

For Morris, art of making art is collaboration

By JOSEPH H. MAZO

MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV meshes his feet into fifth position while standing in the aisle of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's mezzanine. It's the only available place where he can talk and warm up at the same time. Tomorrow, he will be performing at BAM with the Mark Morris Dance Group.

Since resigning as artistic director of American Ballet Theatre in September 1989, Baryshnikov has not been leaping through the classical roles of his early stardom, but that doesn't mean he hasn't been dancing. He heads the White Oak Dance Project, a touring company that presents works created by contemporary choreographers, including Mark Morris, who is sometimes called the "bad boy of modern ballet."

"Mark's attitude toward dance and dancing is very personal," Baryshnikov remarks, stretching. "He is a man of the music. He doesn't just say to himself, 'I have to do a new piece for the company this season'; instead, he constantly listens to music, and his choreography comes from his need to interpret a particular piece."

"His choreography is very specific to the music and very tightly linked to it. I think his

biggest influence was dancing with a folk ensemble in Seattle when he was young; group work is important to him, and so is having normal-looking people as dancers. Mark is eclectic in the best sense."

The program for the five-performance season at BAM certainly supports that remark. It's called "Dances to American Music," and includes works choreographed to scores by Henry Cowell, an influential composer who died in 1965.

George Gershwin and Lou Harrison, as well as a piece commissioned from bassist Rob Wasserman and singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked, who will both perform it.

"The music is all beautiful," Morris says during a break in rehearsal. "That's all it has in common." He's sitting comfortably on the floor wearing blue shorts, with a large water bottle between his knees.

"I work from sensation and emotion," the choreographer goes on. "It's not just the really complex math and geometry of choreography that interests me — I like fantasy. I use specific music because I like it. I found the Henry Cowell music on an old LP in my mother's house when I was visiting Seattle, and I knew I wanted to use it."

"Home" is the piece to music by Rob and Michelle. I've known them for a while now

and we thought it would be interesting and fun to work together. It is."

"I've been going to Mark's rehearsals for a couple of years," Wasserman explains over the telephone from his northern California office. "The process of collaboration started as the process of becoming friends."

"It's going to be a country, folkish viewpoint. Michelle wrote three songs, and I wrote a solo bass trio that's earthy and scrappy. Then I wrote a fiddle tune — my first fiddle tune; Michelle lent me her fiddle and I started to play it for the first time in 20 years, and

I'll play it at the performances."

Shocked, talking from Los Angeles, is equally enthusiastic. Shifting from pop concerts to dance concert doesn't disconcert her in the least, although she realizes that she's going to be more restricted than usual in her approach.

"We have to have arrangements that are very structured and don't allow any shift in emotion from night to night," she explains. "I'm going to have to focus strongly on rhythm, tempo and timing."

The singer takes pleasure, she says cheerfully, "in telling

Mark that I don't know anything about dance. I've been turned off to other kinds of dance. Ballet and modern dance seemed like skeletons they had hung up and were shaking in front of us. It scared us, but they didn't make any sense."

"But the people in Mark's group aren't body-Nazis; they look the way people look," she adds. "I'm fairly shy, but I have to put that aside when I work with Mark, because I've never met anybody who's so comfortable with who he is."

(Mazo writes frequently on dance for *The News*.)



BODIES IN MOTION: Members of Mark Morris Dance Group in rehearsal recently. CHARLES ARRIGO/DAILY NEWS