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BURRELLE'S

Cleverness isn't everything

By Joseph H. Maza
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DANCE REVIEW

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Mark Morris has superb taste in music, no question about it. During his company's current season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the troupe dances to scores by Brahms, Mozart, Poulenc, and Purcell as well as contemporary composer Lou Harrison.

Morris has a sharp mind, too — and a pointed wit — and he makes dances that look like nobody else's. His movement seems to be influenced by everything from ballet to Victorian melodrama, or else to be influenced by nothing at all. At 31, he is widely acclaimed as the freshest and most important choreographic talent of his generation.

I point this out because I have not yet been converted. I may be, one day — the man's talent is not to be disputed — but the works he showed at BAM Tuesday night (the company will be there through Sunday) did not do the trick.

"Fugue and Fantasy," which had its first New York performance, is set to Mozart's "Fugue in C minor" and "Fantasia in C minor for Piano." To the fugue, Morris has composed — a fugue. Four dancers, seated (most of the time) in folding chairs, pass steps and getures among them in strict fugal form. The actions are imaginatively devised and amusing. At the end of a phrase, each dancer extends his arm sharply, almost walloping the performer to his right, in a gesture that suggests the old vaudeville line, "Take it, partner." A neat phrase consists of two stamps on the floor followed by brisk sideways wriggling of the dancer's hoisted feet.

The fantasy section is, indeed, a fantasy — one that frequently involves choking someone. Dancers repeatedly grab one another by the throat, and later clutch their own throats. They also grab one another's shoulders. The fantasy, then, is one of violence, but it is played out in a strictly conceived dance form.

To my taste, the jokes were too obvious and the forms insufficiently investigated. The fugue was clever, and Morris developed it well, eventually moving his dancers out of their chairs as the piece increased in intensity. And yet, the dance, like most of Morris' dances, seemed too closely tied to the music. The choreographer presents an idea, but he does not really elaborate on it.

"Sonata for Clarinet and Piano," set to the Poulenc score of that name, was equally intriguing, and equally unsatisfying. At the opening, a group of dancers in black tops and red tights, looking rather like a football huddle, surround another dancer (Morris himself) in a black top and yellow tights. His arm is extended toward the wing. The other dancers dump him into the wing. Funny. End of sequence.

Bringing dancers on from the four corners of the stage, Morris seems to focus our attention on the empty center of the dancing space as much as on the dancers. Later, he moves between two lines of performers in a dance as neat and formal as an exchange of business cards.

The steps are inventive, but sometimes seem unfinished. The kinetic development of the dance is not seamless: Action does not always arise out of what has gone before. I kept waiting for something more to happen, for the amplification that the next phrase would bring, usually without satisfaction.

Morris' steps are difficult, but they do not stress virtuosity. His dancers tend to be slightly heavyset; they slouch a bit at the shoulders and seldom achieve full stretch. This is a deliberately casual style of dancing and one that, to my eye, lacks theatrical excitement. For many viewers, I think, this is part of Morris' appeal. And it is one of the reasons that I remain among the unconverted.