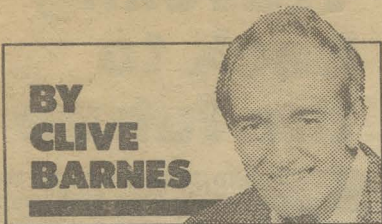


Morris in musical maze

BY
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ONE can only trust that Mark Morris does not believe some of those outrageously flattering things said about him and his modest, pleasing and even promising talent. He is far from being a bad choreographer, but he is also far from being a good choreographer. He is sort of equidistant choreographer.

And, to judge from his new program currently at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, at present he seems to be running up a bland alley.

The outrageousness of some of his past work has been replaced by a generally conservative mediocrity that still obviously thrills his more enthusiastic and vociferous advocates but is unlikely to win many fervent new converts to his cause.

He has possibly become the most produced and most prolific young American choreographer since the late Choo San Goh, and he has the same kind of consistency.

Now Morris and his small troupe are about to depart — at the beginning of next season, actually — to Brussels, where the Theatre de la Monnaie, having botched its contract with Maurice Bejart (who has defected with his company to Lausanne), has hired these Morris dancers to fill its traditionally radical gap. It is a fascinating appointment — and our bravely borne loss will hopefully be Brussels' gain.

Morris has a reputation for being musical which is quite undeserved. He can, it seems, read a score. It says so in every interview he gives. He choreographs strictly to the rhythmic beat, and with supreme indifference to the music's period, style, mood or intention.

Indeed, it is this same crass musical indifference that gives his work its spurious air of modernity and the occasional outrage. He has all the musical sensibility of a frog faced with ice-cream. And this is a handicap.

His musicianship was perfectly demonstrated on this program by his jocular duet to Purcell arias called "One Charming Night." Morris himself plays a



Martha Swope

CARRIED AWAY: Mark Morris (inset) and his dancers, performing "Fantasy" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

DANCE review

Dracula figure in a lounge suit — he dances with suprising and engaging nimbleness for such a chunky man — bloodily courting a young woman sitting on a bench in a frock.

However, I mean, very gently, to put Morris down, not to put Morris off. There is a genuine talent here, perhaps small, but perhaps larger, hidden beneath the dross.

It could be seen strongly in the evening's first work, "New Love Song Waltzes," which is choreographed to the second set of Brahms' "Liebeslieder Walzer," some of which overlap with those used by Balanchine in his ballet of that name.

Years ago, writing in the Lon-

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don Times, I compared Balanchine's dancers with Goethe's phrase "rolling about like spheres." By contrast, Morris' dancers roll about like sailors, but at least they roll.

There is a precious energy here that is not to be ignored. The work lacks any kind of subtlety. It even makes dim-witted jokes to divert the philistines, but it keeps moving, even though the vocabulary is — in-

tentionally, I presume — very limited and repetitive in the currently modish William Forsythe fashion.

An even more interesting work — led by Morris himself, looking like a plump Napoleon — was "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano," set to music by Poulenc, where Morris' heavy-handed humor was actually appropriate, and the strict liveliness of the choreography had both dash and charm.

Yet elsewhere his abilities are at present overwhelmed by his taste, and capsized by his technique. Take, for example, his silly little piece to Mozart, opening with a "Fugue" that is seemingly a weak-kneed parody of the use of chairs by the Belgian choreographer, Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, a lady who herself would appear to be more in need of assistance than parody.

The "Fantasy" that follows is anything but fantastic, simply dull. The same dullness and bland doggedness pursues to the grave Morris' final work, "Strict Songs."

This is set to pulverizingly boring choral music sung by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus and composed by Lou Harrison in a tuning method the composer calls "just intonation." This involves each song being tuned to a different five-note scale, while the orchestra, apart from the piano and harp, has no fixed pitch.

The music sounds monotonous — and the dancing looks likewise. Dedicated to the memory of Liberace, it lacked a great deal in what might be called the luminosity of candelabra-power.