

Terrific night of dance from Morris

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BECKET - Mark Morris brought five dances to open the season at Jacob's Pillow - "a familiar place to

DANCE PREVIEW

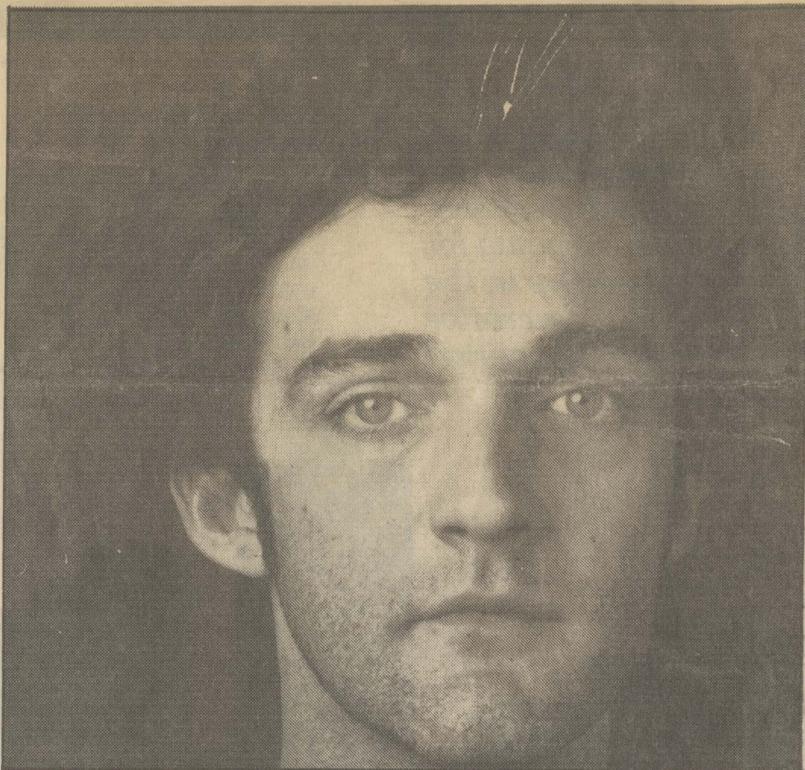
present unfamiliar art," as its director Liz Thompson described it in her annual curtain speech. The main thing Morris' exceptionally varied dances had in common is that all of them were terrific - and there is always something unfamiliar to see, even in as famous a work as "Gloria," and something to hold the audience, even in as uncompromising a work as "Lovey," which Thompson said some people might want to sit out.

Morris' music was piano waltzes, popular music from Thailand, songs by the Violent Femmes, chamber music by Couperin and the Vivaldi Gloria; the subject matter of the movement was humorous, celebratory and threatening, sometimes all at once.

"Canonic 3/4 Studies," set to the piano waltzes, rejoices in the cliches of the waltz and of partnering. When the rhythm stretched off-balance, the dancers tumbled to the floor; a male dancer struggled to keep up as his partners changed direction on him. It is a homely kind of dance, and Morris keeps the garbled mistakes of the pianist on the tape, because they're real too. And paradoxically, showing the absurdities of the waltz does not make it less romantic.

This made a nice parallel to the "Pieces en concert," the Couperin work, an indecorous contemporary commentary on a decorative period, Arcadian groupings flying out of kilter, Poussin in a prom dress and poison in the birdbath. Sometimes Morris' famous responsiveness to music stuck too close to surface detail rather than deeper structure - fluttering hands and feet replicate a trill, but the event that the trill illuminates or intensifies is not explored; this was troubling in parts of "Dido & Aeneas" in Boston a couple of weeks ago.

In this instance, however, the occasional mickey-mousing of the music was also a deadly parody of certain styles of baroque dancing in which treatises overruled taste. Susan Hadley and Keith Sabado danced this with Morris, making



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MONNAIE DANCE GROUP/MARK MORRIS - In a program at Jacob's Pillow Tuesday night.

his only appearance of the evening. In this piece, his belief in his own period graces was irresistible - it was a little like watching a hefty and mature Italian soprano convince you she is a teen-age Japanese geisha because she can hit all the notes and because she so fervently believes in the idea of herself as Butterfly. This piece, like Morris' dancing, was both delicate and broad, and the categories don't clash - they complete each other.

No greater contrast could exist between this and what followed, the oedipal "Lovey," set to music by the Violent Femmes on a cast of dancers and naked plastic doll babies. The "Country Death Song" had the explicit and gruesome detail of an old ballad, timeless yet forever contemporary. "Lovey" was nasty, and while it was easy to remark at intermission that one was glad not to have been carrying this around in one's own mind, Morris' uncomfortable point is that everyone does. The dance had the additional virtue of showing that the words aren't everything, and there's more going on in the music than you'd think.

The popular Thai music mingles a great regional tradition with some of the sleaziest aspects of Western pop music, and that's what Morris' "Celestial Greetings" did too; six female dancers in teen-age going-to-the-mall outfits moved through patterns of Oriental and quasi-Oriental gestures. Are *all* of Morris' dances crossovers? It looks that way.

The program closed with "Gloria," one of Morris' signature pieces, which the wonderful dancers of Monnaie Dance Group, an ensemble company full of distinct and distinctive individuals, danced all out, despite the heat - the way they had performed all evening. Morris' response is to the celebratory spirit of the text rather than to its liturgical or literal meaning; primarily it is a response to the music. If Vivaldi breaks into fugue, so does the choreography, which moved in parallel horizontal lines, almost never on a diagonal; the dancers were like notes on a staff coming exuberantly to life. And the opening image of sliding in supplication changed and developed; by the end it was sheer animal joy, a bellyflop into a crowded pool on the Fourth of July.

It was a great evening, and there was a standing ovation for Morris and the dancers at the end.