

A Talk With Mark Morris

Dancer's Inspiration Comes From The Music

By JEANNIE SCHEININ
Valley News Dance Writer

Mark Morris, dancer and choreographer, has been described as on dance's cutting edge. His company, formed in 1980, has toured extensively and is internationally acclaimed. Morris is sought after to choreograph works for ballet, modern dance, as well as opera companies.

Morris has won many awards and fellowships, and is considered prolific for one who is only 31 years old.

During an interview, Morris shifted restlessly in his chair as if he would have been more comfortable dancing through the questions. Occasionally he was enshrouded in his clove-scented cigarette smoke which he would push aside with expressive hand gestures while emphasizing a point. His rapid delivery was laced with irony and modesty.

Morris has the tall, proud bearing of one comfortable in his body.

Do you take your inspiration from music?

Almost exclusively, almost always. I nearly always work with a score. I nearly always do all my research musically and then make up steps pretty much on the spot.

How do you mean research musically?

I mean, I listen to what recordings I can find or performances if they're happening, and I do score study and listening and I plot things out, like what sort of things should happen. But I don't make up what's going to happen until I'm in the studio with people. I work very directly with the score and it makes it faster and it's also what I want.

How did music come to be the antecedent to your choreography?

In choreography it always used to be that there was music and then dancing to the music, and then the situation was reversed. Music has always come first for me. I love the work of some people who don't use music at all, but I don't want to do that. I might make up a dance that is to take a certain amount of time and isn't necessarily musical, but that's rare. I love music and I even like to listen to music more than I like to watch dancing.

You like to use baroque music.

Yes, in the last few years I've used a lot of baroque music and it's not over yet. I thought that I was over my baroque period. I got all the way up to Mozart, I thought that was really progressing! However, soon, in Brussels, I will be doing a giant two-hour oratorio of Handel — the biggest piece I've ever done. I've been wanting to do this piece for a long time. I'm hiring an auxiliary of 30 modern dancers to augment the company.

What musical training do you have?

Nothing serious educationally. I learned keyboard basics and to read music from my father. He was a pianist and organist. I had theory in high school and I sang in the choir. I work with singers, players, conductors and composers.

How long have you been interested in dance?

Since age 6 or 7, and I started studying it when I was 8 or 9. I love moving well and to music.

Did you have any source of inspiration from the media?

The show that drove me crazy as a kid and made me want to dance was Jose Greco, the Spanish dancer.

In what way are your dancers a source of inspiration?

You can't not be inspired by your dancers. It's no accident that my company dance the way they do. They dance the way they do because they do my work, and my work is the way it is because of them.

What qualities do you look for in your dancers?

My dancers have to be smart, really interesting movers, and mature. Smart in the kinesthetic sense; able to pick up movement easily. My company is a group of very smart and mature people which I like. I would go crazy working with a group of 18-year-olds. Many members of my company have been with me for eight years. I never fire anyone; we just have a parting of the ways.

Does choreography come easily to you?

It is very difficult, very difficult. I like it. I would rather do that than just about anything. I've been working on a piece for American Ballet Theater. I was becoming semi-frustrated in the rehearsals because it is a very technical, difficult, classical ballet. All the steps are from the ballet lexicon which from the dancers' perspective are in the wrong order.

I'm probably getting into deep water here, but what is your view of dance critics? Do you find them helpful?

I read everything that is passed on to me. I give



Dancer Mark Morris

Morris Shows Original Choreography

By JEANNIE E. SCHEININ
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HANOVER — When Mark Morris came out in scarlet shirt and flowing dark mane to take a bow last night, he was greeted with appreciative applause. The Hopkin's Center audience had witnessed some highly original choreography.

New Love Song Waltzes (1982) was the first as

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well as my favorite piece of the Mark Morris Dance Group. Set to music by Brahms, it featured 10 dancers informally clad in blues and grays. Each musical movement offered a different sort of relationship between dancers. There were lovely smooth transitions between movements as dancers changed groupings and couplings. Sometimes men danced with men, or women with women; it never seemed to matter who was supporting whom. The choreography was sensual and fluid and the dancers appeared to enjoy indulging in this richness. There were moments of sheer visual joy as the stage filled with groupings of dancers beautifully interpreting the music. There were refreshing visual breaks when the group moved from variety to symmetry. At the close, the dancers, holding hands, pulled each other into an inside spiral and all fell softly to the floor as the lights dimmed.

Offertorium, the next work, was a solo performed by Morris to music by Schubert. In an interview before the performance, he explained that he choreographed it recently for a benefit held at a New York public school, and was limited in his choreography by a hard floor and a small space. The dance opened with a bright spotlight on Morris wearing a pale gray turtle-neck and tights. He looked almost sinister with his large build, flyaway hair, and light-catching earrings. Slowly, he moved his hands delicately in front of himself. He looked as though he was doing Tai Chi (ancient Chinese movement).

Whenever the singing began he switched from delicate gestural movements to open, sweeping



Mark Morris in a publicity photograph

ones. He danced to the music as if genuinely moved by it, always staying within the spotlight. At times, however, it was almost hard to watch since he was so confined. The applause was polite.

Fugue and Fantasy (1988) were two dances done in tandem, both to the music of Mozart. In *Fugue*, four dancers, representing the four lines in the fugue, danced in the confines of their chairs. The music was anxious and frenzied. They and their movements even appeared pathological as if they were withdrawing from drugs. The

dancers rarely interacted; each was in his or her own world. The music became increasingly frenzied and they left their chairs as they too became more anxious and quick in their movements. It was a clever interpretation of the music.

Fantasy, the tandem piece, was not as successful. The dance seemed a too-literal rendition of the music and was at times even predictable. The five dancers stayed on the diagonal throughout and this was cleverly done. Morris succeeded in exploring levels and shapes between dancers while still remaining on the diagonal. The music was grim, however, as were the dancers, and they too often clutched their throats as they anxiously stared into the distance.

The sole work after intermission was the full-length choral piece, *Gloria* (1981 and 1984), performed to the choral music of Vivaldi. The curtain opened, revealing a man inching forward on his belly as a woman walked stiffly forward beside him; suddenly there was darkness until the end of the instrumental prelude. When the choral singing began, the 10 dancers entered wearing a variety of informal gray clothing. They stood on the diagonal and moved slowly across the stage, some inching on their bellies as one at a time arose and moved forward in dance. In this work the choreography successfully interpreted the music. Here again, the exquisite groupings on stage gave a full visualization of the music. The lighting also effectively changed color and tone with each new musical movement. The dancers performed the demanding choreography beautifully. Sometimes they were required to dance quickly with sudden shifts in body parts or quality. Other times they charged joyously across the stage leaping and running. Although they were an eclectic group of individuals, they never upstaged one another; the movement came first and that commitment was clear. It might have been easy to assume that they were less proficient because they never showed off as dancers, but these dancers were exceptional and the choreography unrelenting.

Morris

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interviews because I believe it is part of my job. If something is well written I prefer it. I've had a lot of good press and very little trash coverage. I've been accused of having a giant press machine, which I don't. In that I've been lucky. I prefer the term reviewers since very few are actually critics. Arlene Croce of *The New Yorker* is a critic, as is Alan M. Kriegsman of the *Washington Post*.

Nobody ever says exactly what I mean, but what I mean isn't word stuff. So it's fine as long as people realize that they're reading something that is third-generation information.

What contemporary arts and artists inspire you?

I have very little time to appreciate the arts. Recently I saw *Hairspray* by John Waters which I thought was brilliant. I just finished reading this graphic fiction, it's a comic book called *Watchman*, which

is one of the best books I've ever read. It's great, great. It's in the comic book format and highly cinematic.

Are there any artists that feed you directly?

Well everything does in a way.

What about in the dance world? Choreographically speaking, Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and I like some pieces by a lot of people but not necessarily their whole works. I love Ballanchine, but he's in heaven so we can't say that anymore. I never lose my head over a work.

A lot of articles have mentioned the theme of androgyny in your work. You switch male and female roles so that it's not important what sex is in that part.

I wouldn't call it the theme of androgyny. That's what other people call it. I want everyone to be able to do everything. I find it more interesting than the tradition — the boy's music, the boy's dance, the girl's

music, the girls dance — and never being able to do each others' steps. I usually work with choreographic modules or phrases or bigger or smaller steps or just positions. Everyone has to be able to do that because you never know which you'll be required to do in a given dance. The point has never been unisex but rather equality.

Is this intentional?

Yes, I believe that everyone is capable of doing everything.

Is this a political statement?

I suppose it is. That's how I look at people.

Is this from your background?

My mother in her own way is a feminist and so am I. With this approach I have more artistic choices and greater versatility.

Did you select pieces for the concert here bearing in mind your potential audience?

No, never.

So you don't worry about where you're taking something?

No, that's horrible. That's the worst sort of pandering. It's like

saying you're not ready to see this piece, so we won't do it.

Do you classify your work in any particular way?

I'm a modernist. I do modern dance. I'm a classicist. I'm a romantic, a structuralist. You can use all of those and none of them are right.

In reference to your goals, you've stated that you'd like to become a master.

Yes, a true master of choreography, a very specialized job. Dance has forever been perceived as the evil stepsister of the arts, which is usually true. For instance, you use a great piece of music and make a lousy dance. Or you commission some horrible composer to write neo-Glassian (referring to the contemporary composer Philip Glass) yardage. But there's much more to it than that. It's a whole aesthetic. That mastery doesn't even mean that I have to be producing work, it means that I have to know what I can about what I do. It involves a very large body of knowledge and understanding which like anything gets bigger the more you know. It's any sort of true mastery of anything, and it goes with a frame of mind.