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The Staying Inside Guide: Waltz of the Zoom Screens

Mark Morris Dance Group's lively 'Dance On!' debuts four digitally assembled works alongside commentary from the choreographer.



A still from 'Lonely Waltz,' part of the 'Dance On!' program

PHOTO: MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

By Robert Greskovic

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'Dance On!' the 58-minute stream of four dances and commentary, first shown live on May 28 and now archived on the Mark Morris Dance Group's YouTube channel, might just as well have been called "Carrying On!" Mr. Morris calls these works "video dances" because, unlike the over 150 stage dances he's made since forming

his group in 1980, these were created with the assistance of Zoom and Final Cut Pro and meant to be streamed.

Framing these video dances, none longer than seven minutes, the Zoom-format presents the 63-year-old choreographer, alongside MMDG music director Colin Fowler in a separate Zoom rectangle, colorfully relating how he's been managing to carry on during what he calls "the plague."

The MMDG's [YouTube channel](#) offers not only a replay of the full "[Dance On!](#)" but also separate films of the individual video dances. This is not to say that the discrete works, choreographed by Mr. Morris with input from his 18 dancers and edited by Mr. Fowler, are the only rewarding parts of the evening.



A still from 'Anger Dance'

PHOTO: MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

For some, Mr. Morris's and Mr. Fowler's repartee, at times candidly addressing questions posed by viewers during the live airing and read by MMDG executive director Nancy Umanoff, will be as entertaining as the dances themselves, possibly

more so. Particularly now, when so many talking heads deputized to speak on Zoom and similar software appear stiff and robotic, Mr. Morris comes across as flushed with life.

With the gray beard he now sports, and at the angle at which we see him onscreen, Mr. Morris has something of the air and authority of Walt Disney's Zeus, looking down from his cloud in the "Pastorale" segment of "Fantasia." The singular, decorative elements seen behind Mr. Morris change successively, so they can, as he eventually admits when questioned about them, "prefigure" the dances he debuts here.

The piquant, 3-minute "Lonely Waltz" is set to excerpts from Maurice Ravel's "La Valse," arranged by the composer for two pianos and played, here, by Mr. Fowler in separate panels. The dance evolves as a bright crazy-quilt of "patches" peopled by single MMDG performers in their apartments, with the exception of the central one in which Dallas McMurray and Noah Vinson are featured in partnered moves. As Ravel's waltz accelerates to its climax, some of the individual dancers are seen separately advancing toward the camera, which leads to another patchwork made from close-ups of their eyes, with Mr. Morris's own fleetingly peering out from the center of them all for a sly cameo.

As the choreographer tells it, "Anger Dance," prefigured here by the presence of a framed tarantula and set to Henry Cowell's driven and punchy piano music of the same name, began life as a dance Mr. Morris made for himself and three Muppets on "Sesame Street." As seen here, in single, double, triple- and quadruple-segmented screens, 14 dancers, seen mostly in close-up, some handling props, such as a metallic pole, project directly to their cameras. Some consciously express angry moods; Laurel Lynch bites down on her wooden spoon. Elsewhere dancers strike static poses, stick out a tongue or pose as beating a chest.



Mark Morris in a still from 'Lonely Tango'

PHOTO: MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

"Lonely Tango" is filmed in black and white and briefly features Mr. Morris, in a more trimmed beard, and 17 of his dancers. They are accompanied by an excerpt of Erik Satie's "Sports et divertissements." Mr. Fowler, who plays piano, notes that the composer had stipulated that his music should be "banal and annoying." At this penultimate point in the program, the takeaway from "Lonely Tango" is a mood more merely impassive than lonely. Asking dancers used to expressing themselves with full-body movement to focus instead on facial expressions leaves this video dance more flat than fascinating.

Before the concluding video dance, there's further forthright and witty banter between Mr. Morris and Mr. Fowler, in which the former notes that these finished works are being seen for the first time by the dancers and that he imagines his company either "plotzing or kvelling" over the results. These dancers are all

undoubtedly familiar with the snap and crackle of Mr. Morris's speech, but outsiders, like the stream's viewers, will likely come away amused and entertained.

"Sunshine," the final video dance, takes cues from "You Are My Sunshine," sung by Gene Autry. For his intended "crowd pleaser," Mr. Morris says he directed his dancers to work with "stepping, walking, running and hopping." The task takes them in and out of their apartments, including to a railroad track, a stoop and a backyard, where they locomote in phase with Autry's singing. Brandon Cournay chooses to alternate winking facial articulations; Mr. McMurray, to twerk his glutes, musically.

Being familiar with Mr. Morris and his works for four decades, I'd imagine he's assessing his first batch of video dances, and if more need to be in the offing, he can be expected to carry on with dancing on.

—*Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.*

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