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Credit...Balarama Heller for The New York Times

The Pragmatist’s Progress: Mark Morris Adapts to Creating Online

“I never had an interest in technology before,” said the choreographer, whose first batch of online dances will stream this week.

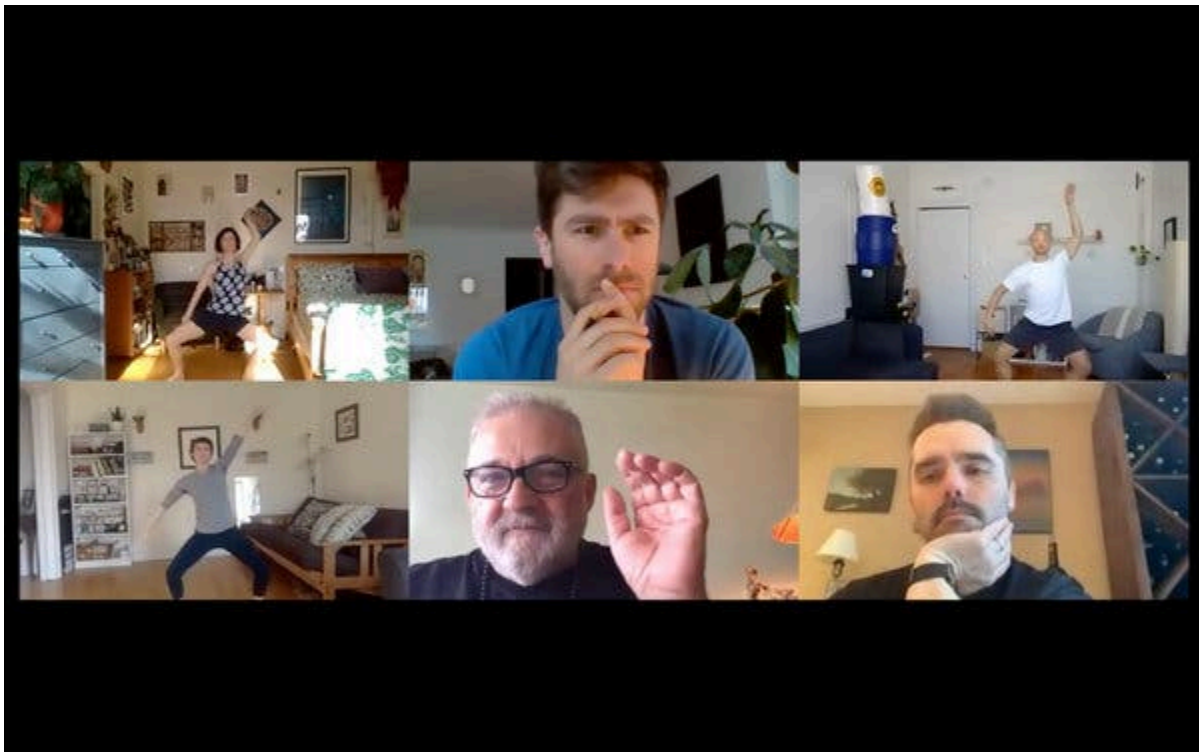
By Marina Harss

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Ask the choreographer Mark Morris how he’s doing these days, and you’re liable to get a stream-of-consciousness cri de coeur laced with expletives about the state of the world and ending with a laconic “I’m fine.” His dancers have scattered, his dance center in Brooklyn is closed, there’s little or no earned revenue coming in, and his company and school have had to furlough more than half of their office staff.

“Believe me, we are staring at the abyss at the Mark Morris Dance Group, like everyone else,” he said in a recent phone interview from his home in the Murray Hill neighborhood of Manhattan. But, as he points out, he can’t complain too much: He is healthy, cooking and puttering around his apartment, and making work.

That last part — making work — has been a constant in his life. Mr. Morris, 63, usually spends most of his waking hours at his company’s studios. He is compulsively prolific, so much so that in recent years in his spare time he has begun creating works [that will premiere after he’s dead and gone](#).



A rehearsal of “Lonely Waltz,” with clockwise from top left: Laurel Lynch, Sam Black, Jammie Walker, Colin Fowler, Mr. Morris and Christina Sahaida. Credit...via Mark Morris Dance Group

So now, faced with the impossibility of gathering his dancers to work, Mr. Morris, known for his insistence on live music and his down-to-earth aesthetic, has turned to the camera on his computer. For the past two months, he has experimented with making dances using Zoom and Final Cut Pro. Four of these short works will premiere on “Dance On!,” to be shown on the [Mark Morris Dance Group’s website](#) on Thursday evening. (The program is free, but registration is required.) And while the dances are prerecorded, the repartee will be live.

“I never had an interest in technology before,” Mr. Morris said. Still, as his executive director Nancy Umanoff, who has known him for over 30 years, said in a phone call, he is a pragmatist. “If the choice is nothing or Zoom, he’ll do the dance by Zoom.”

He approaches the process more or less as he would any dance. “The medium is different, but many of the same rules apply,” he said. “I want it to be engaging and satisfying structurally, and for the audience not to know what comes next.”

In these works, which he refers to as “video dances,” not dances, he plays with the way the camera frames the performers, how their faces and bodies, or parts of their bodies, fit into the screen, what it feels like when they approach or recede from the camera. Detail is hard to read; big gestures pop.

Then there is the drama of entrances and exits. By taking just a single step to the side, or crouching, or jumping, a dancer can suddenly disappear. “When you move offscreen,” Mr. Morris said, “you might as well not exist.”

Part of the fun of Zoom, for Mr. Morris, has been the opportunity to see his dancers in their element. “I get to see all my dancers’ apartments, which I’ve never been to,” he said. In rehearsals, he gives decorating and lighting tips. “I’m like, could you move that ugly lamp and that stuff over there?”

When the company’s headquarters shut down mid-March, Mr. Morris was working on a dance for this summer’s Tanglewood Music Festival, set to Ravel’s choreographic poem “La Valse.” Most of the steps for “Lonely Waltz,” as Mr. Morris’s dance is called, had already been created in person, so the process became one of adapting the phrases to this new medium, with his dancers filming themselves in ones and twos.

In a recent rehearsal, the dancers executed sections from the dance in their apartments, with Mr. Morris watching and commenting. “Lesley, that looks best when you’re at mid-distance!” he shouted out to Lesley Garrison, and she backed away from the camera. Or, “Do ‘le poisson,’” a fishlike move that traveled from the back of the room to the front. Or, “What would it look like if you danced the whole thing while holding the phone in your hand?”

Later the various options were sorted and edited in yet more Zoom sessions involving Mr. Morris, his rehearsal director, Sam Black, and his music director, Colin Fowler. Mr. Fowler, who taught himself the editing program Final Cut Pro after the lockdown began, has become the de facto editor. Mr. Morris has final say.

For “Lonely Waltz,” Mr. Fowler also plays the two-piano version of the Ravel piece. “I recorded myself playing the first part, and then recorded the second part, while listening to the first.” It took about six or seven tries to get it right. He accompanies all the dances, except “Sunshine,” which is set to Gene Autry’s rendition of “You Are My Sunshine.”

The other three dances are more like little movies. In “Sunshine,” the dancers translate a rhythmic pattern to various settings: a lonely figure walking away from the camera along a train track, feet stomping and jumping out of the frame, the lower half of a body climbing up a fire escape.

“Lonely Tango,” which Mr. Morris describes as a “danse noire” (as in film noir), is like a faux Bergman movie set in times of Covid-19. A dancer peers sadly into a refrigerator, a shopping cart negotiates a tight corner at a supermarket, disembodied hands play cards, a man looks out a window. Cut to the same man, standing outside, looking in. The clips were filmed in color, and then converted into grainy black and white to look like an old movie.

The music is the “Perpetual Tango” from Eric Satie’s “Sports et Divertissements,” a suite of piano pieces to which Mr. Morris choreographed [a dance last year for the Mostly Mozart Festival](#). As per Satie’s instructions, the simple tune can be played as many times as the pianist chooses. Here, the piece lasts seven minutes.

All the dances on the program are short, from two to seven minutes long. (“Anger Dance,” with music that Mr. Morris used before, in a [1998 muppet dance for “Sesame Street,”](#) is the shortest.) “Attention spans are shorter with video,” Mr. Morris said. “I know I don’t want to watch a screen for a long time.”

Apart from “Lonely Waltz,” the dances were composed through a series of what might be described as virtual homework assignments. “Mark would give the dancers a few instructions, a few things he wanted to see in each video, and then I would email a few more details to guide people in the right direction,” said Mr. Black, the company’s rehearsal director. Then the dancers were left to their own devices, filming themselves at home or outdoors.

Some aspects of the process resemble what happens in the studio. “This is a part of what I normally do,” Mr. Morris said. “I describe things, I suggest things. I tell the dancers what I might be interested in seeing. And then people do stuff and either it works or it doesn’t.”

What’s different here is the solitude of the process. In the studio, the dancers feed off one another. “There’s this group creativity that happens,” Ms. Garrison said in a phone call. “Mark will say, I like the way so-and-so does it, and then we all try to do it that way. We’re constantly influencing each other.” And yet, it has been a time of exploration and creativity. “It’s a chance for us to connect with our own personal and creative voice,” she said.

Making the dance videos is also a way for Mr. Morris to stay in touch with his dancers, and they with him. It’s evident, watching a Zoom rehearsal, just how much he relishes this creative time, no matter how remote and disembodied. Nothing can replace the real pleasure of being together in a rehearsal studio, on tour, on the stage. But in the meantime, he said, they might as well make something good.

“I’m interested in solving problems,” he said. “But it has to be interesting to look at, frankly, like all dances do. I’m in the entertainment business.”

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