

Morris Dancers Like Nothing Else at SPAC

By CONSTANCE VALIS-HILL

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Curly-haired and androgenously youthful, Mark Morris evokes an image of Hermes discovering, as an infant, the pulsating rapture of music from his stringed lyre. Like that Greek messenger of the gods, Morris choreographs with quick wit and fleet-footed assuredness. The muses of music, comedy and poetry must surely frolic merrily around his head when he makes a dance. He has the Midas touch.

Review

With choreography that sings with music (whether it's Satie, Vivaldi or the Violent Femmes), the Mark Morris Dance Group

redefines modern and post-modern dance on its own terms. Compellingly watchable, this Saratoga premiere was like nothing else to date in the Little Theatre of Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

Using the various piano waltzes that one hears in a dance class, "Canonic 3/4 Studies" is a parody, and would wring a smile from anyone who ever donned a ballet slipper, or tortured over the ballet barre.

In classic classroom black tights and white T-shirts, small ensembles attempt to endure the rigor and imposed fake formality of the ballet class. Of course, Morris looks at the class from the inside out, from the clumsy and suffering amateur's perspective, with more falls and sprawls and crawls than recovers.

One poor fellow attempts to partner a primly prancing ballerina, only to fall dismally out of sync with her, so that they both look like bobbing buoys. Another male fares better, lifting two prissies over slightly curving arcs, back and forth and back again and again, as they create a peculiar retrograding ring around him.

Morris spares nothing. He translates the "events" of the ballet lesson into a wickedly amusing joke.

The slow-extending adagio section begins with elegant stretches, which crash to the floor in sudden succession. Music that would be used for across-the-floor turns in the air accents, instead, the splattering downbeats of a rocky landing. And small jumps, used to develop the instep of the foot, become a Bulgarian stomp line, with off-centered jumps that are executed sincerely, but look a bit loony.

Variations on the circle, with one guy spinning endlessly, two encircling with a polka, and three jogging around all of them, make for fabulous fun.

"Lovey" opens with a downstage spotlight on four plastic doll babies — pink, plump and soft. Upstage, there's a group in variously styled bedroom wear — boys in boxer shorts or jockeys and robes, girls in short nighties or pajamas.

To the Violent Femmes singing "I Hear the Rain," they caress themselves and touch each other, flinching, recoiling from and responding to the touch. The juxtaposition of doll and touch, and later, the explicit narrative of the songs, make a blatantly frank statement on child molestation and abuse.

The nude pink dolls are cuddled, thrust in the groin, smothered, stroked and tossed. In a ravaging scene, the girl in the pink nightie is lured away, as the Femmes sing "you know your papa loves you." As he leans into and pierces through her, the chorus resounds with "I threw my child in a bottomless pit."

Although seriously sober, "Lovey" is not heavy-handed. Morris would hardly shove down our throats the grim reality of violence to our children, and to the innocence within ourselves. Instead, he is frankly honest about that fact, making it all the more jolting.

"Gloria," to Vivaldi's inspirational "Gloria in D," launched the talented com-

pany into an ecstatic flight. It is filled with high-swirling arms, suspended gallops and sweeping belly slides across half of the stage. The tone is serious, the mood is pious. But the manner of worship seems coetaneous, emerging from a youthful perspective.

When a pair of women arduously lead a canting body, they stumble, seemingly unaware of the pitfalls before them. A trio progresses on the diagonal, constantly replenishing each other, taking one step forward and two back. Amidst an enraptured solo, recalling the corporeal spirituality of Jose Limon, other dancers walk apathetically across the stage.

The sheer momentum of the choral climaxes, the unrelenting energy of the dancing and the endless succession of beautifully shifting movement patterns make "Gloria" an inspired consecration.

Mark Morris is a "must see" event. Do not miss him. Program A repeats at 8:15 p.m. today, tomorrow and Saturday.

'Griffin, Minor Canon' Is Music-Theatre Plus

THE GRIFFIN AND THE MINOR CANON. Music by Mary Rodgers. Lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh. Book by Wendy Kesselman. Produced by Music-Theatre Group and Playwrights Horizons with Roger L. Stevens. Directed by Andre Ernotte. Musical direction and vocal and instrumental arrangements by Robert Elhai. Set design by Victoria Petrovich. Costume design by Donna Zakowska. Lighting design by Debra Dumas. Sound design by Adam Guettel. Choreography by Lynne Taylor-Corbett. Performances in Citizen's Hall, off Route 183, Interlaken, Mass. (between Stockbridge and Lenox), at 9 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday through Aug. 28.

By ELEANOR KOBLINZ

One of the plusses of summer in the Capital District is the opportunity to see and write about potential off-Broadway or Broadway material.

The Music-Theatre Group at Lenox Art Center makes this a possibility each summer.

This year's entry by the group which specializes in small musicals and off-beat subjects is a work by Mary Rodgers, Richard Rodgers' composer-daughter whose "Once Upon a Mattress" is fast becoming a classic.

Like Rodgers' "Once Upon a Mattress" whose comic premise is based upon the children's tale of "The Princess and the Pea," her current work "The Griffin and the Minor Canon" derives from a story that would have youthful appeal.

Taken from a 19th-century short story by Frank Stanton, the tale of a mythical griffin that has human qualities is of much earlier derivation than that source.

It comes out of the lore of the Middle Ages when the mythological animal — with body and hind legs of a lion and head and wings of an eagle — was a symbol of vigilance and strength. Stone likenesses of griffins were often placed upon Gothic buildings, particularly cathedrals, probably to ward off evil.

of his political endeavors and lets the world know that "to lead is hard," the gravedigger mans his shovel with flair. The church-keeper wants money to have her own house in back of the church; the blacksmith makes iron images to sell of the stately carved griffin who sits high up on the church wall.

Mocking the saintly canon, the townspeople indulge in all kinds of aberrant behavior — until the day a live griffin, enticed by a strange blackbird, flies down from his lofty aerie in the clouds.

The live griffin has never seen another like himself and comes to gaze upon and peck at his stone image.

According to legend the griffin eats only twice a year, at each equinox. His appetite must be satisfied by human flesh.

The townspeople fearfully want him removed. His presence makes a curiosity and an attraction out of their town. If he stays, their town art is ruined. The griffin is the last of his kind; any status goes to him.

People run from the griffin whose breath is like fire and the spread of whose wings can block out the sun from a whole town.

Finally when the cowardly people cannot cope, the canon comes out of the church and volunteers to make the sacrifice of bearding the griffin in his den.

Directed by Andre Ernotte of New York's Playwright's Horizon has used the small theater in MTG's former Victorian schoolhouse to good advantage. His task is greatly helped by a cast of solid professionals.

Rodney Scott Hudson is an amazing griffin, lithe and giving the appearance of being lighter-than-air despite his tall muscular frame. With a facile face and a thrilling voice, his griffin is a sad creature in spite of Herculean size and great impact on the populace.

In contrast is Henry Stram's abject canon, with small tenor voice and supplicant manner, an effective portrayal of the cleric, ineffectual in all but his final endeavor.

Rodgers' music is clearly evocative of the period and the dark mood, while revealing some personality traits of the characters. It

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