

Morris Dance Group proves exhilarating at Spa Little Theatre

By MAE G. BANNER

Special to The Saratogian

If each modern dance group is the visible expression of the mind of its choreographer, then the Mark Morris Dance Group — sometimes goofy, sometimes frightening, always beautiful — is like no group you will ever see anywhere.

Morris makes dances out of an eccentric, fertile inventiveness that left me gasping, but exhilarated.

Monday night's program at the Little Theatre in the Saratoga Spa State Park included "Canonic 3/4 Studies," a set of cartoon-like variations to piano waltzes; "Lovey," a dance of rejection and auto-erotism to songs by a male rock group called The Violent Femmes; and the exultant "Gloria," set to the baroque music of Antonio Vivaldi.

A group of miniature dances strung together like a necklace, called "Bijoux," was performed by Teri Weksler to Erik Satie's "Quatre Petites Melodies, Ludions."

Though his dances vary in structure and feeling, certain movements and patterns recur. What Morris does that I like best is to send a particular movement — a flat-footed turn with one leg bent or a sudden collapse to the floor followed by an equally sudden rise — rippling through a line of dancers, working itself out through each body in turn.

He's been praised as a master of entrances, exits and transitions. "Gloria" is full of wonderful ones. One example: at stage right, a dancer jumps up as if stung and seems to fly off the stage backwards, her hands jiggling in the air. The next instant, another flies in at stage left only to collapse flat on his back.

Morris has a great capacity for making group movement, often reminiscent

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of Eastern European line and circle dancing. He can set a line of dancers rolling or peeling off in a satisfyingly rhythmic way or he can use a stamping foot, a pointed finger or a lifted shoulder to spoof the dignified folk dances that have apparently influenced him.

Ballet and modern dance vocabularies are equally mocked, yet somehow honored in the breach. There are arabesques with deliberately broken lines and contractions that look like severe bellyaches. Morris' choreography takes everything he knows about dance and gives it a twist that compels the audience to look anew.

The dancers are broad-backed, sturdy and assured. Their costumes look like the cleanest things they could find in the laundry hamper — real jockey shorts or red cotton underpants in "Lovey," gray sweatshirts and chinos in "Gloria." The effect is to emphasize the dance itself and to underscore the literal quality of much of the movement.

Especially in "Gloria," particular gestures or poses like inching along on one's belly with elbows bent up like a grasshopper's legs, or an arm curved downward and to the side, recur and accumulate and thicken, achieving a powerful density by the end of the dance.

The Mark Morris Dance Group will be here through Saturday. See them. They leave soon for a 3-year residency in Belgium, so there's no telling when you will have another chance.

This program will be repeated Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday at 8:15 p.m. Program B can be seen Tuesday and Friday at 8:15 p.m. and Thursday at 2 p.m.