

Meet the Mark Morris that you never see

by Carole Beers
Times dance critic

In some ways, choreographer Mark Morris is living the life chronicled by those hard-living crooners in the country-western songs he says he likes: He chain-smokes, puts away quantities of beer, stays up late shooting pool in noisy dance halls, enjoys gaudy gags and personal effects, uses rough talk making important points, and relishes seeing a lot of skin (hence his nude appearances on stage and in slicks such as *Vanity Fair*).

The Seattle native obviously thrives on the publicity. He loves notoriety, and being at the center of things — in his case, international dance theater.

But there's another part of him equally intense, and as reclusive, as his public persona is, well, public: That's the soft-spoken, listening and caring side, the warm-eyed soul clad in Bermuda shorts who takes his time over a quiet lunch with a critic at a Leschi cafe during last weekend's impromptu visit to his mom. It was his first trip home since September, when he moved to Brussels to head the dance troupe at Theatre Royal de la Monnaie.

It was a Morris few people see, to be sure. He makes better copy saying naughty things such as "(Maurice) Bejart's work is s---" (Bejart was his popular predecessor in Belgium.) Or, "I stopped liking Llory Wilson when she added that second 'L' to her first name." (Wilson works as an independent choreographer in Seattle; she once danced for Morris.)

He maintained, "I trash work, not people." And, "Why bother,

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unless it's excellent?" When the waiter asked if he wanted his chowder in a bowl, Morris paused and delivered the giggle, "How else! Chowder on a stick?"

Slurping chowder, Morris happily recited the litany of his 27-member dance group's upcoming projects — the Dance Theater Workshop benefit this Wednesday and Thursday in New York, the United States premiere of the controversial "Dido and Aeneas" (music by Purcell) June 6-11 in Boston, a fortnight of mid-June workshops followed by shows at nearby Jacob's Pillow, then the tour to Montpelier, Spoleto, Barcelona and Seville, where as a lad he studied flamenco dance with the masters.

He said he has a "bunch of operas" in the offing, including several more for opera producer Peter Sellars ("Peter's the only person I really like working with"), and another opera he will direct in Belgium ("I don't yet know which"). He's also scheduled to create a big new piece for Paris Opera Ballet in the summer of 1990, "to Bach, with a lot of dancers," followed by Los Angeles dates that fall, when he will give the U.S. premiere of "L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato," based on Handel's oratorio — the poetic work that opened his Brussels tenure to generally favorable reviews.

Also under consideration: Offers to do another piece for American Ballet Theatre (his "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes" was a hit), and one for San Francisco



Mark Morris
"Chowder on a stick?"

Ballet ("I might just rent them one, I'm getting so busy").

This freedom to work in other venues is one of the main joys of continuing Morris' three-year commitment to the Monnaie. This, and the astounding artistic support he and company receive: full services including a half-dozen orchestra rehearsals prior to performances, complete cooperation by the costume shop, a massage service and complete health care, a gorgeous theater, a board and administrative bureaucracy that "takes time to get ideas through, but is generally agreeable" and guaranteed, year-round salaries.

"They aren't that great," Morris said, "maybe \$250 a week for dancers in the company — I have no idea what I make, it's all handled for me by my manager — but the steady work is what's

important." Morale is high, like Morris' creative juices.

As for the mixed reviews, the criticism of his choreography, some of which is not "balletic" enough or which contains nudity presented in "shocking" ways, he said, "With 'L'Allegro' I wasn't trying to show anybody anything. I just do my work. All my work is classical. If I wanted to educate people, I'd be doing artists-in-the-schools in some cafeteria at 8 in the morning. I assume a certain responsibility on the part of an audience."

Music is, of course, a major motivating force behind the creation of Morris' works. He understands it like few other choreographers working today. Asian, cowboy, European-classical — all interesting. As are steps in all idioms — ballet, Spanish, Balkan and several modern forms are in Morris' resume.

But lately, as in the hour-long "Dido," in which Morris plays the double role of Dido and the sorceress (now he was photographed by Annie Liebowitz for *Vanity Fair*), he's been interested in narrative, or dance that tells a story. He also plans to incorporate improvisation into his works for the first time.

Morris said he's not bothered by the natterings and batterings by an angry press in Belgium. Although he does have journalistic supporters, there, too.

"I'm doing exactly what I want," he noted. "What controversy there is has been whipped up by the press. It's annoying. But it's political. There're Bejart loyalists. And people who dislike me just because I'm an American. But in the main I am happy."