



PHOTOS BY MARTHA SPOPE

Some call it genius: Dancers in 'Fugue and Fantasy,' Morris

DANCE

Cheers for Mark Morris

Critics hail a klutz in the age of glamour

He's due onstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in a few hours, but right now Mark Morris—critically acclaimed as the crown prince and long-awaited savior of the dance world—is devouring a chicken sandwich and a beer as he cheerfully maligns the New York City Ballet's recent American Music Festival. "I've been calling it the Peter Martins record-collection festival," he says, referring to the NYCB's codirector, who masterminded the huge event. "And the paintings projected on the curtain? And the lettering the same as on a dollar bill? It's like, what's the subliminal message here? Paul Taylor's piece was so beautiful, and coming after Martins's—that lecture-demonstration for the seventh grade... Then I fell asleep during the Jerome Robbins."

It isn't diplomacy that's gotten Morris, 31, where he is today. Indeed, nothing about his career, his dancing, his choreography or his company can easily explain how this big, craggy-faced dancer with the shoulder-length mop of brown curls and a background in folk dance and flamenco has so handily swept up the public, the press and the prizes of contemporary dance. Since staging his first concert in 1980, Morris has choreographed for the Boston Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet and the Seattle Opera; he's been featured on the U.S. public television series "Dance in America,"

he's won a Guggenheim and a Bessie award for choreography, he's choreographed the opera "Nixon in China" and he's made dozens of dances for his own company.

This month alone he directed a production of "Die Fledermaus" at the Seattle Opera, appeared with his company at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and polished up a new piece for American Ballet Theatre, to be premiered next week. All the while he's been gathering such praise as "gifted, brilliant, exceptional" (The Washington Post); "breathtaking" (Newsday), and "the most sought-after choreographer on the international dance scene" (The Boston Globe). By fall Morris and his dancers will be installed in Brussels as the resident company at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, with the use of an orchestra and chorus, eight studios, a school if he wants one, and virtually unlimited freedom. "This guy from Brussels only saw one concert but he'd heard a lot," says Morris. "He basically offered it to me on the spot."

Careful frolicking: The choreography that attracts this adulation is surprisingly unassuming. "New Love Song Waltzes," which opened his BAM season last week, features the ensemble doing a great deal of careful frolicking to Brahms's "Neue Liebeslieder Walzer." Hefty, hearty and barefooted, earnestly lunging and swooping through tidy floor patterns dictated by

the music, they need only red scarves to look more like Young Pioneers at modern-dance camp than the usual sylphlike virtuosos who populate our best-known companies. The troupe's movement style clearly derives from Morris, whose rough-hewn technique lends itself equally to folksiness, solemnity and the macabre. In "One Charming Night" he appears in a dark suit like a malevolent preacher, fluttering and skipping around Teri Weksler, a maiden in puffed sleeves, with the footwork equivalent of a leer. At the end she's carried off by demon lust, literally.

Morris has a wide-ranging love of music and an inexhaustible supply of ideas for dances, but his movement vocabulary is limited, and its crude, brazen quality varies little from piece to piece. Moreover, his passion for musical exactitude is such that he tends to set his dances precisely atop each measure. Sometimes this is captivating: in "Fugue and Fantasy," for example, four dancers sitting on chairs mirror a Mozart fugue as it unfolds, mimicking each theme and clapping a hand over their eyes to signify a rest. Yet imitating the music isn't the same as revealing it, and too often his choreography shows us nothing more than the notes printed on the page.

So what's all the excitement about? His admirers call it genius, but more plausibly it's intellectual independence—which may be just as welcome these days. Morris's work is startlingly honest, a quality that often makes his dances more interesting to think about than to watch. But at a time when most choreography is so hollow it collapses under any mental reflection at all, these dances stand out dramatically. Morris cultivates his imagination, not his audience or board of directors, and he does exactly what he wants, not what the dictates of fashion or career bid him to do next. Three of his dances, for example, were inspired by Roland Barthes essays—one on laundry, one on wrestling and one on striptease. His new ABT ballet is set to Virgil Thomson, and Mikhail Baryshnikov will dance in it as a member of the ensemble, not as a star.

"I don't need everybody on earth to see my work," says Morris. "It's great if a lot of people like it, but I'm not twisting anybody's arm. I've never worked the circuit, I've never done the glamorous cocktail parties to raise money from creeps. The honorary committee for the benefit? Maybe Liz Taylor will show up? I hate that." Here at last is a choreographer willing to look like a klutz in the age of glamour. For that he deserves every ovation he's received.

LAURA SHAPIRO

