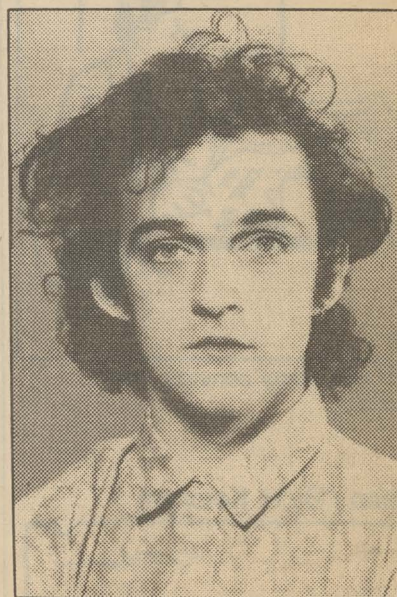
He doesn't fall slavishly in step with the music as many less secure choreographers do. Sometimes his attack, again like Balanchine's, can seem eccentric. He seems to get an initial emotional impression from the music and then mold his ideas to the score. He can pull unexpected humor out of a solemn Shostakovich cello sonata just as he can suddenly introduce tenderness to an all-out kinetic assault on Bach. In "Strict Songs," dedicated to Liberace, he turns dancers into angels in an intricate interweaving of Eastern and Western movement styles with full belief and no irony.

His baroque Bach piece "Marble Halls" has become something of a signature piece and a special favorite with audiences. It's his most emotionally manipulative work and he knows how to push the buttons

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to make the musical pulse exciting. The work is formally structured with a well-defined movement theme neatly varied and woven through the movements. Morris gives it commitment and it turns out to be a high-balling explosion of form in motion that's great fun to watch.

His splendid 14-dancer company gives him the virtuosity his pieces need. They're fast, they understand his shifting dynamics, give every movement clear phrasing and are capable of submerging individual



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personality to the overall look of the dance, without appearing mechanistic. They seem as committed to the work as Morris' dances are to the music.