

Plotting the future of dance

By NANCY VREELAND DALVA

In a sunny, mirrored rehearsal studio at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), the Mark Morris Dance Group is collectively collapsed on the floor, panting.

Poulenc's Sonata for Clarinet and Piano has just ended in a furious tumble of sound. The still air is silent, except for the heavy breathing, and a sotto voce curse or two.

Mark Morris, scion of modern dance, heir apparent of Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor,

sprawls on a folding chair. His Medusa-locks are tied in a ponytail. His pre-Raphaelite face is flushed and puffy from exertion. Cross Isadora Duncan with Jim Belushi, and you have something like this: a snaggle-toothed, bee-stung, squarely built hybrid.

Dance's best hope wiped his face with a towel. He swills health food soda pop. And he belches — an incredible, oracular, Olympic, Book of Records belch. This is not a man who believes in half-measures. Just listen to him give his exhausted dancers corrections:

"Even though it's fast and hard, it has to be lighter and better... so no one can tell whether it's hard or easy."

They work on a jump together. Morris is both impatient and exuberant — the BAM season is about to get under way. From today though May 22d, dance lovers will migrate to Brooklyn, eager to see the company before it files off to Brussels to take up residence at the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie, Belgium's National Opera House.

Meanwhile, there is this five-work program to polish, perfect and rehearse. Elsewhere, the Orchestra of St. Luke's is running through the Poulenc, the Mozart for Morris' "Fugue and Fantasy" and the songs by Purcell that accompany "One Charming Night," a shepherd-and-shepherdess duet about vampires.

The New York City Gay Men's Chorus is learning Lou Harrison's Strict Songs, mesmerizing music based on Hopi Indian chants. And somewhere, a soprano, a tenor, a contralto and a baritone rehearse Brahms' lush and romantic New Liebeslieder Walzer.



Martha Swope

"SONATA FOR CLARINET AND PIANO": Mark Morris, at right, puts his dancers through their paces.

George Balanchine once used this same music for a gorgeous, swoony, subtle, moonlit chamber ballet. Morris hadn't seen the Balanchine when he decided to make his dance, but he's seen it since.

There's an odd affinity between Morris and Balanchine,

one that creeps up on you over time, particularly now that Balanchine is gone and The New York City Ballet continues without him.

What Morris shares with Balanchine is a passionate understanding of music and a reliance upon it for structure. Before the movement comes the floor plan; the score is the blueprint. Just as Balanchine read scores, so does Morris.

Those who wonder where dance will go in the 21st century — and there's been a lot of such wondering during this dance-packed spring in New York — haven't far to look. Out at BAM, the future has arrived.