

DANCE IN JERSEY

Bold is beautiful in unique vocabulary of choreographer Mark Morris' Group



The Mark Morris Dance Group makes a knock-kneed passage through 'Marble Halls'

By VALERIE SUDOL

Mark Morris has been hailed as a young genius of modern dance, and like many men of exceptional talent, he could also be called eccentric.

Appearing at McCarter Theatre in Princeton Tuesday, the Mark Morris Dance Group offered dances bearing the unmistakable stamp of a personality that dwells beyond the mainstream. Almost a cult hero to his generation of dancers, Morris has a strong following on both coasts and is soon to leave for Brussels, where his company will replace Maurice Bejart's Ballet of the 20th Century in residence.

But several dozen Princetonians found the program not to their liking, and voted with their feet to cut the evening short. Such strong and opposite reactions to Morris' work speak to the

expectations audiences bring to the theater.

Morris' dances are formed of blunt material. Dancers slide across the stage like inch worms, cling to the waists of their partners and drop to the ground in unbroken falls, and hoist their partners like potato sacks. To someone weaned on ballet and the more lyrical styles of modern dance, this vocabulary of movement might appear undancerly.

It is anti-romantic, and where some choreographers have taken an aesthetic stance against creating merely pretty pictures, Morris goes further in deflating conventional beauty. The costumes are not just plain, but downright ugly and unflattering to either dancers or movement.

To appreciate Morris, the viewer has to put a premium on other things, like originality. And be intrigued by the structure his dances erect in time and space, and in the relationship of movement to music. For here is where Morris excels.

Three of five pieces were set to vocal music from the classical repertory—Schubert, Brahms and Purcell. This preference isn't surprising in a dancer whose sense of phrasing is like that of a singer. In his new solo "Offertorium," Morris creates a dance that has the supple control of a well-disciplined voice.

While not in any sense miming the words, Morris matches a sustained note with a slowly extended stretch, takes a coloratura passage at a brisk prance, and punctuates a climactic musical moment by upending himself and pointing his free leg at the ceiling. He turns the singer's gesture of clasping hands before the chest into a dance movement of plasticity and odd grace.

In conception quite beautiful, the dance is done in plain gray sweats. Bulkier now, his hair long and wild, Morris has a way of doing things that makes it important to look at the dance, not just the dancer.

His other appearance was opposite Teri Weksler in "One Charming Night," which was anything but. Weksler in a hideous jumper and Morris in an awkwardly buttoned black suit stalk one another, circling around a small bench. In this dark duet the couple doesn't so much dance together as prey on one another; at its conclusion Morris slashes at his wrist and offers it to his partner, who sucks at it greedily like a vampire.

"New Love Song Waltzes," a group piece, also avoids romanticism like the plague. In a collection of unmatched black and blue clothing, the 10 dancers move in tumbling waves across the

stage with their arms wheeling like spume on broken surf.

They form a long chain for an intricate series of joined patterns. Running under the arched arms of the first two, dancers fall to the floor in sequence, jump lightly to their feet to execute the whole business in retrograde, wind into spirals and collapse again like dominos in series.

The love part isn't much apparent in Morris' unisex choreography. Partnering is brief and undeferential, as it mainly involves hoisting an inert colleague and hauling him/her offstage, or lying prone atop another dancer in a groping embrace that needed no explanation.

Yet this, and the equally peculiar and earthbound "Fugue and Fantasy" had a pristine and meticulous musical sense, and a confident command of structure that made them fascinating. In "Fugue" four dancers remain seated while performing in strict musical sequence a series of gestures that include wagging their raised feet and aiming an open-handed blow at the face of their neighbor. In the "Fantasy" section, five others form frozen tableaux, fall thumping to the floor in brutal drops, clutch and bend in contorted postures, all while staring fixedly into middle distance as if at some impending doom.

Morris' triumph is that by combining unglamorous movement with intuitive musicianship, he creates strong and unsentimental statements that aren't in any sense derivative. If raw and unembellished, these dances are also fresh, distinctive and challenging.

The final piece, "Marble Halls," set to a Bach harpsichord piece, was lovely in its bones, although costumes of orchid T-shirts and orange shorts seemed boldly, deliberately ugly.

Taken at the score's fierce, metrical tempo, this was a superb musical visualization of Bach's architectural music. To its repeating themes, the dancers rushed onstage in intersecting diagonal lines. This recurred like a chorus, flooding the stage and washing away, leaving soloists behind in the wake to perform their featured dances.

Choral or group patterns were the theme, with dancers often arrayed in several lines like a corps de ballet, each line working in unison to create harmony and counterpoint in concert with the others.

Athletic in the endurance it required, performed with a brimming zest by this strong group of dancers, it was the closest concession Morris made to recognizable virtuosity and artistic uplift. Too bad those who left early missed it.