

Mark Morris premieres win accolades at BAM

THE MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, through Sunday.

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ADVANCE DANCE CRITIC

In many ways, Mark Morris emphatically defies the current dance aesthetic: His dancers are not perfectly shaped, nor are they coiffed and dressed according to New Wave chic.

And yet his work continues to win accolades. Just about all his supporters agree that the essence of Morris's appeal lies in the twin traits of exceptional musicality and astonishing imagination. In his current Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) season, Morris is presenting three New York premieres which demonstrate how much these traits are inexorably linked and how well they contribute to his success.

When applied to Morris's gifts, the term "musicality" means more than making dances that are aptly structured to fit and complement a score. It also refers to the flights of fancy Morris allows himself based on that score.

A perfect example is "Fugue and Fantasy," the first premiere on the BAM program. Both of the

works' two discrete sections ("Fugue" to Mozart's "Fugue in C minor K. 401," and "Fantasy" to the "Fantasia in C minor for Piano," K. 475) are interpretations that could not have come from any mind but Morris's.

In "Fugue," four dancers mimic Mozart's musical devices, but not through a series of dance steps, not even on their feet, actually. The quartet (Tina Fehlandt, David Landis, Kraig Patterson, Teri Weksler) sits on four molded plastic folding chairs executing a pattern of moves (pulling, picking, stamping, slashing, rolling, jumping), each phrase corresponding to a recurring phrase in the music.

Their movement is rough, puppetlike, and their costumes consist of unflattering leotards fashioned after old-time bathing suits. Yet Morris's deliberately awkward — yes, even ugly — visual devices are rendered fascinating by their cerebral, witty correspondence with the music.

In "Fantasy," Morris takes off not from the structure of the music but from its mood. Here five different dancers appear (Ruth Davidson, Susan Hadley, Jon Mensinger, Donald Mouton, Keith

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Sabado), again in strange garb (tattered pants and shirts). In tune to Mozart's solemn chords they inch forward, ever so slowly, diagonally across the stage, at once drawn and repelled by some unseen force beyond the wings.

One by one, they break away from the huddled core to advance, retreat, fall, rise up again. I found myself thinking I'd hate such laborious progress if it were made to a post-modern score or a sound collage. But the irony of juxtaposing such activity to Mozart makes it compelling.

Morris's second premiere, "Sonata," again can be seen as a flight of fancy, a reverie on its tuneful, romantic score (Francis Poulenc's "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano"). At times, for example, Morris responds to Poulenc's somewhat eerie, atmospheric sound by having the dancers roll on the floor while making hieroglyphs with their legs in the air.

But here we see also Morris's trademark humor derived from the incongruity between musical

formality and oddities of movement or breeches of decorum.

But instead of beginning the dance from that focal point, they carry him off stage and the action must start anew as the performers run one by one back onto the stage.

Dancing the middle slow movement, Morris once again proves himself a sinuous, ardent performer. But to prevent things from getting too earnest, he resorts to humor again in the finale, making up a ditsy little dance with flapping arm movements to accompany a silly little melody of Poulenc's.

The lines of "Sonata's" dances are simple and like other Morris repertory it often reminded me of early modern dance. The level of virtuosity required is not as high what we are used to today but earnestness, propulsive force and visceral response to music are central to its appeal.

In the sense that it takes a straight-faced approach to its theme, "Strict Songs" is the program's most serious premiere. Danced to Lou Harrison's "Four Strict Songs," based on Hopi Indian chants, the work does not aim to imitate authentic rituals.

It does use images that might suggest Native American dance: Scant costumes, ritual circles, high-charged hops and leaps, the arrangement of arms and legs in totemic formations. But then again, such actions might also

suggest any number of other cultural phenomena.

The action is most striking for its consistent upward pulse. Morris chooses to have his dancers reach heavenward rather than communing with the ground, although both activities are legitimate aspects of ritual dance.

Originally commissioned for the Seattle's Men's Chorus, the music for "Strict Songs" was performed at BAM by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus accompanied by the Chamber Orchestra of St. Luke's which was featured throughout the performance.

The dance is dedicated to the memory of Liberace, perhaps be-

cause it was made last year shortly after the entertainer's death, but "Strict Songs" has no thematic connection with the entertainer's life.

Now is a good time to catch Mark Morris's work. After the BAM season, American Ballet Theater will present his first ballet for that company on May 31, June 2, 4 and 8.

In September, Morris and his dancers leave for Belgium where they will become the resident troupe of the Theater Royal de la Monnaie, replacing an equally outrageous company, Maurice Bejart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century.