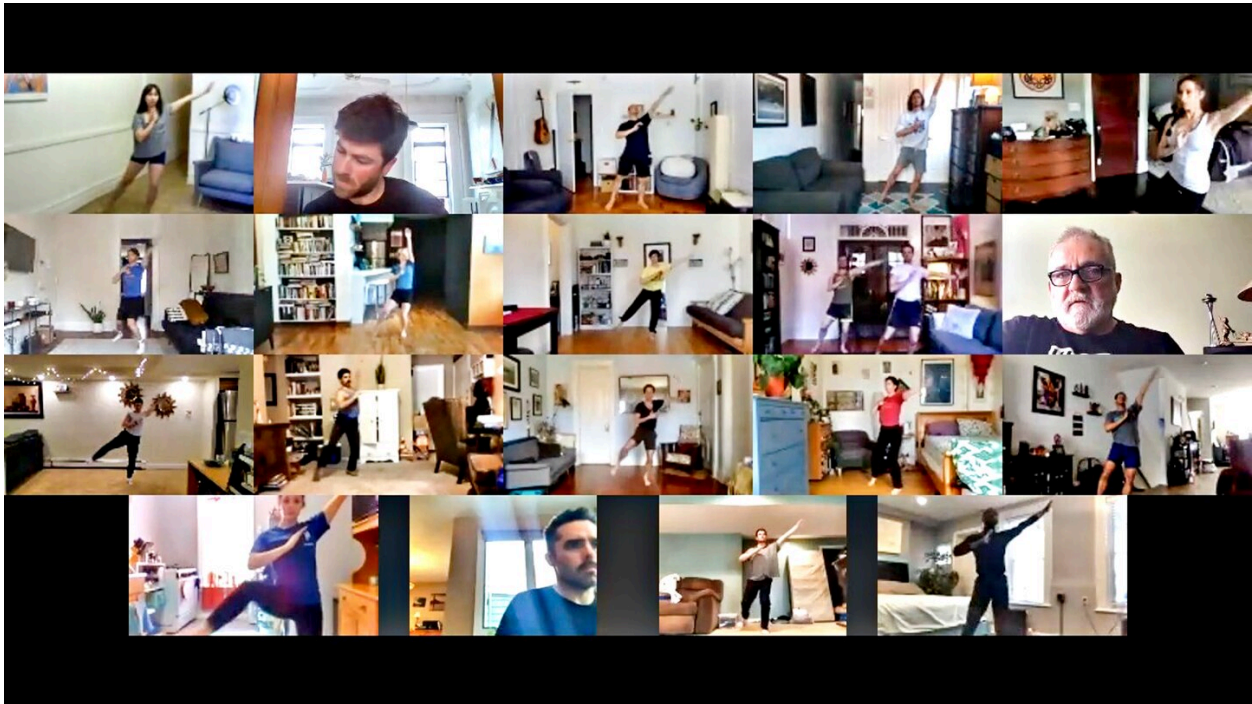


Theater & Dance

# Mark Morris, one of the world's leading choreographers, takes dance to Zoom



An image from a rehearsal of Mark Morris Dance Group's "Lonely Waltz," with Morris on the far right, second row down. (Mark Morris Dance Group)

By **Sarah L. Kaufman**

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"Back up," choreographer Mark Morris says to his dancers. "Go as far away as you can in your room."

Morris, in a black T-shirt and a string of beads, peers through his reading glasses at his computer screen. Arranged around his own image in rows of little boxes he can see who's on this recent videoconference call: his rehearsal director, music director and three Mark Morris Dance Group performers.

Stuck at home like everyone else in New York, the dancers jog backward, past couches, beds and bookshelves, to the rear walls of their apartments.

"It's so nice to see everybody's crap that they have," Morris, 63, says cheerfully, taking in the available floor space. There's not much — these are dancer-salary apartments — but it's all he and his performers have to work with.

Choreography in the age of covid-19 is hardly a graceful undertaking. Morris, the esteemed modern-dance artist whose company has performed to acclaim for more than 40 years, suddenly finds himself out of place in a world of seclusion. His profession depends on working closely with people, getting them to move exactly as he wants. But he's determined to keep creating. No matter that the city's quarantine makes gathering in a rehearsal studio impossible.

“Now, let's dance a little bit,” he says. “Foot articulation is not important 'cause I don't see that. What's more interesting is swooshing” — he swirls his hand in a serpentine movement — “and depth changing.”

The music starts; it's Ravel's “La Valse,” rolling and lush, recorded on piano. The three dancers in their separate squares whirl and glide into view with a smooth, floating quality, winding side to side as if drifting on wind currents.



Mark Morris Dance Group music director Colin Fowler plays both two piano parts in a rehearsal for “Lonely Waltz” (Mark Morris Dance Group)

In his chair, Morris echoes their moves with his upper body, lifting his arms as they do. He gasps, he gapes. He sucks in a breath and runs a hand over his hair. Suddenly he waves frantically at the screen.

“Stop, stop!”

He grabs his head in his hands and pitches backward in his chair. Something has bowled him over — but what? Anguish, despair? Has he been horrified into silence by what he’s seen?

The dancers wait, breathing hard.

Finally the choreographer snaps himself upright.

“That was great!” he shouts, beaming.

He adjusts his glasses and adopts a lilting Italian accent: “I feel like-a Federico Fellini.”

That captures this weird, tilted reality perfectly. There is a certain hallucinatory, Fellini-esque quality to this scene, where a giant of the dance world struggles to master the same awkward video technology that remote office workers are using to teleconference.

And where top dancers are limited to a few feet of floor space and bad lighting, using bathroom doors as stage wings. And where a pandemic is causing financial and existential distress for institutions like Morris’s around the globe.

With canceled performances and classes, his \$9 million organization expects to lose nearly \$2 million if the shutdown extends into July. No income. No audience.



The Mark Morris Dance Group’s production of “Pepperland” at Sadler’s Wells in London last year. (Robbie Jack/Corbis/Getty Images)

What is a choreographer without a stage but a sad clown of God at a time like this?

So Morris has retooled himself as a filmmaker. He began working on this dance last fall, devising the movements in his company’s spacious Brooklyn headquarters with a pianist and 15 dancers. He was nearly finished before shuttering the building last month.

The dance is scheduled to premiere at the Tanglewood music festival in Massachusetts in July, with two pianists playing Ravel's four-hand arrangement. The festival has not been canceled, but Morris holds little hope that his group's engagement will go on. So he's distilling the 12-minute work into a three-minute video fittingly titled "Lonely Waltz," to be streamed May 28 on the company's [website](#), along with another new piece and an interview with Morris.

"My job is irrelevant, if not obsolete," Morris says in a phone interview. "There's no place for live choreography with a company right now, but there's a place for this. . . . It's the perpetuation of what we've built over the past 40 years with my company. We're carrying on what we do and adapting.

"The truth is," he continues, "I'm not making up a dance. I'm making a film. But I'm not an auteur, I don't understand this technology. I'm not a video artist."

He's a purist, above all. Morris doesn't even own a laptop. He's teleconferencing on an iPad. He doesn't work with recorded music; his company tours with its own chamber ensemble. He doesn't make site-specific works, which is pretty much what he's creating now. The screen-freezing, transmission delays (everyone is off the music) and bad sound quality frustrate him. But it's pointless to be picky.

"It's not in-person, blood-sweat-and-tears performing," he says, "but there's still a presence we're maintaining that's really valuable."

Other companies are posting or streaming recordings of past performances, or have excerpted long-standing classics in a quarantine video montage ([Alvin Ailey dancers recorded themselves separately performing parts of "Revelations,"](#) for example).

"But in our company, we still have Mark," says Sam Black, Morris's rehearsal director. "That's what we can bring to the table. His imagination is firing on all cylinders, and he can put something out there that's brand new."

The dancers have been taking company class every day on Zoom, and having weekly Zoom singing sessions and happy hours. But rehearsing with Morris — even with his tendency to tease them about their unmade beds — fulfills a deep-seated need.





“We’re carrying on what we do and adapting,” says choreographer Mark Morris, shown in 2017. (Brian Ach/Getty Images for Bloomberg)

“It felt so refreshing to hear Mark’s voice booming from my computer,” says Lauren Grant, a veteran dancer who swept her 8-year-old’s Magna-Tiles aside, rolled up the rug in her Brooklyn living room, and ordered her husband and son into their bedrooms so she could enjoy a blissful hour of rehearsal.

“To be told to come in at bar 17 from your bathroom into your living room and without any visual cues of other dancers and the music is coming through in this warbled way — phew,” Grant says. “But suddenly I returned to that deep focus and total reverence. That’s a part of my life that I need and thrive on, to connect with that family of mine and that communal endeavor.”

Morris needs it, too. Unlike his dancers, most of whom have spouses, partners or roommates, he lives alone.

“I like it, because I work with a ton of people all day,” he says. “But there’s no other side to that right now.”

He puts on a mask and rides a Citi Bike around the streets, astonished at the emptiness.

He went for a walk and a stranger said, “Have a nice day” and he started bawling: “Screaming-sobbing on the sidewalk.”

Gazing into his virtual studio, Morris appears to be comfortably in his element, scanning each face, each body, picking up every move and gesture, editing freely. No one escapes his focus.

“Get your hand out of your eye!” he shouts when Black absent-mindedly scratches an itch. “Sam, you’ve got to stop!”

“Can you exit stage left or stage right?” Morris asks the group. Christina Sahaida and Laurel Lynch slip out of view through nearby doorways, then simultaneously strut back in like Ziegfeld showgirls.

“Oh, my God,” he exclaims, delighted. He leans in, like a scientist studying specimens under glass.



Mark Morris Dance Group uses Zoom to rehearse for the “Lonely Waltz.” (Mark Morris Dance Group)

Meanwhile, Colin Fowler, the music director, has vanished from his square. In the void, there’s the unmistakable sound of carbonated water pouring into a glass.

Busted.

“We heard you in the ice bucket,” Morris says, chuckling as Fowler slides back onto his chair.

“I thought I was muted, sorry,” says Fowler, brandishing a highball. “It’s 5 o’clock.”

Brief, and fragmented, the dance is unmistakably a Morris work. The quirky steps, a lunge, a leg tossed high; the crisp, angular gestures like a kind of full-body sign language, black-inked on the air, against the backdrop of dressers and TV screens and coffee tables.

He dismisses the dancers with homework for next time: “Think and have ideas, but not complicated, big ones. I don’t want to be pretending to be better filmmakers than we are. I just want it to be what we look like.”

“There will be more dance products coming from me,” Morris says later. Always energetic when he speaks about his work, in this moment he sounds positively exuberant.

“When I’m done with this I’ll start something else. Even though it’s not my medium,” he says, “and it feels weirdly invasive to see somebody’s underwear drawer.”

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