

Morris brings pure dance to Dartmouth

By PETER CONVERSE

Mark Morris, the renowned young choreographer of the '80s, came to Center Theatre Thursday night with his Dance Group and added to the Hopkins Center's phenomenal list of birthday presents.

His gift was a profound extension of Nina Wiener's earlier, technical "pure dance" — the bare stage, the simple costume, the pristine line of classical training and the lack of a literary context — as Morris' choreographic vision saw the simplification of dance as an opportunity to explore its creative process.

Too often choreography is complas-

cent about the creation of dance and assumes that the art can be created by imitation. Like paint on a canvas, dancers are used as the lifeless tools of a choreographer. Morris sees the error in this approach and accepts that dance is ultimately created on stage, out of his control. The dancers cannot be paint, but artists.

Morris insists that his dancers explore themselves in the steps. He leads his dancers to areas where they have to redefine what dancing is, where technique does not provide answers, where it comes down to what is expressive and what is dull, what is felt and what is not.

Morris addressed a group of local dance students the day before his performance in Hanover. During this workshop, he screamed at the young dancers for making his steps look lifeless. The point was not to follow steps, but to use their bodies to express themselves.

This was the plea of one who knows his art is ultimately at the mercy of other people to express. Morris' ability to challenge dancers to be creative is an essential aspect of his choreographic vision — the exploration of the dancer.

This exploration depends on Morris' great ability to work through what Stravinsky called the "struggle between music and choreography."

George Balanchine, the great choreographer who worked with Stravinsky, wrote, "music is like an aquarium with the dancers inside it." If this is true, than one could say that Morris puts his fish in an ocean of sound — Brahms, Mozart, Vivaldi — not in a rock pool of synthesized beat music.

Morris' dancers are not lost even in the most powerful current. Instead of "transcribing [the music] as a pattern or making it serve as an organizing element for

arbitrary action," as *Time* critic Martha Duffy writes, Morris hears the music and makes a complete visualization of it, representing the sound in the movement in order that we may "see the music and hear the dance." — Balanchine's injunction to choreography.

It is Morris' intense musicality which sets him apart from most of his contemporaries.

From Thursday's opening piece, "New Love Song Waltzes" with music composed by Brahms, Morris' choreography developed thematically, embellishing, fragmenting and repeating itself by way of the dancers' powerful phrasing. What resulted was a sublimely lyrical language of dance where individuality could be exposed in clarity and beauty.

In "New Love Song Waltzes," the sexuality was not lost to androgyny. It was multiplied, instilling the movements with a scintillating, procreative energy — the energy of the choreographer living in the dancers.

With Morris' dancers we were always given a sense of where they wanted to go, so their movement always had direction and purpose.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in "Fantasia," when five dancers clad in cut off shirts and pants directed their tortuous and sometimes tortured falling-and-choking movements to corner stage left, as though it were an island, which they, on the "Raft of the Medusa" were not to reach.

The art was in the struggle, the dancer's struggle with the theme and the choreographer's struggle with Mozart. The struggle brought them together.

Perhaps the most choreographically inventive piece was the last, "Gloria," performed to Vivaldi's "Gloria in D."

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In "Gloria," Morris allowed almost an entire section of music to play unaccompanied by dance.

In the middle of the opening, the lights went out after revealing a man crawling on his belly toward the audience while a woman walked alongside him gesturing with her torso and limbs. The audience continued to enjoy the perfection of the music in darkness.

When the "Et in Terra Pax" (peace on earth) section continued, the belly-crawling motif was expanded by 10 other dancers, and Morris' choreography took

off. Embellishing the motif until it fragmented off into a contrapuntal collage of movement, Morris effortlessly returned to unison with the inspiration of the composer and created a choreographic structure of profound coherence and intensity.

In short, Morris did it all. Moving dancers and audience alike in the contours and contortions of his choreography, he brought his choreographic gift to life, and dance was created.

Few gifts to the Hopkins Center anniversary have been so openly received.