

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP



PRESS KIT

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MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

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MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

The **MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP** was formed in 1980 and gave its first performance that year in New York City. The company's touring schedule steadily expanded to include cities in the United States and around the world, and in 1986 it made its first national television program for the PBS series *Dance in America*. In 1988, MMDG was invited to become the national dance company of Belgium and spent three years in residence at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. The Dance Group returned to the United States in 1991 as one of the world's leading dance companies. Based in Brooklyn, New York, MMDG maintains strong ties to presenters in several cities around the world, most notably to its West Coast home, Cal Performances in Berkeley, California, and its Midwest home, the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In New York, the company has performed at New York City Center's Fall for Dance Festival, regularly performs at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts' Mostly Mozart and White Light Festivals, and collaborates yearly with BAM on performances and master classes. From the company's many London seasons, it has received two Laurence Olivier Awards and a Critics' Circle Dance Award for Best Foreign Dance Company. Reflecting Morris' commitment to live music, the Dance Group has featured live musicians in every performance since the formation of the MMDG Music Ensemble in 1996. MMDG regularly collaborates with renowned musicians, including cellist Yo-Yo Ma, pianist Emanuel Ax, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, and jazz pianist Ethan Iverson, as well as leading orchestras and opera companies, including the Metropolitan Opera, English National Opera, and the London Symphony Orchestra. MMDG frequently works with distinguished artists and designers, including painters Robert Bordo and the late Howard Hodgkin, set designers Adrienne Lobel and Allen Moyer, costume designers Isaac Mizrahi and the late Martin Pakledinaz, and many others. MMDG's film and television projects include *Dido and Aeneas*, *The Hard Nut*, *Falling Down Stairs*, two documentaries for the U.K.'s *South Bank Show*, and PBS' *Live from Lincoln Center*. In 2015, Morris' signature work *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* had its national television premiere on PBS' *Great Performances*. While on tour the Dance Group partners with local cultural institutions and community organizations to present arts and humanities-based activities for people of all ages and abilities.



MMDG MUSIC ENSEMBLE

The **MMDG Music Ensemble**, formed in 1996, is integral to the Dance Group. “With the dancers come the musicians...and what a difference it makes” (*Classical Voice of North Carolina*). The Ensemble’s repertory ranges from 17th and 18th century works by John Wilson and Henry Purcell to more recent scores by Ethan Iverson, Lou Harrison, and Henry Cowell. The musicians also participate in the Dance Group’s educational and community programming at home and on tour. The Music Ensemble is led by Colin Fowler, who began to collaborate with MMDG in 2005 during the creation of *Mozart Dances*.



COLIN FOWLER (music director, piano) began his musical study at the age of five in Kansas City, went on to study at the Interlochen Arts Academy, and continued his education at The Juilliard School, where he received his Bachelor of Music in 2003 and his Master of Music in 2005. While at Juilliard, he studied piano with Abbey Simon, organ with Gerre Hancock and Paul Jacobs, harpsichord with Lionel Party, and conducting with James DePriest and Judith Clurman. A versatile musician and conductor, Fowler works in many areas of the music scene in New York City. He is a veteran conductor and keyboardist of many Broadway shows, including *Jersey Boys*, *In the Heights*, *Wicked*, and the *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*. As a classical soloist and collaborative artist, he has performed and recorded with many world-renowned musicians and ensembles, including Deborah Voigt, Renée Fleming, The Knights, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He has arranged and conducted for numerous TV and film productions, including *Yellowstone* and Greta Gerwig’s *Little Women*. He began to collaborate with the Mark Morris Dance Group in 2005 and has performed over 60 pieces with the

company on almost every keyboard instrument possible, including the harmonium and toy piano. He has conducted performances of *Mozart Dances*, *Acis and Galatea*, *The Hard Nut*, and *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, and helped edit and create over 15 videodances with Mark Morris during the pandemic. Hailed by *The New York Times* as “invaluable” and “central to Morris’ music,” he was appointed Music Director in 2013.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR - MARK MORRIS



MARK MORRIS was born on August 29, 1956, in Seattle, Washington, where he studied with Verla Flowers and Perry Brunson. In the early years of his career, he performed with the companies of Lar Lubovitch, Hannah Kahn, Laura Dean, Eliot Feld, and the Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble. He formed the Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) in 1980 and has since created over 150 works for the company. From 1988 to 1991, he was Director of Dance at Brussels' Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, the national opera house of Belgium. In 1990, he founded the White Oak Dance Project with Mikhail Baryshnikov. Much in demand as a ballet choreographer, Morris has created 22 ballets since 1986, and his work has been performed by companies worldwide, including San Francisco Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Ballet am Rhein, Dusseldorf, and the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Noted for his musicality, Morris has been described as "undeviating in his devotion to music" (*The New Yorker*). He began conducting performances for MMDG in 2006 and has since conducted at Tanglewood Music Center, Lincoln Center, and BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music). He served as Music Director for the 2013 Ojai Music Festival. He also works extensively in opera, directing and choreographing productions for the Metropolitan Opera; New York City Opera; English National Opera; and The Royal Opera, Covent Garden; among others. He was named a Fellow of the MacArthur Foundation in 1991 and has received eleven honorary doctorates to date. He has taught at the University of Washington, Princeton University, and Tanglewood Music Center. A Doris Duke Artist, Morris is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical

Society, and has served as an Advisory Board Member for the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. He has received the Samuel H. Scripps/American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement, the Leonard Bernstein Lifetime Achievement Award for the Elevation of Music in Society, the Benjamin Franklin Laureate Prize for Creativity, the International Society for the Performing Arts' Distinguished Artist Award, Cal Performances Award of Distinction in the Performing Arts, the Orchestra of St. Luke's Gift of Music Award, and the 2016 Doris Duke Artist Award. In 2015, Morris was inducted into the Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney Hall of Fame at the National Museum of Dance in Saratoga Springs, New York. Morris opened the Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn, New York, in 2001 to provide a home for his company, subsidized rental space for local artists, community education programs for children and seniors, and a school offering dance classes to students of all ages and levels of experience with and without disabilities. Morris' memoir, *Out Loud*, co-written with Wesley Stace, was published in paperback by Penguin Press in October 2021.

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

DANCER HEADSHOTS



Elisa Clark
Rehearsal Director



Mica Bernas



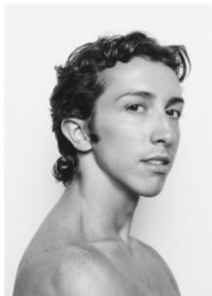
Karlie Budge



Kara Chan †



Domingo Estrada, Jr. †



Kyle Halford †



Sarah Hillmon



Courtney Lopes



Claudia McDonald †



Dallas McMurray



Alex Meeth*



Sloan Pearson †



Brandon Randolph



Robert Rubama †



Christina Sahaida



Billy Smith



Joslin Vezeau



Noah Vinson

* Apprentice
† Guest Performer

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

QUOTE SHEET

“The skill of the great artist - whether a Michelangelo, a Mozart, a Mark Morris - is to fashion simplicity from complexity. The dances simply feel right, to the eye, intellect and nervous system.”

– **The Washington Post**

“The genius of Morris as a choreographer doesn’t come from large, loud movement, but from the simple elegance of allowing the music to breathe life into the movement.”

– **Broadway World**

“[Morris’] choreography presents something profound and of great value: a fresh sense that human expression, in the human body, can soar beyond all limits.”

– **Robert Pinsky, Poet Laureate of the U.S.**

“The musicality for which the choreographer Mark Morris is celebrated reveals itself on multiple levels and in mysterious ways. Two of his most peculiar gifts... are his capacities for responding to a score with a raw innocence and for exposing its deep neurological effect.”

– **The New York Times**

“[Morris] is one of those handful-in-a-century creative spirits – think Picasso or Balanchine – who manage to hold our attention while challenging all expectations.”

– **The Times-Picayune**

“Everything they do is human and marvelous”

– **The Independent**

“The Mark Morris Dance Group has long been ahead of all other dance companies in the flow and detail of its dancers’ response to music. And their qualities of focus, stillness, ease are ones that most actors would envy. “

– **Financial Times**

“That kind of craftsmanship, closely allied to musical structure, is the Morris method.”

– **The New York Times**

“In his works, a turn of the head may be as important as a leap, a sweep of the arms may give way to a small flicking of the fingers. The dancers give themselves to nuances as well as digging into huge, even sometimes clumsy moves. Their bodies—their very selves—sing.”

– **DanceBeat**

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

2024 - 2025 Tour Engagements

For more information, additional photos, and details on each work visit the specific links

Katonah, NY – August 1
Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts

[Italian Concerto](#)
[Candleflowerdance](#)
[Excursions](#)
[Words](#)

New York, NY – August 31
Bryant Park Outdoor Stage
[Gloria](#)

Fairfax, VA – October 19 (2 shows)
George Mason University

[Pacific](#)
[Going Away Party](#)
[Rock of Ages](#)
[Castor and Pollux](#)

Detroit, MI – November 2, 3
Detroit Opera
[The Look of Love](#)

Fayetteville, AR – November 20
Walton Arts Center
[The Look of Love](#)

Dallas, TX – November 23
TITAS
[The Look of Love](#)

Brooklyn, NY – December 12-22
Brooklyn Academy of Music
[The Hard Nut](#)

Boston, MA – January 23-26
Global Arts Live
[The Look of Love](#)

Marion, IL – February 18
Marion Cultural and Civic Center

[Excursions](#)
[Going Away Party](#)
[Candleflowerdance](#)
[Castor and Pollux](#)

Urbana, IL – February 21, 22
Krannert Center

[Candleflowerdance](#)
[Excursions](#)
[Via Dolorosa](#)

Sarasota, FL – February 28-March 3
Sarasota Ballet

[Pacific](#)
[Going Away Party](#)
[Rock of Ages](#)
[Castor and Pollux](#)

Brooklyn, NY – March 7-9
Mark Morris Dance Center

[Pacific](#)
[Rock of Ages](#)
Hello, Stranger (World Premiere)
[Castor and Pollux](#)

Washington, DC – April 4-5
Kennedy Center
Moon (World Premiere)

Williamsburg, VA – May 6
William and Mary College
[Pepperland](#)

Berkeley, CA – May 9-11
Cal Performances
[Pepperland](#)

Las Vegas, NV – May 13
Summerlin Library
[Pepperland](#)

Los Angeles, CA – May 16-18
Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts
[Pepperland](#)

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

PROMOTIONAL VIDEOS

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[*The Look of Love*](#)

[*Pepperland*](#)

[*The Hard Nut*](#)

The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

Review: The Sophisticated Simplicity of a Mark Morris Masterpiece

The incandescent “L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato” returns to Brooklyn, leaving you as breathless as ever.

By **Gia Kourlas**

March 25, 2022, 2:14 p.m. ET

L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato NYT Critic’s Pick



On Thursday, “L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato” returned to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where it had its United States premiere in 1990. Credit: Stephanie Berger

Mark Morris’s “L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato,” a dance of exacting and exceptional artistry, speaks to the fortitude of the human condition in both body and mind. There is euphoria and sadness, silliness and thoughtfulness, mirth and melancholy. There is the way you feel watching “L’Allegro,” too: overwhelmed and overcome, yet somehow, also, at peace.

Morris was only 32 when he made “L’Allegro.” It was 1988, and his youngish company was in residence at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, where he had replaced Maurice Béjart, a much-loved choreographer of questionable taste. Morris, a rising star in New York, was met with hostility. What would your next move be if a newspaper headline told you to go home? Morris created a masterwork.

On Thursday, “L’Allegro” returned to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where it had its United States premiere in 1990, with the company’s excellent music ensemble, led by Colin Fowler, and the Choir of Trinity Wall Street with Downtown Voices. In New York, this two-act work has also been performed at Lincoln Center; there, it has more space to breath. The academy, by comparison, is cramped, with problematic site lines.

But “L’Allegro” is still “L’Allegro,” and in this iteration there were fresh faces, as well as the welcome return of veterans, including Maile Okamura and Elisa Clark. Of its 24 performers, half were new to the production, including the apprentice Taína Lyons, at 22 the youngest dancer in the Mark Morris Dance Group, who was fleet of foot and adorable.

The production — set to Handel’s oratorio (1740) that draws mainly from Milton’s poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” — feels both prescient and uncanny. Now, along with articulate singing bodies that sweep on and off the stage as if caught in sudden gusts of wind, there is the ominous backdrop of the present. It’s the third year of a pandemic. Opening night was a month to the day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Doesn’t a line like, “Where brooding Darkness spreads his jealous wings,” from “L’Allegro,” take on new, harrowing meaning?

At a time when melancholy can easily overshadow joy, Morris's "L'Allegro" is more than an incandescent evening of music and dance. It's where art, and the reflection of it, impart something about the action of living. It's hope.



Maile Okamura and Shaquelle Charles. Stephanie Berger

In the work, the poems represent different states of mind: L'Allegro is a cheerful extrovert while il Penseroso is a meditative introvert. Handel and Charles Jennens arranged the poems, adding "il Moderato," written by Jennens, as a way to even out the mood. For his dance, Morris was also inspired by William Blake's watercolors that illustrated Milton's poems. With its colorful, changing panels by the scenery designer Adrienne Lobel; lighting by James F. Ingalls; and flowing, Grecian costumes by Christine Van Loon, "L'Allegro" doesn't just bring to mind the idea of a moving painting, it continually is one.

Morris, repeating and layering gestures in a way that renders the stage a vision of sophisticated simplicity, has his dancers gliding in and out of scenes that transform them into elements and species of the natural world — in one scene, they are a dazzling flock of birds — as well as nymphs, gods, lovers and friends. There is the camaraderie of folk dancing; the light, litheness of ballet; and the grounded shapes of modern dance. With playfulness, dancers run in place or, in a comic male section, smack one another and then pause for a cheek-to-cheek kiss.

Arms curve generously; bodies lean and bend, stopping just short, it often seems, of toppling sideways. There is daring within the decorum. In a luminous walking dance, the cast becomes a chain by linking one hand in the bend of an elbow while the other rests on the waist. Morris rebuilds an ancient world — one of manners and restraint — right before our eyes.

In another section, Dallas McMurray transforms himself into a bird, hopping up and down with legs tightly cinched as his arms float at his sides, a vision of perpetual motion — so whimsical and yet so delicate. And Sarah Haarmann, in her "L'Allegro" debut, was stunning from the moment she stepped onstage. She moves as if she were made of air.

In the "Sweet Bird" section, Haarmann, with fluttering feet and trembling fingers, was almost angelic while gliding through passages of choreography. Without rushing or blurring gestures, she allowed fragments of movement to trail behind her — through her limbs, her head, her neck — even when she was onto the next step. She was effortless, almost as if she was dreaming of dancing.



Lift every voice: from left, Sarah Haarmann, Okamura and Mica Bernas. Stephanie Berger

But so much was impressive: Mica Bernas and Karlie Budge holding hands for courage as they fought their way past dancers posing as hounds; Lesley Garrison's grounded, unguarded strength; Brandon Randolph's sweet buoyancy. Really, though, "L'Allegro" is a group experience, among not just the dancers but also the singers and the orchestra. They hold your ear and eye as they create harmony and connection. Their world and more important, the world, good and bad, comes into candid focus.

If, at present, the line separating art and life seems much too thick to break, "L'Allegro," in which emotion lives in the rhythm and line of bodies, exists somewhere on a third plane. Within Morris's theatrical frame, we see exaltation and sorrow as well as a community; but more, we feel a community and with it, resoluteness and power.

As "L'Allegro" builds to its gorgeous finale, the dancers, grasping hands and flashing grateful smiles at one another, run onto the stage in neat, orderly lines and peel away into the wings lost in the rush of the moment. In the final few seconds, they gather at the center of the stage and arrange themselves into three concentric spinning circles. And then, suddenly, they stop. What just happened? In a word, everything.

L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato

Through Sunday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music; bam.org

The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Mark Morris Premieres a Dance More Major Than 'Minor'

In his Joyce Theater debut, Morris unveiled a cheekily titled premiere and "Castor and Pollux," a lost treasure from his early days.

By **Gia Kourlas**
Aug. 9, 2023

A less confident, more mild-mannered choreographer might not have named his latest work "A minor Dance." But Mark Morris, saucy and never shy to crack a joke, has done just that with his world premiere set to Bach's Partita No. 3 in A minor. For this choreographer, music means everything; his title is a wink, not to the work's worth, but to its key signature.

This new dance, its piano solo performed by the company's music director, Colin Fowler, premiered on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, as part of a two-program run for the Mark Morris Dance Group — which began last week with a mixed bill featuring the wonderfully eccentric "A Wooden Tree" (2012) and the classic "Grand Duo" (1993), and continues through the weekend.

In its more than 40-year history, Morris's company has never performed at the Joyce. It's been a pleasure to see the dancers, especially the excellent and soon-to-be-departing Domingo Estrada Jr., performing at closer proximity than, say, at an opera house (but also mercifully not as close as when they perform at Morris's center in Brooklyn).

"A minor Dance," gratifyingly, isn't so minor. Six dancers, wearing separates by Elizabeth Kurtzman — short-sleeve T-shirts and belted colorful culottes for the women, and pants for the men — imprint the stage with swooping curves as their bodies tilt and bend, reversing course from the weight of an outstretched leg. At the start, five dancers lie on their backs with bent knees while Mica Bernas stands to the side and claps her hands, holding them together, for a split second, in a fist. (Later, her clap heralds a blackout.)

Soon the stage becomes a lively swirl of bodies, almost birdlike, as if the air has made the dancers' arms and legs more billowy. Among these individuals are couples that gravitate together in ways that are almost imperceptible: Bernas with Billy Smith; Courtney Lopes with Estrada; Nicole Sabella with Brandon Randolph.

In one evocative moment, the dancers, three at a time, create a water wheel with their bodies — at least the top half of one, with the bottom half seemingly dipped underwater. They grip hands and take turns moving from the floor to standing and back to the floor to create the sensation of a moving wheel. The magic of these interlocking bodies passing one position off to the next is strangely suspenseful. In another section, the men are surrounded by the women, who watch closely from the perimeter as though they're trying to keep their eyes on a ball. This is a game; fittingly, they trade places.

In the end, amid patterns of running and walking; skipping and jumping, the dancers spring into the air, separating their legs like scissors before peeling off into the wings. One dancer, Smith, is at the end of the line; but instead of taking off, he crumbles to the floor — a surprise, appropriately, in a minor-major kind of way.



Sabella and Randolph in the premiere, which is set to Bach's Partita No. 3 in A minor for solo piano. Rachel Papo for The New York Times

Tuesday's program closed with a robust dance from Morris's earliest days: "Castor and Pollux" (1980), staged by Tina Fehlandt, a founding member of the company, and set to a score by the experimental composer Harry Partch, whose handmade instruments create a curious percussive world. Morris has always been open to unusual sounds and fell in love with Partch as a teenager, when "Castor and Pollux" was included as a bonus record on an album he bought. "The sound of his music, played on homemade instruments — gongs and plucked strings — made perfect sense to me," Morris writes in his memoir.

The sight of eight dancers twisting and hopping through Morris's winding circles makes perfect sense today, too. "Castor and Pollux" is ferocious, raw yet precise and in possession of an unquenchable wildness. The dreamlike Karlie Budge, who gives off an otherworldly aura here and elsewhere this Morris season, opens the dance with grounded feet and thighs. As she rounds her arms, she uses the weight of her body to absorb the floor and, in turn, create buoyancy.

As the others join in, there is a floppy spring to how the choreography guides them backward and forward; their feet, neither pointed nor flexed, produce rhythms and changes of directions in turns within larger moving circles. In the final, breathtaking pose — after the dancers run with zeal, twisting to the floor and popping back up — they stand, planting their feet wide apart like warriors. You can see there the skeleton of Morris's "Grand Duo." To have been able to watch them back to back would have been heaven.

The program started out more sleepily, with the stage premiere of "Tempus Perfectum," set to Brahms's 16 Waltzes (Op. 39) and created for a pandemic-era livestream in 2021. Now this was a minor dance, with echoes of social distancing in its spacing and repetition; the dancers, copping a childlike quality, brought an atmosphere more sentimental than innocent.

Both Joyce programs, no matter their rewards, included one dance too many — which, for all the live music, a Morris mandate, and articulate dancing, revealed a choreographic sameness. Two of the run's most distinct works were set to recorded music; in the Partch, it couldn't be helped, and the same was true of "A Wooden Tree," an odd and winning work accompanied by the words and music of Ivor Cutler, the Scottish composer, humorist and poet.

In that work's 14 songs, Morris weaves his gestural, nuanced choreography into the narrative with a sleek deftness that embellishes the humor of the lyrics without coming on too strong. It could become overly silly, but he plays it straight, pulling out of both the music and the dance something that can be elusive in performance: whimsy. He trusts the body to tell the stories, and there is nothing wooden about it.

Gia Kourlas is the dance critic of The New York Times. More about Gia Kourlas

THEATER & DANCE

Mark Morris's tribute to Burt Bacharach is what the world needs now

Nothing is as it seems in this brilliant journey performed by Mark Morris Dance Group at the Kennedy Center

Review by [Sarah L. Kaufman](#)

October 27, 2022 at 2:20 p.m. EDT

There is no emotional glop in Mark Morris's witty, wounding and brilliant new dance production, "[The Look of Love](#)," which opened at the Kennedy Center on Wednesday. No excess of sentiment whatsoever, though, good lord, there could have been, since the live musical accompaniment is a string of brokenhearted hits from the 1960s by songwriters Burt Bacharach and Hal David.

It would be easy for a choreographer to get tripped up by the earnest passions of these familiar songs. Familiar, that is, to a certain generation, though they are absolutely timeless: "Walk on By," "I Say a Little Prayer," "Do You Know the Way to San Jose" and nearly a dozen more. But Morris's [imaginative exploration](#) of this music dives beneath the surface lushness to expose honest feeling.

In doing so, he reveals that nothing is quite as it seems. The piece begins with a few tinkling piano notes of "Alfie" — you'll hear the lyric in your head, "*What's it all about, Alfie?*" — and this is the first hint of the searching and constantly shifting journey in store. What's it all about, indeed: The question haunts "The Look of Love."

If love is the answer, it's not without peril. As the waltzy "What the World Needs Now" begins — performed by luminous chanteuse Marcy Harriell, two backup singers and a marvelous jazz band — the 10 dancers enter with deliberate uncertainty and flashes of paranoia, as if they have wandered onto Mars. Soon they have paired up for cheerful whirling, and just as quickly half of them are casually knocked over by the others. Cruel intent or obliviousness?

The bright fun costumes, designed by Isaac Mizrahi, are a riot of Barbiecore pink, purple and orange, with acidic counterpoints of mustard yellow and olive, to take the sweetness down a notch. One woman's long slinky gown has a deeply cut neckline and a slit up the side, but she is more guarded than she appears. Underneath she is wearing pants.

It is all lively and colorful, loose and bouncy, but this is not a daquiris-on-the-beach dance party. No, thankfully, nothing is what you would expect here. The hour-long production — Morris's first major evening-length work since his 2017 Beatles-inspired hit, "Pepperland" — is more like a series of predicaments. They escalate in intensity, each one resulting in the devastating aloneness and mystifying breakups that are at the core of rom-coms and advice columns. As the progression of songs unspools, the dancers conjure up moments of ineffable universal experience that begin to feel as familiar as the tunes, and as intimate as muscle memories. It is as if they are dancing the way the human heart behaves in the fog of love.

For love has its sour side, as these songs tell us over and over. Lyricist David makes that abundantly clear in "I'll Never Fall in Love Again," though Bacharach's tune is deceptively perky. Accordingly, with a few deft musical gestures, the couples bicker, get back together, break up. But Morris goes deeper. He is in exquisite control of point of view here. His command of the stage space directs our eye to a single dancer, the elegantly restrained Billy Smith, so we feel his isolation as he stands in quiet confusion, watching his partner, Karlie Budge, stride away from him with the kind of forward force in her hipbones that says she is never coming back.

The paradox of love: It can destroy us, yet still we yearn for it. That is the truth that Morris builds upon, song by song. Your special someone might leave town and change their name and you'll be reduced to begging a bird (a *bird!*) to track them down. That is the story told, of course, in the searing ballad "Message to Michael," where Morris changed the title character's pronoun to "they" as a nod to the mystery at its heart and the reference to a discarded identity. Harriell's voice ranges masterfully from hushed intimacy to a desperate, raging plea, making you feel the destruction of a soul.

The soul is on the line here. In Morris's interpretation of the song, it is not just about a breakup. It is spiritual death. Amid a circle of chairs onstage, the exquisitely musical dancer Dallas McMurray lip syncs to Harriell's vocals, but is he singing or preaching? He adopts a Christlike pose, arms spread, palms forward, and those gathered around him leap to their feet, fists thrust at the sky. Meanwhile, Smith goes through more emotional disintegration, chasing Budge as she flies past, out of reach, gazing elsewhere. Everyone is searching, searching, endlessly grasping.

The songs — beautifully arranged by Ethan Iverson, who also plays piano in the band — are brilliantly organized to highlight those twin pillars of loss and hope, with the optimism of one replaced by hardened reality in the next. In a charismatic solo to "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head," Domingo Estrada Jr. brings to mind Gene Kelly's insouciant puddle-jumping. Around him, couples cluster under floor cushions raised overhead as umbrellas, but, as we have come to expect by this point, sharing does not come easily.

Bacharach wrote the theme song for “The Blob,” the 1958 sci-fi horror film starring Steve McQueen, which is in here too, its weird vibe continuing the vaguely uneasy mood that is been gathering steam. This unease builds to a climax in “Don’t Make Me Over,” when Harriell’s voice reaches theater-filling force and the band kicks up the heat. At this point, under Nicole Pearce’s lighting design, the stage glows like a nightclub in the devil’s basement. McMurray runs madly about, looking for someone he never finds. He collapses into a chair on a heavy downbeat that seems to suck the life out of him. By the end of the song, he melts to the floor like a lump of candle wax.

But the choreographer does not leave him, or us, there. Alongside the brief flashes of cruelty there is plenty of light. It floods the stage like sunshine after a storm. Yet Morris is too honest an artist to deliver unalloyed gushing. He is too sensitive to the incongruities of our current state of existence, where humanity seems to be spiraling backward into endless war, loss of rights, unconquerable disease and the crumbling away of what once felt solid. Yes, this is the big question: *What’s it all about?*

There are few answers here. We simply go on. And being vicariously swallowed up in a whizzing circle dance is a fine way to gather the strength to do so.

Mark Morris Dance Group performs “The Look of Love” at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater through Oct. 29. \$29-\$119. (202) 467-4600. kennedy-center.org.

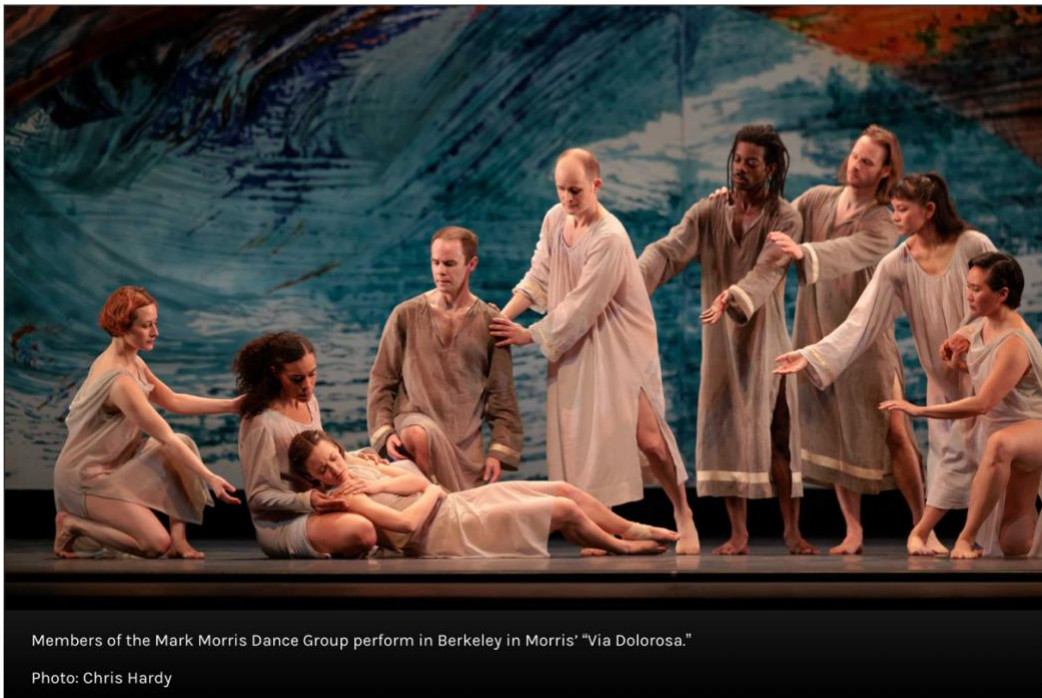
San Francisco Chronicle

DANCE

Review: Mark Morris' powerful world premiere captures Jesus' final hours in dance



Joshua Kosman | April 20, 2024 Updated: April 21, 2024, 12:28 pm



Members of the Mark Morris Dance Group perform in Berkeley in Morris' "Via Dolorosa."

Photo: Chris Hardy

In an early segment of choreographer **Mark Morris'** serenely shattering new stage work "Via Dolorosa," a dancer stands stiffly erect, extending his arms straight out to become a human crucifix. He topples back, still fully rigid, onto the shoulders of the two dancers who are there to support him.

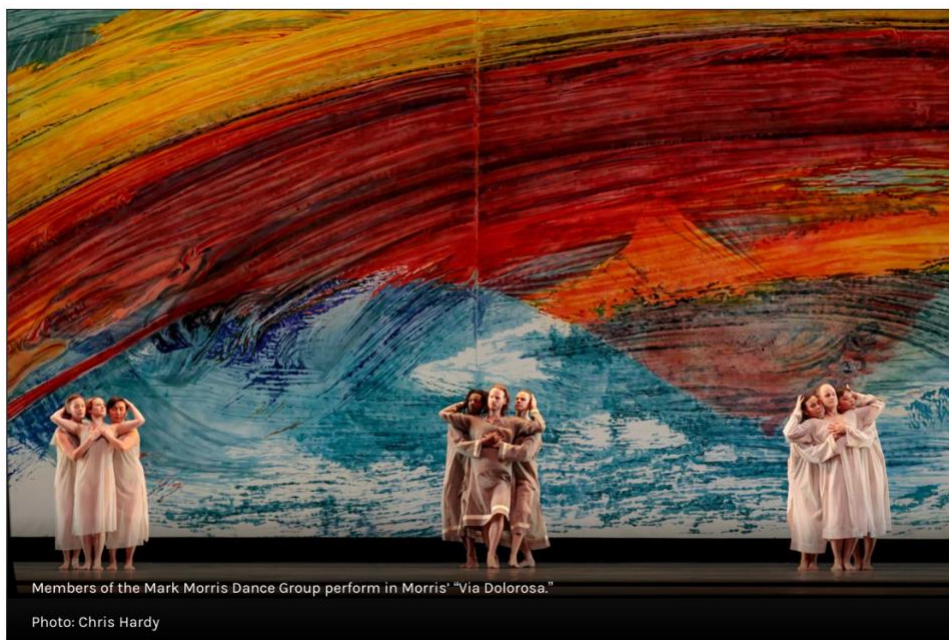
Then, with a transformative rush, his arms soften and his hands enfold the heads of both his partners in a gesture of immense solace. It's a heartbreaking moment, at once bleak and tender.

The scene depicts the fifth of the 14 stations of the cross in traditional Christian iconography, in which St. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross toward calvary. And it's just one of many episodes in which Morris puts his mastery of physical expression to purposes that are both narrative and spiritual.



“Via Dolorosa,” which was given its world premiere with the Mark Morris Dance Group on Friday, April 19, at UC Berkeley’s Zellerbach Hall, is precisely what its title promises. It’s a 40-minute series of tableaux tracing Jesus’ progress on the day of the crucifixion, from condemnation to entombment.

The stations of the cross have typically been a subject for visual artists, and Morris’ treatment may be his most overtly painterly creation to date. There is movement, of course, but it’s delicate and nuanced, sometimes even seemingly reluctant. Often, as in the meticulously arranged descent from the cross, the idea is to imprint a single unshakable visual image.



It’s a perilous strategy, but Morris’ physical vocabulary is so varied and eloquent that he makes it register time and again. When Jesus first loses his footing on his path — the first of three momentous and increasingly worrisome stumbles — Morris takes the occasion to create a brief but intricate stumbling ballet, interrogating the motions and sensations of nearly falling.

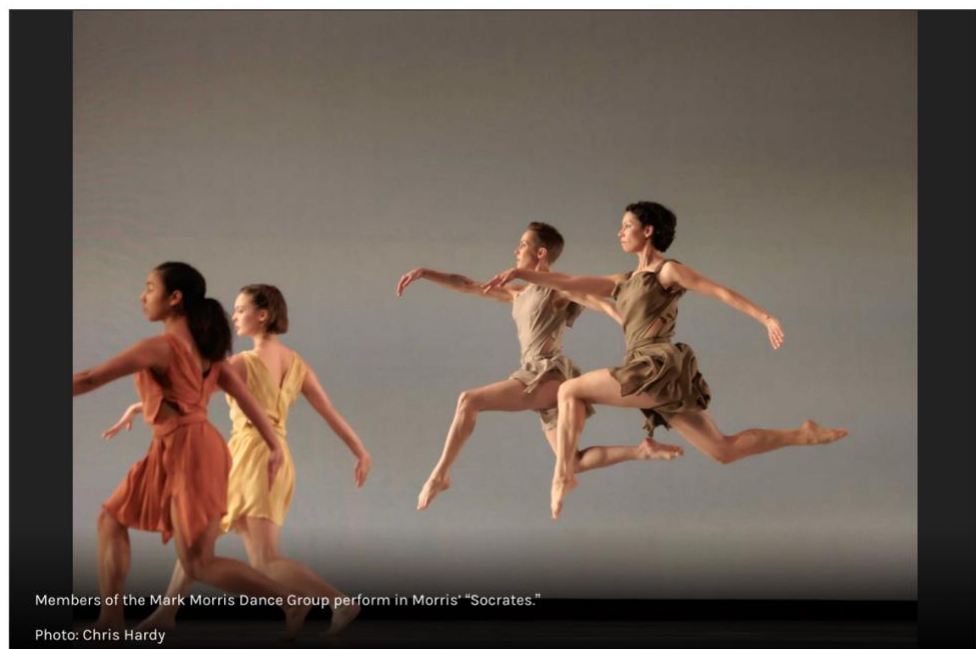
There are evocative interactions with women, including Mary and St. Veronica. And there are several sequences, including the scene of St. Simon, in which dancers presented as crucifixes blur the boundary between the human and the inanimate (not to mention the divine).

“Via Dolorosa,” which was co-commissioned and presented by Cal Performances, moves at the stately pace of liturgy. It’s a beatific treatment of a religious narrative that doesn’t require actual faith from either its creators or its observers, which is the best kind of treatment there is. You don’t have to be a Christian — you don’t have to be anything but human — to feel the power of the piece’s final moments, when grief and suffering give way at last to airy leaps of grace.



Underlying “Via Dolorosa” like an unheard fundamental bass note is a series of literary texts by poet Alice Goodman, best known as the librettist of John Adams’ operas “Nixon in China” and “The Death of Klinghoffer.” (These ruminations are printed in the program but never spoken.)

The shimmery score for solo harp by composer Nico Muhly (one of Esa-Pekka Salonen’s Collaborative Partners at the San Francisco Symphony) got a refined rendition by harpist Parker Ramsay. Designer Howard Hodgkin’s beautiful scenic projection — a great swoosh of paint on canvas that adopted a kaleidoscope of colors in Nicole Pearce’s virtuosic lighting scheme — underscored the piece’s visual nature.



The first half of the program was devoted to Morris' 2010 piece "Socrates," which now emerged as a sort of prequel to "Via Dolorosa." The music is Erik Satie's poker-faced setting for voice and piano of three excerpts from Plato, and Morris' version is every bit as chaste and decorative as its source.

Dancers, dressed in Martin Pakledinaz's gauzy tunics, cavorted winningly in groups of two, three or four, as tenor Brian Giebler and pianist Colin Fowler performed Satie's music. Through the first two movements, no one touched one another — a Platonic entertainment in two senses.



But the expressive heart of "Socrates" comes in the third movement, with its extended description of the philosopher's death. It takes only a moment to realize that this is the same story as that of "Via Dolorosa," simply separated by a few hundred years. The exquisite final stroke — in which the entire corps lies onstage as if dead while a lone dancer, representing Socrates' immortal soul, makes an escape — drove the point home.

On Friday, unfortunately, the premiere of "Via Dolorosa" did not find favor with all observers. Before the final note of the music had even finished sounding, some loudmouth in the balcony shattered the mood by booing at the top of his lungs. Clearly, his was a very important opinion — far more important than that of anyone else in the hall — and now we all know what it was.

The New York Times

DANCE

Mark Morris and Lou Harrison, a Large-Spirited Partnership

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY JUNE 30, 2017



From left, Aaron Loux and Sam Black in Mark Morris's "Numerator" at Tanglewood.
Christopher Duggan/Mark Morris Dance Group

LENOX, Mass. — Though born almost 40 years apart, the composer [Lou Harrison](#) and the choreographer Mark Morris, both from the West Coast, became one of the great artistic partnerships. Harrison, an artist whose musical style often turned to the Pacific Rim rather than to Europe or the eastern United States, died in 2003; this year is his centenary. I think of him as this nation's equivalent to the Czech composer Leos Janacek (1854-1928). Both were imaginative modernists with marvelous veins of melodic lyricism and strong appetites for folk material, thrilling sonorities and drivingly percussive rhythms.

Harrison worked with a number of choreographers (Jean Erdman, Merce Cunningham, Katherine Litz) in the mid-20th century. But since the 1980s, his music has proved a particular source of inspiration to Mr. Morris (born in 1956), who has made seven Harrison dances since 1987. In all of them, above all the enduring masterpiece "Grand Duo" (1993), Mr. Morris has proved an uncannily perfect dance companion to Mr. Harrison, especially in terms of large-spirited imagination.

At Tanglewood on Wednesday and Thursday, the Mark Morris Dance Group performed "[Lou 100: In Honor of the Divine Mr. Harrison](#)," a program of four of those dances. It included the world premiere of "Numerator," Mr. Morris's dance setting — for six men — to Mr. Harrison's five-part Varied Trio for violin (Xiaofan Liu), piano (Michael James Smith) and percussion (Nick Sakakeeny). (The score, often evocative of the Javanese gamelan, has also been choreographed for New York City Ballet by Jean-Pierre Frohlich, in his 2013 male-female pas de deux "[Varied Trio \(in four\)](#).")

In the opening phrase of "Numerator," the men, one after another, change before your eyes. As each slowly crosses the stage, he gradually rises from his stomach and knees until he is upright — like a cartoon of Darwinian evolution from quadruped to biped — and then suddenly arrives in a simple balance on one foot, quietly angelic, with arms swept back like low wings. The odd, anti-dance beginning and the transfigured conclusion marvelously exemplify Mr. Morris's talent for dramatic poetry.

Imagery and energy keep changing throughout “Numerator.” Here you’re held by geometries, here by body language of both ecstasy and ritual, here by arm gestures. Some of the simplest inventions are among the most enchanting, like a supported somersault (one man holds another’s parted hands, creating a hoop through which the second one turns forward and over). “Dance,” the fifth and final section, begins with a sensational explosion of six contrasting, rapidly pulsating simultaneous solos; but before you’ve had time to appreciate the individual dance material, the men have begun to create one harmony after another, first in spatial terms and then in canonic sequences. In a final chain sequence, each one’s steps include a cartwheel.

The program’s opener was “Pacific,” made to the third and fourth movements of another trio, this one for violin, cello and piano. (Mr. Liu and Mr. Smith were joined by the cellist Francesca McNeeley.) In this work, the nine dancers, male and female, are in patterned flowing skirts of various colors; the men are bare-chested.

Among the many choreographic resources Mr. Morris shows here — gesture, rhythm, line, grouping, not least — the originality and fluency of his stage geometries are especially impressive. The opening is startlingly asymmetrical, with dancers all on one side of the stage, but in patterns that mysteriously answer the music’s sonorities. A later, more symmetrical image briefly shows the dancers in two close horizontal rows — five women almost overlapping with four men — just before the dance takes off into three trios.

“[Serenade](#)” (2003), vividly and vigorously danced by Lesley Garrison, is a five-part tour de force to Mr. Harrison’s Serenade for guitar with percussion. Different percussion instruments — a gong, drums, castanets — accompany the music’s five sections and are answered onstage by different props for the dancer: hand bells, a long cylinder, a fan. The guitarist Robert Belinic and the percussionist Marcelina Suchocka were quietly joined for the last section by Mr. Morris himself, unannounced but playing castanets. (When “Serenade” was new, he was its dancer and played his own castanets.)

For the final “[Grand Duo](#),” Samantha Bennett (violin) and Nathan Ben-Yehuda (piano) played, with gorgeous intensity, the Harrison piece that gives its name to the dance. Always spellbinding, this Morris work is a dark, glowing, exciting plotless drama that suggests both primitive ritual and neurological urgency. Its various images seem to include warfare, shamanism and vital impulses. I’ve seen it often; it invariably awes me.

Dancing with Lou Harrison

June 30, 2017 by [Deborah Jowitt](#) - [1 Comment](#)

The Mark Morris Dance Group celebrates the centennial of composer Lou Harrison's birth.



Mark Morris dancers in Morris's *Numerator*. (L to R): Noah Vinson, Sam Black, and Brandon Rudolph. Photo: Christopher Duggan

In 1991, the composer Lou Harrison wrote a piece for gamelan and harp and called it *In Honor of the Divine Mr. Handel*. On June 28, 2017, in Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall, the Mark Morris Dance Group premiered a work, *Numerator*, set to Harrison's *Varied Trio for violin, piano, and percussion*. The title of the program? *Lou 100: In Honor of the Divine Mr. Harrison*. That brings to seven the number of works that Morris has set to music by a man he considered a friend. Harrison, who died in 2003, didn't attend.

The occasion was just one of several—most of them in far-west states—celebrating the work of this adventurous America composer, who learned from Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg and, on occasion teamed up with John Cage. On May 14 (the day of his birth in 1917), admirers walked through the desert landscape of Joshua Tree National Park to attend *Lou at 100: A Global Day of Art and Conversation*. The musical celebration in his high-ceilinged former home (adobe encasing piled-up hay bales) lasted 24 hours.

Harrison's musical tastes were far-ranging; he explored the instruments and the styles of Asia, early Europe, and elsewhere. He and his partner, William Colvig, built several large gamelans. Some of the five sections of the *Varied Trio* that inform and accompany Morris's *Numerator* give a clue to the composer's ways of mingling cultures. "Gending" refers to an Asian instrument and to a dry Javanese wind and was played in Ozawa Hall by Xiaofan Liu (New Fromm Player at Tanglewood) on the violin. With his sticks, percussionist Nick Sakakeeny struck delicate, ringing tones from an instrument that I couldn't see clearly; the title of the section is "Bowl Bells." Piano (played by Michael James Smith) and violin sing together in "Rondeau, in honor of Fragonard." (On these two evenings, all but one of the musicians are Fellows of the Tanglewood Music Center.)

It's always a pleasure to consider what Morris might have heard in a given piece of music that caused him to make his choreographic choices. What in Harrison's *Varied Trio for violin, piano, and percussion*, for instance, made him want to set a dance for six men to it? (Or did he want to make a dance for six men and searched Harrison's oeuvre for something that suited?)

The title, *Numerator*, is thought-provoking as well. Perhaps it stands for the six, who as denominators, can break their formations into twos and threes or six and one.



Mark Morris's *Numerator*. Noah Vinson leaping, Sam Black sitting. Photo: Christopher Duggan

When the dance begins and the violin emits its quiet, windy melody, and the percussion is light, you can just make out a man lying on his belly. He begins to crawl along a diagonal; the other five men feed, one, by one, into that procession, cross the stage, and exit. As each man proceeds, his stance gradually moves to an upright posture, and Nick Kolin's lighting gradually

brightens. If you can envision this prelude, you may be tickled to see it as I did: an illustration of the human race moving from its amphibious beginnings through reptilian and simian evolutions to “man.”

These are the men: Sam Black, Domingo Estrada, Jr. Aaron Loux, Dallas McMurray, Brandon Randolph, Noah Vinson. They wear black pants and bright-colored, short-sleeved, loose-fitting shirts designed by Elizabeth Kurtzman. The shirts, flowing as the men rush or spin, make me think of hot-climate, island attire. All but Black return to the stage; circling and weaving, playing a kind of peaceful tag without the drama or role-playing of a real game.

Black re-enters alone, and the others do so lined up, their backs to the audience, each with an arm around the next man. When they break apart, it's to balance on one leg, while Black runs around them, then backs between two of them to devolve on the floor.

Not all is gentle and friendly in *Numerator*; the dancers roister in unison, and their drooping downward becomes an occasional motif in “Elegy,” as does their scrabbling on the floor. “Rondeau,” alludes to the medieval poetic and musical form with a cycle of changing partners. After Estrada and McMurray have danced together—sweet-tempered, holding hands, arms around each other—Estrada exits, and McMurray dances with Vinson; then McMurray, having had his turn, goes away, so Vinson dances with Black; then Loux ushers Vinson offstage so that he, Loux, can pair up with Black; after which, Randolph replaces Black and dances with Loux. Finally, bright sidelights, light drums, and plucked strings require the six to divide themselves into pairs, then into threesomes, then, paired again, to hug. Three times two is six, two times three is six, and the wonderfully dancing denominators call it a day.



Laurel Lynch (L) and Aaron Loux in Mark Morris's *Pacific*. Photo: Hilary Schwab

The other three works to music by Harrison on the Tanglewood program are older. The marvelous *Grand Duo* dates from 1993; Morris created *Pacific* for the San Francisco Ballet in 1995; and he built a solo, *Serenade*, in 2003. *Pacific*, the program's opener, is set to the third and fourth movements of Harrison's *Trio for violin, cello, and piano*. When I first saw the MMDG perform it, I was struck with how much more fluid its balletic steps looked when executed by Morris's dancers. Their legs fly up, they spin as if suspended, they leap as if blown

upward. In this they are enhanced by James F. Ingalls' lighting and costumes by the late Martin Pakledinaz. Both men and women wear long, full white skirts, splashed with colored designs; the men are bare-chested, the design on the women's skirts continues upward onto their bodices.



An earlier cast in *Pacific*. (L to R): Chelsea Acree, Lesley Garrison, Stacy Martorana, and Laurel Lynch. Photo: Hilary Schwab

The music—played by Liu (violin), Francesca McNeeley (cello—another New Fromm Player) and Smith (piano)—is assertive at first, with heavy chords on the piano, but full of variety. Perhaps because Morris made the work for a ballet company, he often presents four of the women in green-streaked costumes (Rita Donahue, Lesley Garrison, Laurel Lynch, and Nicole Sabella) as a unit. That's often true of their blue-marked men (Estrada, Loux, and McMurray). Vinson and Sarah Haarman, who perform a nice duet with lifts, wear ones splashed with orange. The foam-up of the skirts hint at breaking sea waves, the pauses suggest cresting ones, and the dancers' rushing in and out of formations conjures up balmy breezes. (Maybe my own California seaside youth and the driving quality of some musical passages are responsible for this reaction.)

As is often the case in Morris's choreography, small precise gestures contrast with the organized swooping and vaulting. At several points, the dancers cup their hands near their chins and then cross them in front of their chests. And many times they stop, poised on the balls of their feet, reaching one arm straight up and gazing down on the opposite side.



Lesley Garrison in Mark Morris's *Serenade*. Photo: Stephanie Berger

Initially, Morris choreographed *Serenade* to Harrison's *Serenade for Guitar* as a solo for himself. In this quirky, quite charming little variety show, he also played the finger cymbals and the castanets called for in two of the score's five sections. Garrison, wearing Isaac Mizrahi's long black skirt and severely cut white top with two little fantails at the back, manages the cymbals' quick punctuation in "Usul," but Morris slips onstage to provide castanet rolls for the final "Sonata" section, joining a guest musician, guitarist Robert Belinć, and Marcelina Suchocka, who strikes the rims of two different-sized red drums, strokes their centers, and occasionally makes a large cymbal resonate. Garrison has grown into *Serenade* since last fall, whether she's dancing seated on a black box; shaping herself into two-dimensional designs while manipulating a thick, glinting metal rod (off which Michael Chybowsky's lighting bounces); flipping a fan open and shut with staccato precision; swinging her hips while making the finger cymbals ring; or flying around the stage while Morris goads her with the castanets. Garrison refrains from flirting with us; the routine is a series of demanding tasks, and she wants to finish them in style.



The Mark Morris Dance Group in Morris's *Grand Duo*. Photo: Erin Baiano

The evening ends with *Grand Duo*, one of my favorite Morris works. It is in four sections and requires 14 dancers, among them Mica Bernas, Durell R. Comedy, Brian Lawson, and Billy Smith, who haven't yet performed tonight. Samantha Bennett (New Fromm Player) is the violinist, and Nathan Ben-Yehuda plays the piano. One section of the music is titled "Stampede," and that's not the only section in which movement and music seem to be thundering across a limited-space prairie, sometimes jolting you pleasurably with its syncopations.

Morris starts out with a mystery. These people, wearing Susan Ruddle's costumes (satin dresses, kilts, tunics, and variations thereof, have perhaps gathered for a ritual. When they lift their hands high, those hands enter a horizontal beam of light that Chybowski has hitherto concealed. Interestingly, because uncommon in Morris choreography, there are a few moments when all the dancers know a common phrase of dancing and perform it in different timings. When they pair up, each couple has its own sequence.

As the music sometimes stutters, so do their feet, spread wide apart beneath bent knees. There are other curious moves. In one, they're lying on their stomachs, but rear up to brace their weight on their hands; then, responding to something in the music, they jut their chins forward. The women's loose hair flies. Individual moments and encounters seethe up in the pressing-forward music—not that there aren't slow passages, spare ones, and singing ones in Harrison's splendid score.



Domingo Estrada, Jr. in Mark Morris's *Grand Duo*.

Photo: Katsuoshi Tanaka

In the last section, during Harrison and Morris's exhilarating, terrifying, invigorating "Polka," the dancers sit in a circle and nod or shake their heads, but calm moments are rare. They have now changed costumes or shucked part of what they were wearing. Lord, how they hunker down, their feet pounding the floor; their legs flicking and kicking out! How they twist and shake and punish the air with their fists! They dance in a circle, split into two fast-moving, nestling curves, and resolve it again. And they are precise in their strength, immaculately so. Harrison's music is a bucking bronco, and they've gripped it tightly. If this were *Rite of Spring*, someone would have to die. Not in this tribe of Morris's, for sure.

The New York Times

The Beatles' 'Sgt. Pepper' Gets a 50th Birthday Festival in Liverpool

By ROSLYN SULCAS MARCH 23, 2017



The Beatles's " Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," vinyl album cover.
Credit Liverpool City Council

LIVERPOOL — The choreographer [Mark Morris](#), the visual artists Jeremy Deller and [Judy Chicago](#), DJ Spooky and the cabaret performer Meow Meow are among the artists participating in "Sgt. Pepper at 50," a celebration here in May and June of the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' 1967 album "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," announced by the city Wednesday.

The four band members — John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr and George Harrison — all grew up in Liverpool, and the city recently published a report which concluded that Beatles- related tourism brings in around \$100 million a year.



Artwork to celebrate upcoming 50th anniversary of the Beatles' album. CreditLiverpool City Council

“We didn’t just want to do a pop concert on the pier,” said Claire McColgan, the director of [Culture Liverpool](#), the cultural arm of the City Council, at a presentation to the media on Wednesday. The program, created by the veteran festival directors Sean Doran and Liam Browne, is rather more ambitious. Thirteen cross-disciplinary commissions will represent the 13 tracks on the album, with projects corresponding to Side 1 taking place June 1 to 5, and projects corresponding to Side 2 from June 8 to 11. These are preceded by the Overture (May 25 to 27) and followed by the Coda (June 16).

Mr. Morris will open the festival with an hourlong work, “Pepperland,” using the opening title track of the album alongside five other Beatles song and original music by Ethan Iverson. In a filmed message, Mr. Morris described “Sgt. Pepper” as “the most incredible album ever made.” He added, “I think there may have been drugs involved, but I’m not sure.”

Artwork for Beatles' album celebration. CreditLiverpool City Council



In an email, Mr. Morris wrote that the album set a radical new direction for popular music. “This amazing album was abundant with new musical ideas; a new kind of studio-born performance; a never-before-heard confluence of music world conventions; a witty, sad, surprising and moving musical trip.”

Other creative pairings include Mr. Deller, a Turner Prize-winning artist, creating two public art commissions inspired by “A Little Help From My Friends”; a giant mural by Ms. Chicago on the themes of “Fixing a Hole”; DJ Spooky’s installation and performance piece for “Getting Better”; 13 poets writing about “When I’m Sixty-Four”; a procession devised by Meow Meow, involving traffic wardens and a brass band, to “Lovely Rita”; and a daylong Ragafest featuring Indian classical musicians in a tribute to Harrison’s interest in the genre in “Within You Without You.”

“We wanted the event to be multidisciplinary, but there were no rules,” said Mr. Doran, who is also the director of the Enniskillen International Beckett Festival and the [Lughnasa International Friel Festival](#). “The song was key, then finding an artist who felt like a fit.” He added that he and Mr. Browne had tried to use the geography of Liverpool “as a turntable for the album.”

The New York Times

Review: From Mark Morris, a Tale of Love Refracted and Multiplied

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY OCT. 2, 2016



Lesley Garrison and Durell R. Comedy of the Mark Morris Dance Group in “Layla and Majnun” at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, Calif. The dance-drama is a collaboration of Mr. Morris, the Silk Road Ensemble and Howard Hodgkin. CreditSusana Millman

BERKELEY, Calif. — “My soul is on fire because we are apart. My only wish is to perish in the world of love. My true love knows every sliver of sorrow in my heart.” “Dear God, let me feel even more despair for my love.” “The true purpose of love is sacrificing oneself.”

These lines, capturing various archetypal facets of Romantic love and anguish, come from the libretto of “Layla and Majnun.” The story, known from the fifth century

onward in oral versions, reached its first definitive form in the Persian romance of Nezami Ganjawi (1141-1209).

This classic, which has long pervaded Arabic, Persian, Azerbaijani and Indian culture, has now become a transcultural dance-drama that [had its premiere](#) on Friday night at Zellerbach Hall here. Mark Morris, who has employed several ethnic styles over the decades, choreographs and directs, [in collaboration](#) with the Silk Road Ensemble and the painter Howard Hodgkin. The production was presented here by Cal Performances, its lead commissioner, and will now tour the United States.

Mr. Morris does not so much tell the Layla-Majnun story as refract it, ritualize it, multiply it. The emphasis is all on emotion. Sometimes one couple from the group represents the hero and heroine; sometimes we see four Laylas and four Majnuns; sometimes one couple is offset by an ensemble that also at times suggests society, the lovers' parents, the male and female hearts.

The staging — about 65 minutes including a long musical overture — is visually beautiful. An abstract backdrop painting by Mr. Hodgkin (realized as décor by Johan Henckens) shows a selection of intense colors, juxtaposing yellow, green and red, so that we feel them as warring but adjacent emotions. Identical costumes — Hodgkin's designs have been realized by Maile Okamura — for women (full-length orange) and men (blue jackets over white trousers, help to suggest a multiplicity of Laylas and Majnuns. When particular Laylas and Majnuns are featured, the Laylas wear flame-colored scarves, the Majnuns white ones.

The beauty is even greater for the ears than for the eyes. Mr. Morris's music is the "Layla and Majnun" [opera](#) composed in 1908 by Uzeyir Hajibeyli (1885-1948). This score, often known as the first opera of the Middle East, had its premiere in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan. Mr. Hajibeyli's score is a central work of Azerbaijani culture; Mr. Morris uses a condensed arrangement of it by Alim Qasimov, Johnny Gandelsman and Colin Jacobsen. The words are both printed in the program; the general topic appears in supertitles.

The outstanding feature of this Azerbaijani music is its vocal lines, all of which feature complex melismas: a single syllable is decorated with rapid flourishes, slow trills and firm downward slurs. The basic vocal sound (the mouth is never opened wide) is related to that used in flamenco, but softer, sweeter, more inward.

The stage is gently tiered. The musicians always occupy center stage, seated. Two young singers and two instrumentalists play the long "Bayati Shiraz" overture, which is undanced. It proves a perfect introduction to the sound world of the opera. The two wonderful vocalists, Kamila Nabiyeva and Miralam Miralamov, wearing white shirts, cast a spell as they embroider the expression of amorous obsession.

Two mature singers, 10 instrumentalists and 16 dancers (seven women, nine men) then perform the opera. The singers, Alim Qasimov and Fargana Qasimova, seated at the center of the other musicians, sing the roles of Majnun and Layla. Ms. Qasimova's voice glows gorgeously. The dancers occupy the peripheries of the stage — front, back, and

sides. We never see more than 12 of them at a time: The number matches that of the musicians.

At times the dance idiom is based on that of Asian dervishes, with the arms and upper body holding a formal, side-tilting position while the dancer revolves on the spot — now slowly, now fast, though never for a long time. Elsewhere, intense through-the-body gestures tip the torso powerfully from side to side (the dancers stand with legs parted and knees bent), suggesting a maelstrom of emotion.

A few of the steps come from ballet. (One Majnun slowly retreats from his Layla while extending a leg behind him into high arabesque; that Layla replies with a matching arabesque but folds the leg inward, inverting his phrase.) There are jumping steps, fitted with folk-like inflections to the music. Although there are lifts amid the ensemble, the various Laylas and Majnuns address each other across space; the distance is crucial to the drama.

The words and music sometimes suggest depths that the dance does not match. The Layla-Majnun romance is contemporaneous with the tales of courtly but adulterous love (Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Yseult, Troilus and Criseyde) that pervaded the culture of Western Europe during the age of chivalry. Like them it connects love and death, flesh and spirit; it expresses desires for both consummation and transcendence.

Having watched two performances with pleasure, I long now to renew my acquaintance with Azerbaijani music in general and Hajibeyli's opera in particular. Mr. Morris's choreography deconstructs and distills the poetic legend with charm and taste.

Correction: October 3, 2016

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of the picture caption with this review misstated the name of a group that collaborated on the project. As the review correctly notes, it is the Silk Road Ensemble, not the Silkwood Ensemble. An earlier version of the review misquoted part of a line from the libretto. It is "My only wish is to perish in the world of love," not "in the wilderness." It also omitted the presenter and lead commissioner of the work — Cal Performances. The review also misstated the number of Laylas and Majnuns the audience sometimes sees. It is four, not five. It also misidentified what is shown in supertitles; it is the general topic of the action, not the words that are sung. And the men wear blue jackets over white trousers, not black trousers.

Books & the Arts.

Plainspoken

by MARINA HARSS

“Dance? Dance is pretty much just people dancing.” The choreographer Mark Morris is responding to a question from one of fifty or so earnest music lovers gathered for a performance of his work. It is the second night of the Ojai Music Festival, held in the bucolic hippy enclave of Ojai, California, about a two-hour drive northeast from L.A. Morris is looking very pleased with himself, in rumpled cargo shorts, a red polo shirt, matching red socks and Franciscan-style sandals. With his broad chest and even broader belly, a scraggly beard, leonine head of graying hair and gleaming greenish eyes, he looks like a Welsh poet, a mischievous Buddha, a disheveled and possibly disreputable emperor. In his right hand he daintily clasps a tartan umbrella angled to protect his eyes from the waning sun. Something about the arrangement of his limbs as he perches on a stool—the extreme angle of his knees, perhaps—reveals the uncanny flexibility of a former dancer. “I was a fabulously good dancer,” he tells me later, and it’s true, too. I’ve seen the tapes.

Every summer for the last sixty-seven years, Ojai’s main street and outdoor amphitheater have been overrun by avid consumers of contemporary music, mostly of the experimental and avant-garde variety. A new music director is selected each year, though some have made repeated appearances. Pierre Boulez has been in charge on seven separate occasions, Stravinsky twice, as well as Esa-Pekka Salonen (twice) and John Adams (once). This time around, the baton was passed to Morris, the first choreographer to be invited. One wonders whether any of the previous musical eminences would have had the gumption to describe Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* as “that sob-fest, boo-hoo” or to define tone clusters as “hitting the piano with your fist and calling it a day.”

Morris’s level of participation is astonishing. With the encouragement of Tom Morris (no relation), the festival’s permanent artistic director and guardian angel, the choreographer has cooked up a dizzying assortment of events, up to ten a day, certainly

Marina Harss is a freelance dance writer and translator in New York City.



Mark Morris leads audience members in a sing-along at the Ojai Music Festival last June.

more than is remotely possible to take in. He is everywhere, at just about every talk, every performance (even the early morning concerts at a meditation center in the hills) and every late night event. These include a karaoke night—accompanied by the jazz trio the Bad Plus—and social dancing with patrons and assorted guests. Morris’s dancers, who perform on the second night of the festival, are nearly as ubiquitous. They sing at the karaoke night and at an afternoon concert of gamelan music by the West Coast composer Lou Harrison, and attend concerts—always as a group—when they’re not rehearsing or teaching morning exercise classes. They look more like an appealing and youthful band of acolytes than a dance troupe; they bring their babies to rehearsals and appear perfectly content to tag along with their boss to most events rather than head off on their own to eat ice cream or read in the shade.

At the dance party, Morris whips up a series of rounds, one based on the polka, the other on the waltz. He exhorts the participants to hold hands with strangers and look into their eyes, frankly, *without irony*. The dances are fun to do, and not without their small complications—steps that go to-

ward and away from the center, lines turning in opposite directions, a slap here, a slap there. Like the karaoke, they are accompanied by live music, an obsession of Morris’s. His company performs exclusively to live accompaniment—anything from solo piano to full orchestra and chorus—and has done so for most of its thirty-three years. (In 1996, it officially made a commitment to have live music at every show and formed its own musical ensemble.) When dancers move to recorded music, steps can become fixed and stale; it is possible to perform without actively listening or responding to minute changes in tempo, accent, dynamics. Plus, recordings reduce the choreographer’s options—what if he or she likes a certain passage a little faster or slower or louder or more staccato? Performing to live music is extremely rare in the world of dance: the Paul Taylor Dance Company usually performs to recordings, as do Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey and many of the smaller ballet troupes. That live music represents a significant expense (just under 10 percent of Morris’s budget last year) is no excuse, in his opinion: “It’s bullshit. You can afford it. You can get some darling student to play a synthesizer or a drum or singers or

TIMOTHY NORRIS/OJAI MUSIC FESTIVAL

make the sound yourself, or use electronic music that's meant to be that way." On this point, and others, he is uncompromising.

From the beginning, life and work in Morris's company have amounted to almost the same thing. Back in the late 1970s, when he got his start in New York City—he moved there in 1976 to dance and put on his first show at the Merce Cunningham Studios four years later—Morris's friends used to take the train over to his loft in Hoboken to drink beer, watch television, eat food he had prepared, listen to records and do folk dances, devised by Morris. The group—centered around his interests, enthusiasms and imagination—is his natural habitat. (Paul Taylor, in contrast, spends long periods of the year on his own on Long Island.) He expects his company and trusted collaborators—people like Nancy Umanoff, his intimidatingly efficient and down-to-earth executive director—to be engaged, “interested in the world, in art, in books, food, Jeopardy, sex and everything else,” in the words of Maile Okamura, a dancer with the company since 2001. He also draws ideas from the group dynamic. “He’s very interested in behavior in a group,” Okamura notes, and those interactions show up in his dances.

It is also a reflection of how he works. “I make up everything in the room with the dancers,” he recently told an interviewer on NPR. “I don’t work in the studio alone ever.” First he gets a certain feeling, an itch triggered by a piece of music. That, of course, is a solitary experience, though he is famous for coercing everyone he knows into listening to the music he loves. Then there is the period of mulling, which may last years. He studies the musical score. (“He’s a scrupulous analyst,” says the musicologist Simon Morrison, who collaborated with him on a *Romeo and Juliet* based on Prokofiev’s original version of the ballet score. “He reads all the technical literature.”) But once he decides to make a dance the real work begins, in the studio, score in hand, with his dancers. (He is one of very few choreographers to use the musical score; another was Balanchine, who used to create his own piano reductions.) Which is not to say that the dancers improvise or help come up with steps. “There is this strange assumption that people make...where they wonder, are you a complete fascist/tyrant/dictator or do the dancers improvise? Well, neither. I mean, it’s more that I’m a fascist dictator, but the dancers dance. They contribute by dancing.” The dancers are his instruments, the movement itself.

In addition to the modern dance works for his company, Morris has also made ballets, with *pointe* work, for various troupes, including American Ballet Theatre and the San Francisco Ballet. He also teaches a daily ballet class for his dancers at the Mark Morris Dance Center, the company’s headquarters in Brooklyn. Unlike modern dance masters of previous generations such as Martha Graham and José Limon (and to a certain extent Paul Taylor) who created their own technique, Morris is happy to teach ballet, which he considers a kind of lingua franca of dance, complete enough to prepare the body for all kinds of movement. In his own ballets, he tends to downplay the Balanchinean ideals of extreme lightness, speed and hyperflexibility. In *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes* (1988), a chamber work for ABT based on a series of limpid piano études by Virgil Thomson, the movements of the dancers have a pleasing weight and loose-limbed feel; they sink down into deep pliés, tip over until they are about to fall, and torque their upper bodies to give each position a lush three-dimensional quality. (You can watch passages from *Drink to Me* on YouTube.) Because of the way dancing on point accentuates gender specificity, ballet allows him to toy with the way men partner and lift women, though even here, his focus remains more on the ensemble and the individual than on the balletic ideal of the couple. His recent *Beaux*, for the San Francisco Ballet, is an ensemble work for nine men, with, in his words, “no fighting, no competition and no sexual predation.”

In his own company, gender can seem almost irrelevant, pointedly so. (In the 1980s, when the company emerged on the dance scene, this stance was more of a statement than it is today.) Extended duets are not really Morris’s thing, though he has made some beautiful ones, like the tender coming-of-age dance for Drosselmeier and his nephew in his version of *The Nutcracker* (*The Hard Nut*, 1991) and the brutal *Jenn and Spencer*—a kind of battle to the death he created earlier this year. There is also the disturbingly erotic pas de deux he made in 1985, *One Charming Night*, depicting a brief love affair between an adoring (and aroused) vampire (played by Morris) and a little girl (played by an adult, Teri Weksler). But for the most part, the individual and the group are the main subjects of his dances. Women lift and support men just as often as the opposite, and roles are often shared by dancers of both sexes. In the original cast of his *Dido and Aeneas* (1989), for example, Morris himself danced both the role of Dido and that of her nemesis, the Sorceress. (He was half-woman, half man, with

long, curly hair and earrings, but also bulky muscles and a markedly heavy, strong way of moving.) In more recent casts, the roles have been assigned in many different ways: split between a man and a woman, both performed by a man or both by a woman—most memorably, by Amber Star Merkens, who has the profile of a Byzantine princess and the musculature of a young Greek wrestler.

Morris tells me that when he starts to make a dance, “I try to figure out something to do while they’re all waiting there trying to pretend they’re not bored.” Sometimes he already has the germ of a movement idea. When he made *Falling Down Stairs* (1997), a dance inspired by Yo-Yo Ma’s execution of the Third Cello Suite by Bach, he told Ma that just before he started he’d dreamt of falling down stairs. The Prelude begins with a group of dancers arrayed on a wooden staircase opposite the cellist; as Ma plays the opening phrase—a descending scale and arpeggio—the dancers run down the steps and tumble to the ground in a fanlike pattern. Morris seems to love the effortfulness of falling and getting up.

A few years ago, when he began to work on the choreography for *Socrates* (2010), a spare, meditative work based on a pellucid song cycle by Satie, he started things off by asking the dancers to re-create poses from Jacques-Louis David’s *Mort de Socrate*—the raised finger, the downturned face of the man in red holding a cup of hemlock. Most of the gestures and poses didn’t end up in the piece, but a few did, and those became compositional elements, divorced, at least in part, from their literal meaning. They became the visual equivalent of a chord or motif in music. The odd thing about bodies in space is that in different contexts, their movements take on new meanings: “the audience doesn’t know why that part is sad, it’s just that she’s facing away from you that time instead of toward you,” is how Morris explains it. For this reason, he isn’t afraid of repetition; each time the gesture or step seems a little bit different. Repetition and variation is one of the elements that lends his dances such emotional resonance. It also drives some people crazy. “It seems as if he uses about four steps,” the critic Leigh Witchel complained of one piece, “a fifth would be nice.”

If, as Morris claims, dancing is merely “walking and running and falling” to music, how does he avoid making the same dance over and over? First, he imposes a series of rules for each dance, a different set of problems. How many groups will there be? Will they interact with each other? What sorts of floor patterns will he

work with? In response to these self-imposed rules, he devises ingenious solutions. But he's not bound to his own systems. If he gets tired of a step, he throws it out and replaces it with another that makes more sense to him at the time: "it's like changing the color." Sometimes, in order to obtain unpredictable results—he likes to see what will happen—he asks for actions that cannot be fully controlled, like bending backward "until you fall over." If ten people do this at once, they will do it in ten slightly different ways, because there is no way to fall over elegantly. Then there are all the tactics he uses to manipulate the material he invents. He might ask the dancers to do a phrase in reverse, or change direction, or do it while lying on the ground with their feet in the air, or as a canon or a fugue. He creates many variations on a theme, versions that contain some of the same material but also add or subtract from it, or shift the emphasis. One of the most brilliant examples is a solo he created for himself in 1984, *O Rangasayee*, set to a South Indian Carnatic song; for twenty minutes, he spun seemingly infinite loops, riffing on a series of crouches, lunges, Isadora Duncan–like leaps and rhythmic footwork that echoed the syllabic, accented scating of the singer's voice. The principles that guided the minute variations of this morphing structure were indecipherable from the outside, but their relationship to the logic of the music was thrillingly palpable. His dancing allowed the audience to hear the music more clearly by providing a kind of memory palace of movements.

In a related vein, when he works with music that has an accompanying text, like Satie's *Socrate*, a scenario—or a phrase, or even a word—can become a point of departure. In *Dido and Aeneas*, when a sailor bellows the words "come away, fellow sailors, your anchors be weighing," the dancers mime pulling at ropes and raising the sails of a ship. In last year's *A Wooden Tree*, when the singer utters a series of blips and beeps imitating Morse code, the dancer (Mikhail Baryshnikov, in a guest appearance) taps out the rhythms precisely on a chair. Morris has even buried bits of American Sign Language in his choreography. The conjunction between words and gestures isn't always this obvious, but he has been accused more than once of "Mickey Mousing." It's true, in a sense, but at the same time, different forms of "word-painting" and "music visualization"—as these practices are called—are common to much of the classical and folk dance around the world.

He's also keen on rhythm. The patterns of the footwork he creates are more varied and more percussive than those of just about any other modern dance or ballet choreographer. (He likes to joke that the only dancers who can equal his in rhythmic acuity are in the Ballet National du Sénégal.) Sometimes they follow the beat, or double it, or to the contrary, slow things down to half-time, suspending a step to create tension and syncopation. "He understands subdivision," says Reid Anderson of the Bad Plus, the jazz trio that supplied Morris with the version of *The Rite of Spring* he used for his *Spring, Spring, Spring* earlier this year. (The title was borrowed from a musical number in the film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, which Morris loves and will happily sing.) His understanding of the subdivision of the beat allows him to work within or against the rhythm, shifting the accents of the body to complement or play against those in the music. He loves hemiolas, rhythmic patterns that allow him to insert steps between the beats (three against two or two against three). He didn't invent this practice, of course; it's typical of many folk dance forms, in which

he is well versed. Rhythmic variety is simply another tool he uses to mine the textures and layers of a musical work. But craft isn't everything. What makes the dances come alive are the surprises, the man dragging himself across the floor like a lowly beast in the opening of *Gloria* (1981) as the chorus bellows "Gloria! Gloria!"; the mad whoosh of dancers at the start of *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1988); the almost unbearable stillness at the end of *Socrates* (2010). These are what stay with you when you leave the theater.

It helps that he seems to have an endless supply of ideas. "I make way too much stuff and then I edit," he says. In the video of *Falling Down Stairs*, we see him working in the studio; at one point, unsatisfied with something he has just made up, he says, "Never mind, fuck that," and does something new. The process may not be pretty—"He shouts a lot," says Isaac Mizrahi, who has designed several of his shows, and Morris himself admits "I'm daunting and bossy and I get my way"—but the dances he ends up creating are their own reward. "It's a joy to do them...there's nothing like it," Rob Besserer, who danced with Mark Morris on and off for twenty years, told me, a blissful smile spreading across his face.

Morris was born in Seattle in 1956. He began dancing after being taken to see a José Greco concert by his mother. Watching videos of Greco, one can see what might have excited the young Morris: the playfulness that could quickly veer into solemnity; the powerful, rhythmically exciting footwork, the crystalline movements and razor-sharp timing, as well as the hammy virility that alternated with touches of almost feminine sensuality (especially in the way Greco used his hips). Morris's mother took him to a local school directed by the open-minded and eclectic teacher Verla Flowers, a place where one could learn everything from ballet to acrobatics to belly dancing. He studied mainly Spanish dance and ballet. Then, as a teenager, he joined a Balkan group, the Koleda Folk Ensemble. With Koleda, Morris experienced, perhaps for the first time, the creative excitement generated by a group of people joining hands and shoulders and forming varied patterns across a stage, illustrating the complexities of folk rhythms with their stamping feet and bobbing knees. In this context, personal virtuosity—which Morris had in spades—faded away. Unlike ballet, it didn't really matter how high you could lift a leg or how much stage presence you had or how many times you could spin, so long as you could really hear the music and communicate its energy

to your fellow dancers and the audience. As Joan Acocella, *The New Yorker's* dance critic, has written, Koleda became "an image of the world," one that would serve as a perpetual reminder of what dancing really was.

The plainspokenness of folk dance has endured in Morris's work, even as it has grown more refined, more sophisticated. Somehow, he has managed to combine it with his analytical, meticulous approach to composition. Through his daily ballet classes, he eliminates the mannerisms and distortions that worm their way into the most advanced ballet training, in part as a result of technique being pushed to the limit so that dancers can raise their legs higher, turn more, exaggerate their lines, embellish their movements. Morris isn't interested in extremes. "He's interested in anatomy," says Okamura. "He's looking for each person's ideal form. He sees a beautiful body as one that is coordinated in a seemingly natural way. It's a more honest expression of the body." This may be why his dancers tend to look more like regular people than like creatures from another, perfect planet. When they perform, they exhibit the same frankness that Morris expects in social dance. "He teaches us to look directly out of our eyes, with our pupils going straight out of our face, to really look."

The theme at Ojai, selected by Morris, is American twentieth-century music, especially from the West, and even more specifically, from the circle of Lou Harrison. The company's performance on the second night of the festival, which includes dances set to music by Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, Samuel Barber and Harrison, is a highlight. Two days later, there is an unscheduled performance of the solo *Ten Suggestions* just before a concert of songs by Cowell and Ives. Morris originally made this solo for himself, but, now 57, he no longer dances, so here it is performed by Dallas McMurray, who looks a bit like an overgrown boy from a children's book. The 1981 work is a touchingly simple, almost hokey suite of solos set to Alexander Tcherepnin's evocative *Bagatelles* for piano (played with great panache by Colin Fowler, the music director of Morris's company). Though they lack titles, the pieces are like miniature musical mise-en-scènes, each evoking a clear mood and style. McMurray enters, wearing pink pajamas, and seems to improvise in an exploratory, almost naïve style. On a long suspended note, he revolves three times on one leg, then plunges into a squat, hitting the bottom of the drop squarely on a rich, low chord. Then, as Fowler plays a repeating series of rising and falling notes, McMurray rolls forward, twice, and then flicks one foot to mark an accent, then rolls again, this time to the right, then backward, then to the left. After this, the theme having reached its conclusion, he jogs back to the spot where he began. When the melody begins again, so does the dance. Before a new, dreamier melody is introduced, McMurray takes a few casual steps, as if to wipe away the mood. Then his torso loosens and hinges forward, riding the wave of a long accented note, vividly showing the effect of gravity pulling it downward. In this next section, his swinging arms, plunging torso and tilting head illustrate the outline of the melody. The pattern is repeated as often as it is heard on the piano. When Fowler stretches the music with a little rubato, McMurray takes a slight breath.

Nothing could be simpler, in a way. There is music, and one man's utterly personal response to it. It's obvious, but specific. No one else would have imagined that exact series of movements. The ideas are straightforward, easily legible, often repeated. Many of the elements of *Ten Suggestions*—the rhythmic incisiveness and playfulness, the casual affect, the literalness, the idiosyncrasy, the fanciful (but knowing) naïveté—are to be found in one Morris dance after another. Of course, he can also be dark. He has made dances about death and murder and sexual brutality

and fear. Even seemingly gentle pieces like *Ten Suggestions* are laced with an underlying whiff of sadness, a recognition of human limitation and failure. The dancer in *Ten Suggestions* often falls to the ground; his quietly focused demeanor is contrasted by moments of discouragement. The piece ends with him standing on a chair, but also covering his face.

As often happens with audiences who are unfamiliar with Morris—the dance and music worlds overlap surprisingly little—the response at Ojai is extremely warm. Music lovers dig his work; so do musicians, which is curious, because musicians are, I've found, often slightly resistant to dance. They tend to feel that dance is superfluous, unmusical and distracting—the music is complete without it. Morris's dances come across as transparent, smart and surprising, even when they are provocative or deeply strange. More than that, his choreography has a symbiotic relationship with the music. It goes beyond understanding to a kind of empathy: "He finds the character of the piece of music," says Okamura, "and once it's choreographed, you can't imagine it any other way." Morris's reputation in the dance world is more divided. There are the enthusiasts—Joan Acocella, who published her 1994 book on Morris when he was only 37, is one, as well as her predecessor at *The New Yorker*, Arlene Croce, who was an early booster—but there are the skeptics, among them the late Clive Barnes and for a long time Anna Kisselgoff of *The New York Times*. Robert Gottlieb recently described Morris's *Choral Fantasy* as "run, run, run; leap, leap, leap; and, most persistently, march, march, march." Barnes once wrote that he found *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*—which was performed as part of the White Light Festival at Lincoln Center this fall—to be "commonplace and totally irrelevant," even though it is considered by many to be one of the great dance works of the last twenty-five years.

The superficial simplicity of the dances is a frequent bone of contention. In Europe, where there is an expectation that contemporary dance will be knotty and densely packed with ideas, Morris's work is less popular than here and in England. "We went to Holland a couple of years ago and we got some of the worst reviews ever, saying, 'This is nursery school kind of dancing,'" Nancy Umanoff told me this summer. Rather than bombard you with his erudition, Morris sometimes has a tendency to amuse himself with jokey references to popular culture: professional wrestling and comic strips and B movies

like *3D House of Stewardesses*. This deliberately lowbrow esthetic can appear arch, even campy, and in a way it is (though he truly admires these things). But like them or not, the homey references and plainspokenness represent core elements of his style. For Morris, the complication should remain beneath the surface, in the construction of the dance, not in its results or cultural references. "It's not important. Or if it is, you should just do the fifty pages of program notes explaining your ideas. Which some people do," he says.

Morris is branching out. His dance center in Brooklyn, which in many ways reflects his own experience with Verla Flowers, hums with community classes for children and adults and professional master classes, all accompanied by live music. The center also produces educational programs for schools based on his dances, and free classes for people suffering from Parkinson's, taught by former company members, which include barre work, dances in the round, partnering and, on the day I attended, a bit of flamenco. (Morris has said privately that he wants the center to survive him, but not the dance company.) In the last decade, he has begun working more directly with singers and musicians (especially at Juilliard and at the Tanglewood Summer Festival), directing opera, even conducting. A few years back, he began studying conducting with the baroque specialists Craig Smith and Jane Glover, as well as with Stefan Asbury, a champion of new music. He has found the experience "terrifying and very enlivening." Apparently he sweats so much that he prefers to conduct barefoot. Musicians seem to agree that he's a good conductor, with strong opinions about tempo and the quality of sound he wants and a firm but elastic sense of meter. "The main thing I've learned from him is that all music has to swing," the soprano Yulia Van Doren told me. He also teaches graduate music courses at Princeton with the musicologist Simon Morrison. He directed a surprisingly drab production of Gluck's *Orfeo* at the Met (2007), but also a wonderfully irreverent staging of Purcell's *King Arthur* at City Opera (2008); the latter included one of the most rousing, imaginative maypole dances ever seen.

This summer, he directed the Tanglewood Fellows' staging of Benjamin Britten's chamber opera *Curlew River*. Most of his work with singers consists of clearing away habits that build up in vocal training and performance, distorted (to his ear) English diction and preconceptions about musical style. He also pushes singers to take chances with vocal

color for dramatic effect—not to always worry about making a pretty sound—and to make clear choices about rhythm. He asks them to acknowledge the rests in the music and give them full value, but also to allow themselves certain liberties for a more natural, conversational delivery. He favors character and directness over sheer vocal beauty—like most Baroque enthusiasts, he's not especially fond of vibrato. As with dancers, he constantly reminds singers to look out at the audience and at each other rather than "at the inside of your own head," as Isaiah Bell, one of the Tanglewood Fellows, put it. His frankness can be jarring: "You have to be thick-skinned and you have to have a sense of humor," one singer who has collaborated with him over the years told me. Even among musicians, his musical ear surprises: "At one point," Bell told me, "he said to someone in the band, 'There's an eighth-note tied over to a triplet, and you're coming off the first eighth-note in that triplet too late,' and it was true. The gesture made more sense that way." The minute adjustment—usually the territory of a conductor, not a director—was enough to clarify a shift in meter. The production had no conductor, so Morris found ways for the singers and musicians (who were all onstage) to give each other cues, without worrying about creating a "perfect" sound or a seamless visual effect. If the audience noticed a cue, so be it. This fluidity between performers is typical for him. In his next big project, the Handel opera *Acis and Galatea*, which will premiere at Cal Performances in April, the principal singers will be onstage with the dancers throughout, as they were in *King Arthur*. In this way, "Everyone occupies the same world," as he puts it.

Morris is beginning to transcend the boundaries of the dance world, which may be one of the reasons some of the figures in that world resent him a bit. It's understandable. He can sometimes seem hell-bent on offending. At Ojai, he spoke of dance as being seen as the "pathetic bottom drawer embarrassment of the arts." (At a pre-performance talk, he scolded a lady on the bleachers for making noise: "Hey you, keep your chips quiet!") But his love for the basic truths of the body is unshaken. "Every gesture means something," he told me the first time we spoke. When I reminded him of this later, he elaborated on what he believes dance can do better than any other art: "There's a sympathetic response to watching someone dance. It helps you stay alive. People watching people dance have incredible undisclosed empathy. When you see a great Indian dancer who suddenly has Krishna's revelation, you get it, you feel it yourself. That's what I think." ■

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Mark Morris's Enduring Career



Nearing 60, he can look back on a long list of accolades

Choreographer Mark Morris's dance center will celebrate its 15th anniversary this fall. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **LIZZIE SIMON** | May 15, 2016

In the field of American dance, rarely friendly to aging bodies, the number of master choreographers working into their seventh decade—and still directing a namesake company— can pretty much be counted on one artfully extended hand.

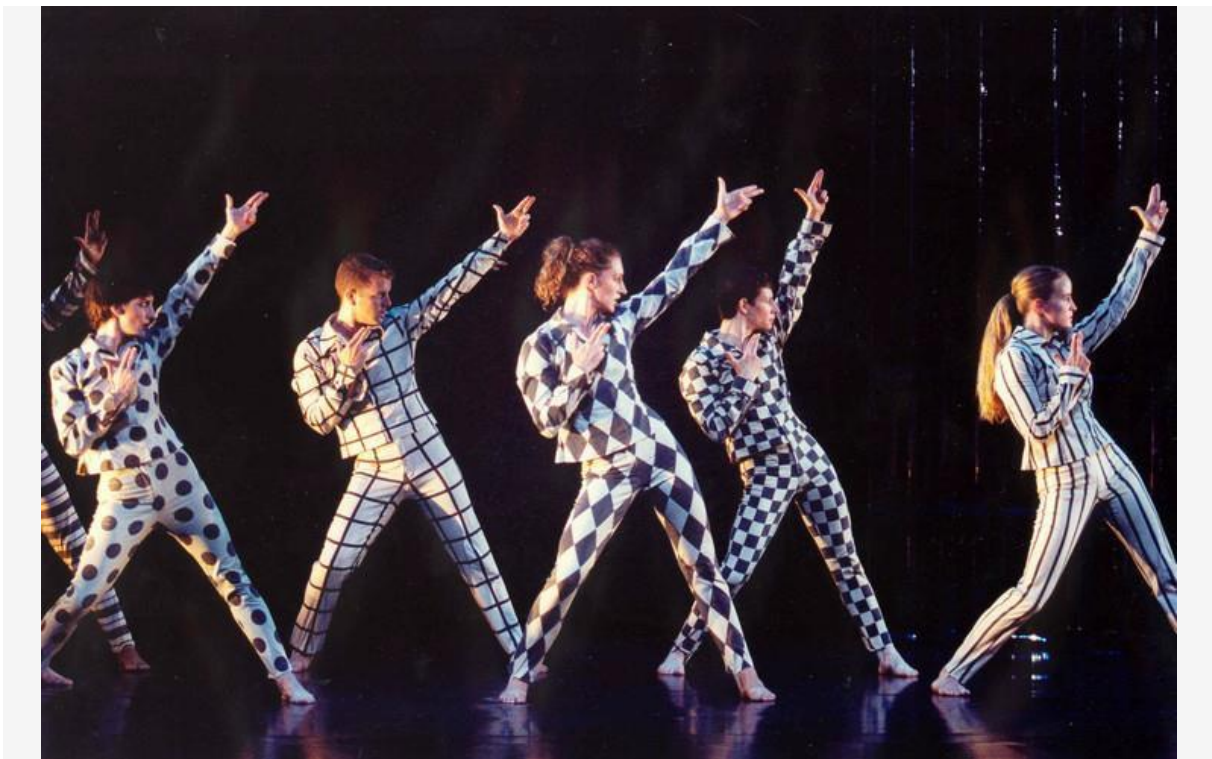
Soon to enter that elite club is Mark Morris, who turns 60 in August and whose company, the **Mark Morris Dance Group**, performs its spring season May 17 to 22 at his center in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

Known as one of the more prolific makers of dance of his or any generation, Mr. Morris has amassed a long list of accolades, including a MacArthur Fellowship, multiple lifetime- achievement recognitions and, recently, a prestigious Doris Duke Artist Award, which comes with \$275,000 in flexible, multiyear funding.

“Very few people have the gifts Mark has,” said Lawrence Rhodes, artistic director of the Juilliard Dance Division. “People hope to emulate his innate knowledge of music, structure and vocabulary.”

The company, founded in 1980, hasn't had a repertory season at its center since April 2013. Each of the four pieces on the program is a smaller dance—selected, Mr. Morris said, because in scale they are particularly well suited for the intimate space.

'Resurrection,' which premiered in 2002. *BRUCE FEELEY*



They also showcase his renowned musical eclecticism and facility for resurrecting lesser-known compositions, which are always played live.

One piece is “A Forest,” a world premiere set to Joseph Haydn’s “Piano Trio No. 44 in E Major.” Haydn’s composition, said Mr. Morris, is “very, very surprising, very advanced for the period, and structurally radical.”

“The,” a New York premiere, is set to a highly unusual piano four-hand arrangement by Max Reger of Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F Major.”

The program’s other two works haven’t been performed in New York for more than five years: “Cargo,” set to Darius Milhaud’s “La Création du Monde, Op. 58” and “Foursome,” a suite of short dances for four men with music by Erik Satie and Johann Nepomuk Hummel.

Fashion designer [Isaac Mizrahi](#), a longtime friend and frequent collaborator, characterized Mr. Morris as having a relationship to music that is encyclopedic, scholarly and deeply felt. “No one knows more about the nature of presenting music than Mark,” he said.



'The,' performed in Seattle in 2015. *PHOTO: MAT HAYWARD*

A visit to Mr. Morris's colorful Curry Hill apartment, with its hundreds of knickknacks and dolls, reveals a life of extensive world travel. India, he said, has had a particularly magnetic pull, drawing him back nearly a dozen times. That global curiosity has seeped into his work, from his 1984 solo "O Rangasayee," inspired by the vocabulary of Indian dance, to a Muslim opera project slated for this fall.

The evening-length work, "Layla and Majnun," which will premiere at Cal Performances' Zellerbach Hall at the University of California, Berkeley on Sept. 30, has been in development for nearly a decade. It was proposed, said Mr. Morris, by Yo-Yo Ma.

The score is a western chamber-orchestra arrangement of Azerbaijani music and Mugham, a traditional singing style of the region that blends poetry and "soulful, intense organized improvisation."

The Silk Road Ensemble will perform live with Alim Qasimov and his daughter Fargana Qasimova, singers with celebrity status in the Middle East. Disputedly the first Muslim opera, its narrative has been compared with "Romeo and Juliet"—although the young lovers, Mr. Morris said, never consummate.

In the wake of growing Islamophobia, the choreographer said he has been even more inspired to bring the piece to U.S. audiences. Talks are under way to present the work in New York in the fall of 2017.



'Socrates,' which premiered in 2010. PHOTO: GENE SCHIAVONE

Another looming birthday for Mr. Morris is that of his dance center, which celebrates its 15th anniversary this fall. The center offers significantly subsidized rehearsal studios and dance classes for all ages and abilities. One program, Dance for PD, teaches people with Parkinson's disease and currently has more than 110 world-wide affiliates, some as far-flung as Pune, India, and Guangzhou, China.

In Mr. Morris's inner circle, the conversation about his legacy is far along, and there isn't a consensus.

Nancy Umanoff, executive director of his operation, would like to ensure that the center, its programs and Mr. Morris's dances continue.

Mr. Mizrahi isn't so sure about the future of the dances. "Once a great choreographer passes, there is no one who truly understands the work. It's never as good. It's never fulfilling the intention."

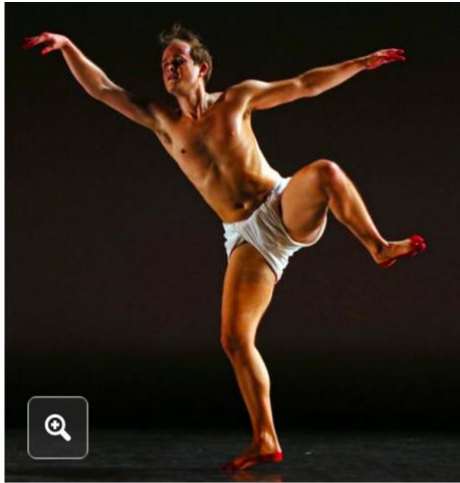
What can't be replicated without Mr. Morris, he added, is "the spirit. Forget about technique; it's about a kind of engagement, a capacity to hear the music in a certain way."

Mr. Morris said both are right. "In my life, I've already seen my work in a way that was so not exactly what I meant. I want it right or not at all."

The New York Times

Review: Mark Morris Is a Citizen of the World at the White Light Festival

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY OCT. 30, 2016



Dallas McMurray performed Mark Morris's "O Rangasayee" (1984) at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater of John Jay College on Saturday.
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Because Mark Morris pays close attention to music in his choreography, you can hardly miss the sanity in his method. But his choice of movement often shows a streak of lunacy, a naïve and eccentric singularity that makes you think, Who else in the world would have thought of something so completely nutty? It's this aspect of him that can seem magically inspired.

I had not expected to see much of the crazy side of Mr. Morris this fall, only the responsible multiculturalist. As curator of "Sounds of India," part of Lincoln Center's White Light Festival, he has invited a number of performing artists from South India to perform in New York; at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater of John Jay College, the Mark Morris Dance Group is alternating with the Kerala Kalamandalam

Kathakali Troupe and Nrityagram. But all four pieces of his own program, which opened on Saturday night, show his talent's marvelously irrational aspect.

Two items are rarities from the 1980s, to taped music: "The 'Tamil Film Songs in Stereo' Pas de Deux" (1983) and "O Rangasayee" (1984), both of which show Mr. Morris's early absorption in aspects of Indian music and culture.

The "Tamil Film Songs" number, a duet for a bullying fusspot of a male dance teacher (Brian Lawson) and his plaintive but resilient female student (Stacy Martorana) is the evening's comic highlight, a piece of fabulous silliness. "O Rangasayee," an extraordinary 20-minute solo made by Mr. Morris for himself and now revived for the dancer Dallas McMurray, is the evening's most sensational success, a dance of obsessively rapturous devotion.

The program, however, opens and closes with pieces set to Western music: "Serenade" (2003), to a five-part composition for guitar and percussion by Lou Harrison, and "Pure Dance Items," a world premiere, to six selections from Terry Riley's ultralong string quartet "Salome Dances for Peace." Mr. Harrison (who died in 2003, a month before Mr. Morris's dance had its premiere) was, as Mr. Riley remains, open to musical influences

from India, from Native American traditions, Western modernism, jazz and much more.



Billy Smith, center, and other members of the Mark Morris Dance Group in “Pure Dance Items.”
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Thanks to Mr. Morris’s responses to their work, this program makes him and his dancers citizens of not just India but also the world. The range of movement hints at Martha Graham modern dance, at ballet, at flamenco, at the anti-virtuoso selection of everyday movement in American postmodern dance, and also at a wide range of ethnic sources.

Throughout the evening I was happily amazed, and enchanted, by how Mr. Morris’s decisions surprised. “Pure Dance Items” is a changing ensemble for 12 dancers, dressed by Elizabeth Kurtzman in brightly colored sportswear and in soft half-light designed by Nick Kolin against a twilight-blue backdrop. During much of it, one dancer or another sits on a stool, indicating (like a rehearsal director) the movements done more fully by others elsewhere onstage. The stool is moved, and sometimes this seated directorial figure (now male, now female) becomes part of a duet or trio that’s semidetached from the rest of the action.

This supervisory person in “Pure Dance Items” keeps being replaced, as if to say: “So what if rehearsal staff change? On with the dance!” The ensemble’s larger synergy is only heightened.

“Pure Dance Items” is largely about rhythm and pattern. In the dances for all 12, Mr. Morris gives us two sixes, three fours, four threes, but sometimes with such bewilderingly fluent changes that it’s remarkably hard to keep track of the number games. (And the colors of the costumes and backdrop make this sensuously mesmerizing.) Tiny solos within the group help every member register clearly; in one brief sequence, Brandon Randolph’s jump and pulsating rhythm make a breathtaking impression.

When Ms. Garrison begins “Serenade” seated — legs apart, and moving her upper body in changing gestures — you can feel traces of Martha Graham’s celebrated “Lamentation” (1930), which remains radical in the way it is a dance performed almost entirely while seated. But “Serenade” is not expressionistic; it switches from mood to mood and style to style. The score has five sections: In one, Ms. Garrison wields a brass cylinder; in the next a fan, after which she puts on finger bells, playing them while moving.

What is she? Having begun solely with her upper body, she becomes a font of rhythm in her footwork and whole physique. These changes reveal the diversity of Mr. Harrison’s music. It starts just with guitar (Robert Belinic) and then adds percussion (Stefan Schatz) in shifting sonorities and meters.

When new, “O Rangasayee” convinced many who saw it that Mr. Morris had genius as both a creator and performer. Mr. McMurray — a long-term Morris performer who looks like an overgrown baby and not remotely like his choreographer — rises brilliantly to the challenge; this is the greatest achievement of his dance career. The solo, to music by Sri Tyagaraja from which the dance takes its name, has a rondo-like structure. It begins with the dancer, clad only in a dhoti, standing at the back of the stage, his upper body folded forward to hang between his legs. He keeps returning to this starting position. The first time, he rises to vertical stance very weightily and slowly; he’s brisker on later occasions.

This motif alone suggests deep concentration of spirit as well as body. The intense feats of rhythm, plasticity and complex phrasing that follow take Mr. McMurray (and us) into realms where body and soul inseparably travel together. It’s a trance dance, a religious statement, an expression of the individual as child, adult, student and sage. And it’s a Western performer entirely immersed in the rhythms of the East.

The White Light Festival is an annual investigation of the nonsecular aspect of our lives. It has never been better embodied than by “O Rangasayee.”

Correction: October 31, 2016

An earlier version of this review misidentified the attire worn by Dallas McMurray. It was an Indian garment, a dhoti, not diapers.

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/arts/dance/review-mark-morris-is-a-citizen-of-the-world-at-the-white-light-festival.html>

FINANCIAL TIMES

Mozart Dances, Lincoln Center, New York — review

The three linked dances catch the spirit of the composer's myriad gestures as well as the woozy beauty of the piano flurries



The Mark Morris Dance Group performing 'Mozart Dances' © Stephanie Berger

AUGUST 26, 2016

by: Apollinaire Scherr

The few choreographers who dare to approach Mozart do not usually get too close. They take him at second-hand, nodding to the pomp and powdered wigs or to the music's vaunted elegance, sweetness, sadness, sublimity. The musically driven Mark Morris, on the other hand, seems to have climbed inside the piano.

Commissioned by Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival in 2006, Mozart Dances returns from nearly a decade's hiatus. Pianist Garrick Ohlsson does plain-spoken honours for Concertos 11 and 27, and, joined by Inon Barnaton, the two-piano Sonata in D.

The three linked dances catch the spirit of Mozart's myriad gestures — whether teasing, naughty, ingratiating, bored or swaggering — as well as the woozy beauty of the piano flurries, and those sudden drops in temperature at the swell of the orchestra that chill the soul. But more crucially and more rare, this fully

engrossing, classically restrained two-hour work brings out the transitions between ditty and soaring harmony: the liminal states that too often in Mozart, as in life, are overlooked.

The choreographer has long been richly gestural, but this time at every musical tadahe freezes the gesture: the finger raised to make a point, the traffic-cop semaphoring, the women's scything arms. However striking the image, though, another and another will follow until the tension is at breaking point. For those sudden Mozartian depths, the dancers relinquish themselves to easeful momentum. They spin dervish-like, for example, arms flung wide and head wobbling giddily on the neck.

Mozart Dances possesses cartoonish jollity, lyrical communal feeling, much striding purposely about with arms swinging, and a late instance of full-bodied romance that ends with couples forming a single spear from their two raised arms and staring jubilantly into each other's eyes. But when Mozart transcends the social world, the dancers pause and look down and away as if to say, "The rest is silence."

Morris has always seemed the most forthright of choreographers. But beside the prodigious composer, he has grown pensive. Mozart Dances is full of quiet and the unresolved.

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