

Theater Review:

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Morris pieces will please at DPAC tonight

BY ROY C. DICKS, Correspondent

DURHAM - Mark Morris' choreography continues to please the public with its naturalness, whimsical humor and life-affirming spirit, qualities on display as his company finishes out the 2009 American Dance Festival season.

This year's pieces are in two groups: a pair of stage-filling works from the early 1990s and a trio of intimate creations from the current decade. All have Morris' typical gentle surface under which curious and emotional realms reside.

The program opens with "A Lake," a 1991 piece set to a Haydn horn concerto. Ten dancers in quasi-18th century garb use balletic gestures and symmetrical groupings to present a joyous, bucolic celebration. But the somber second movement reveals fallen figures lifted up by others, and though things brighten in the bouncy third part, the theme of rescue pervades, reflecting humanity's requirement for reciprocal support.

The 1990 romp, "Going Away Party" ends the program with a hormone-fueled country-and-western dance to eight recorded tunes by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. What seems merely a humorous look at cowpokes flirting with their fillies soon reveals a subtext about a loner who doesn't fit in, watching wistfully as couples pair off, leaving him partnerless.

Between these bookends are smaller-scaled works danced to live music (played with stylish confidence by pianist Colin Fowler). The short 2000 solo "Peccadillos" has a child-like innocence, enhanced by Satie pieces on a toy piano. Joe Bowie quietly and sweetly performs the simple, repetitive movements of this Pierrot-like figure, ultimately exuding a melancholy that suggests innocence remembered.

The other two works are from the same cloth, each performed within a square marked out on the floor around which dancers congregate until time for their parts. "Candleflowerdance" (2005), to Stravinsky's "Serenade in A," has powerful images of group ritual, each dancer taking a solo turn, then joined by the others in mysterious group collapses, from which they crawl to recovery only to collapse again. Despite the ominous tone, the feeling is one of defiance over adversity.

In "Excursions" (2008), Morris takes his cue from the western Americana of Samuel Barber piano pieces, the dancers mimicking horse riding, roping and square dancing. But then there's a sudden shift to a frightening world of sickness and sorrow, which the dancers enter reluctantly. Again, there's a theme of the fallen and mutual aid, this time with not as much hope.

This particular program does not show off Morris's full range, but the warmth and openness of his works counts for a lot, his images and ideas winningly engaging the mind.

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If you go

What: Mark Morris Dance Group, at American Dance Festival

Where: Durham Performing Arts Center

When: 8 p.m. today

Cost: \$22-43

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