

Across familiar landscapes

BY JOSEPH H. MAZO

With Mikhail Baryshnikov onstage, cellist Yo-Yo Ma in the orchestra pit, and pop-music artists Michelle Shocked and Rob Wasserman performing on the stage apron, the Mark Morris Dance Group had something for just about everyone when it opened at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Thursday night.

The program, "Dances to American Music," includes pieces by Henry Cowell, George Gershwin, Shocked and Wasserman, and Lou Harrison.

"Mosaic and United," set to Cowell's String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4, had Baryshnikov and members of his White Oak Dance Project joining performers from Morris' company. Ma, whose appearance was not announced in advance, was one of the musicians at the opening-night performance.

The piece, which takes its name from the titles of Cowell's quartets, was made for a single group of five dancers, but at BAM, two groups of five — White Oak and Morris dancers — alternated, performing the sections.

Early on, Morris introduces gestural language as dancers move with their palms pressing against the air, and the positions of hands and arms grow more important as the work continues.

There's a strange, disturbing image in which a dancer lies supine, legs wide, wiggling her raised feet and hands. It looks somehow like a call for help. The movement style is simple and direct, and the dance is filled with striking images and a strong sense of communal action.

Baryshnikov has not been given an outstanding role, but functions as a member of the ensemble —

DANCE REVIEW

THE MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP. Choreography by Mark Morris. With Mikhail Baryshnikov and members of the White Oak Dance Project. 2 and 7 p.m. today. The Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. \$10 to 35. 1-(718) 646-4100.

an equal among equals. His dancing, however, sets him apart, as it always has. He moves with distinctive clarity and control, giving each small step importance and vitality.

"Home," to a score commissioned from Shocked and Wasserman and played by them, has a definite down-home, country feeling. The main sections of the piece are separated by lighthearted group clog dances performed to a fiddle tune.

Morris has fun with the clogging, and it's delightful to see how he varies this simple movement theme from one passage to the next, playing happily with the quick little steps that keep feet slapping smartly against the floor.

The darker passages, danced mostly by an ensemble of women, are filled with images of yearning and reaching. One of Shocked's songs deals with a woman whose child is stillborn, and another describes the worry of a farmer who must get her harvest in before the weather changes.

Morris' choreography, slow and tender, suggests the harshness of rural life — never literally, but with sculptural shapes. "Home," with its cheerful clogging and painful images, is a hymn to the loneliness and comforts of rural America.