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Ballet Review



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A Conversation with Mark Morris

On the cover: Mark Morris' *Festival Dance*.

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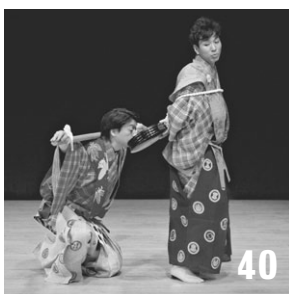
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Cover photo by Tom Brazil: Mark Morris' *Festival Dance*.



Mark Morris' *Festival Dance*. (Photos: Tom Brazil)

A Conversation with Mark Morris

Joseph Houseal

BR: My first question is . . .

Morris: You haven't asked a question.

BR: Okay, I don't need to. As I understand, you started out in folk dance, European folk dance. I think "folk" is a dumb word. I don't like labeling things folk – or ancient dance, traditional dance, indigenous dance, ethnic dance. By the time you call it "folk," the folk aren't doing it anymore.

Morris: I also don't like the terms "live music" or "modern dance" . . . "world dance" or "world music." I understand the usefulness of those terms. For some legal reason, we have to call the gym in my building a wellness center. Wellness? I don't even know what that is. It is the word for health that has had a different life when it started. I call it a gym. I think that's nice even when nobody's naked. But really, "wellness"? Give me a break.

Anyway, flamenco was the first dance that I did, but then shortly after that, I was studying Spanish folk dance: jota and Escuela Bolera. By the time I moved to Spain at seventeen, I had abandoned flamenco mostly and was studying the jota from Aragon. That was my thing. If that's not folk dancing, I don't know what is.

It was also part of the times. There were a lot of people doing folk dancing. And I was a specialist in Croatian dancing. I taught Croatian dance a lot, Bulgarian dancing, different kinds of Romanian dancing.

BR: What is your background?

Morris: What do you mean?

BR: Your ethnic background.

Morris: I don't have one. Anglo, whatever. Welsh, more than anything. Both sides of my family had a lot of Welsh in them. It started with a regular brew, with the Anglo mix. I'm white and from Seattle, etc. I'm postracial.

BR: I thought *Socrates* at last night's concert

– Plato and Satie – was a very white piece.

Morris: I'm postracial.

BR: I like white. I'm not against white.

Morris: Famously or not famously, Satie said that he wanted that piece of music to be as "white as classical antiquity," not knowing, of course, that the Parthenon was painted orange and turquoise and then all the glass, all the statues. The marble wasn't the valuable part. The realism was the wonderful part.

BR: There's a nineteenth-century painter that I couldn't think of last night . . .

Morris: Jacques-Louis David. There are a couple of visual quotes from his very famous painting "The Death of Socrates." But more specifically, the palette of costumes is as directly as it can be from that one painting. The pigment doesn't translate to light and fabric at all, but the three groups of colors are as specific a quotation as you can get.

BR: In the first piece, *The Muir*, the color palette alone was so beautiful.

Morris: That's a Sir Walter Scott dance in the first place.

BR: Does folk dancing inspire you?

Morris: No, it does not. It's what I do.

I just made a title for the new dance: *Festival Dance*, for six male/female couples. They stay in those couples through the whole thing. Maybe some queers will be upset, but it's completely, as young people in college now say, "heteronormative." Somebody asked me about it, and I said, "No, why? Because what I do is usually homonormative? I don't know what you're talking about." In *Festival Dance* there are couple dances and wine dances. It is very hand-holding and it's very folk dancing looking, but I very rarely make direct quotations of somebody's national dance because . . .

BR: What about the brilliant May Pole dance in your production of Purcell's *King Arthur*?

Morris: Well, it's two things specifically. May Pole dances are often Morris dances. Morris dancing includes May Pole dancing. I like the idea that it's a Morris dance. The other thing is that it's in the exact palindrome of that piece. Exactly. It's not fake when they undo the ribbons. It is exactly in the middle



King Arthur (2006). (Photo: Tom Brazil)

because it's a passacaglia, if the rhythm works out.

The dancers wanted to kill me because if one person fucks up, everybody's . . . So we practiced without the ribbons. We did it a whole bunch of different ways. Then, in rehearsal, I said, "Take the ribbons," and everybody panicked. There was really no safety net to do that dance, which I love.

If you do any combination, step-hop and hop-step, you are treading on someone's ethnic toes. It's, "Oh, sorry." I have a big, big knowledge of the catalogue of these dances and the styles of them. Even if it's a hasapiko, or a horo, I know it well enough so I don't have to work it out.

There's a dance in *King Arthur* that takes place in front of the curtain that's in two quadrilles. It's a bourrée, an old French bourrée. It looks like a contra dance, but it's not. And there's a pretty direct quote from old Provençal dance. You hold hands. You're holding a basket or belts or hands or arms. That's already something.

BR: Your *Socrates* to music by Erik Satie for

voice and piano. You told me it's hardly been done. This Chicago performance is only the third one. There's a lot to understand about it.

Morris: That's what I love. It's a concert for adults. Nobody does that. I like children too; they would like *Socrates*. It takes watching and listening. It takes some responsibility.

BR: What about the supertitles? If you look up, you can't watch the dancing.

Morris: It depends on where you're sitting, and you can ignore them. I've never done it before. Of course, why would anyone do that? Why would you have supertitles for a dance? It's ridiculous.

BR: The words are important: the Platonic Dialogues.

Morris: Even if they know Satie, they don't know this piece of music, and not one line in it repeats. There are no repeats, nothing repeats. Some words repeat, you know, "the." The text is very important, or why would you set it to music? Since it doesn't repeat, it doesn't have a romantic payoff. It's a line of text that goes off into the future.

Occasionally, a phrase will repeat, but the music never repeats exactly. There are melodic themes that repeat, a bar will repeat. People hear this music as repetitive and it's very much not. It's hard to sing because it sweeps high and low. Even though it's "climaxless," it's a big, big tessitura. It sounds so simple, but the singer comes in at any time on any pitch. It's not 5, 6, 7, 8 tonic. The piano system and the vocal system are stacked, but they're not closely related.

There is a simple device in the second movement, "The River Dance." It only goes from left to right, and one reads from left to right, so it goes like that if you choose. I watch it now to "proofread" it. I like that you can do that if you want to.

In March we're doing some concerts in my building, [in the James and Martha Duffy Performance Space] that seats 140 people. You're lucky to get in. We are not advertising it really. The program is the two recent pieces, *The Muir*, and *Petrichor*, and then the world premiere of *Festival Dance* to music by Hummel.

BR: Who?

Morris: Johann Nepomuk Hummel. If Beethoven hadn't lived, he would be the only composer you've heard of from that period. As a child he was a student of Mozart's, and he was a very great piano virtuoso, defined piano technique for everybody, and was a famous composer in the early nineteenth century. Beethoven loved him. He was hugely popular and wrote a lot of music. There's only one famous piece, his Trumpet Concerto, which every trumpeter knows. The music prefigures Schubert harmonically. It's really wonderful and kind of corny, very Czech. It's very sort of Bohemian. You know I love that. There's a very hard piano part and not so hard violin and cello parts.

BR: Are you a musician?

Morris: Yes.

BR: Do you play an instrument?

Morris: No. That's a different question. I read music. I know music. I deal in music.

BR: There's no question that you are bringing to audiences music that never gets airtime.



Socrates. (Photo: Tom Brazil)

Morris: The Villa Lobos [for *Petrichor*], no one's ever heard it.

BR: The Beethoven songs for *The Muir* . . .

Morris: People either know them or they don't. They are scoffed at by a lot of music snobs.

BR: In one of my notes from last night's concert, I just wrote, "Lieder!" with an exclamation point.

Morris: Beethoven wrote two hundred song settings, and so did Haydn, so did Pleyel. It was a publicity thing, but people complained that Beethoven just did it for the money or something. He was in constant communication with the publisher, and the songs were meant to be played at home, sung at home. He didn't speak English, but he really got the essence of them. There's a beautiful arrangement of "God Save the King" and "Auld Lang Syne," and songs that everybody knows.

BR: You've become a curator of music.

Morris: Yes, music that people don't get a chance to hear is something I love partly because I know so much music and am so sick of seeing dances to the same old tired music. I'm particularly proud that sometimes the only way you can hear a piece of music is to come to my show. Because I work in music, I have a music audience, which is, I don't have to tell you, way bigger than the dance audience.

BR: You said in an interview once that you and your company could just as easily be at a music festival as at a dance festival.

Morris: We are. I work every summer now at Tanglewood. I'm on the faculty. I coach singers and string quartets. We perform with the fellows and I do new work there.

BR: You make it easy to listen to difficult music.

Morris: Well, "difficult" music. People are scared of the Bartok string quartet, the Fourth String Quartet from 1925 that I choreographed. "Oohh, scary modern music." What the hell? I know what they mean, but it's also, "Listen to this!" The Ives Piano Trio, which people are scared of. That's another.

BR: And your choreography comes from this?

Morris: I just started reading *Apollo's Angels* – finally. Well, I read the last chapter because everybody was fighting about it. That's all anybody's read.

BR: Is ballet dead?

Morris: No, it's fine. A lot of it is crap, but that doesn't mean it's dead.

BR: Is the author Jennifer Homans just being a provocateur?

Morris: On life support isn't the same as dead, and she is being a provocateur. She talks about court spectacles, as we all know, as being enactments of the movement of the spheres or geometric ideas. She talks about the choreography tracing out patterns and making formations. That's what I do and I'm not dead. That's what every choreographer I know does, well or not. It's, "Oh, of course, it goes like this. Of course, I did research. Of course, I thought about this for years. Of course, I know what the words are that the people are singing. Of course, I know the history of everything." Or why would you even start?

My work always comes from music. Period. That is it. That's what starts me thinking. But there's a million contrasting and complementing ideas and notions and concepts and sort of theories that I'm working on as I make the dance, but they are not that interesting. They're certainly not good for feeding the program notes so that everybody can . . . When I do a piece at a ballet company, they try to put descriptive notes in the program with things like "in this romantic and beautiful pas de deux, it's a little bit saucy and then he rejects her. . . ." No, it's not.

BR: Bill T. Jones does endless notes.

Morris: First of all, never do that. So does Kylián. So does Forsythe. Everybody wants to be behind the scenes.

At the University of Chicago, I screened a film to this class about collaborations. It was musicians and other people. It shows my company and me working with Yo-Yo Ma: *Falling Down Stairs*, to the Bach Cello Suite. The first half is us talking about and actually working on it, and the second half is the dance as it ended up.



The Muir. (Photo: Tom Brazil)

There's a thing at the beginning where I explain to Yo-Yo how I'm making up a particular part by dividing the body of the prelude because it's the introduction to the piece. There's a first statement and then a recap at the end. In the middle, it's not really developed. There is just certain noodling around within the language of what the piece is going to be musically.

I had fifteen people in the dance, so I divided it, it must have been seventy-five bars because each person dances for five measures. To make it not about my notions, I made it alphabetical to the last name of the people in the original cast. When you're watching it, it's unpredictable, interesting, wonderful. Now when other people do it, they learn the part. It's not re-alphabetized. It's now the text of the dance.

When you watch the dance, you don't care about any of this. It's not interesting. Now I sort of regret having explained it. Someone might say, "Oh, in this part where you do the five bars," but you only know that because I

told you. It helps you think you understand that an artist is the same as you and me: "Oh, I think like that. I could do that too." No, you can't. Don't even bother. It's an interesting puzzle, but that's all it is, like a Sudoku.

It's just a technique to generate dance material, like the repeats: they do it like this and then the repeat has the same text but they do it like that. It's the way a composer or any other artist would organize the fundamental materials of the piece they're making.

The "creative process" is another term I hate. That's what I do all the time. In my free time, I'm listening to music and reading books and going to shows and cooking and it's all the same thing. I just try not to make up the same dance twice.

BR: How did you approach the Satie?

Morris: I worked on the Satie for one year amid much touring and stuff in between. I couldn't find a way to make a dance in the language that satisfied me. It was a test for me just to come up with something that wasn't like watching paint dry, that wasn't a boring

thing because the music to me is not at all boring.

BR: You have some new dancers.

Morris: Three gentlemen left the stage this last summer: David Leventhal, Craig Biesecker, and Bradon McDonald. They wanted to quit when they can still dance well. Hooray for them! It's just a coincidence that they all left at the same time. I have a couple of women who will be leaving soon, so I'm having big auditions.

David is still guesting with us a little bit, and he is now running the Dance for Parkinson's program at my building. It's not therapy. It's a dance class that's all Parkinson's people.

It started with David and John Higgenbotham, who still dances with me. The Brooklyn Parkinson's group asked if we would send someone to them to teach classes. We said, "Well, no, send them to us." It started out an hour a month for five or six people and their, another word I hate, caregivers. Their companions. Now, it's one or two times a week with sixty people in two different studios.

Here's what happens. These people come in at various levels of whatever disability. They kind of shuffle in or not, and they walk out different. It's like a car wash. They come out different people and it's hugely successful. Look it up on my website. There is some footage that will make you weep. A huge fabulous thing: it's just folk dance for PD.

BR: Fascinating. I'll check it out. I want to go back to music. Do you ever just listen to music and not think anything at all?

Morris: Always.

BR: Always?

Morris: Yes. I don't see dances in my head when I listen to music. I hear music. I go to the opera, to chamber music, to concerts. I listen to music all the time. And it's not, "Oh, I have to write the dance down right now." Not at all. The opposite.

Occasionally, I'll might think, "Oh, that'll make a good dance." But I don't see a dance. I just think it's good music for a dance. A perfect example is the Villa Lobos Quartet for *Pet-*

richor. I wanted a string quartet because I'm overtaxing my pianist, Colin Fowler. He's an obviously great pianist. He's been around just a couple of years. He's a Juilliard organ grad, so, on the piano, he can read a full orchestra score and play the germane parts. He plays harpsichord. When I conduct *Dido and Aeneas*, he's my harpsichord and continuo player. He's very versatile with choral direction.

I was too reliant on piano music, which I love, and of course it's easier to tour with. The new Hummel piece is super-difficult virtuoso piano. It's really hard, so I wanted to do a string quartet. I've done many. I knew I wanted a string quartet and all women for the new dance.

BR: Would you call that piece "climaxless"?

Morris: What? The Villa Lobos? No. I would not. It's not obviously climax-full and the payoff is unlike a lot of pieces of music and choreography. There are big shifts that happened, but it's not "ta-DAH!" It's not the human pyramid.

I didn't want classical music specifically. I didn't want Mozart or Haydn string quartets. I looked at later music. I just started listening to string quartets; I own a lot of them. I did not know what I was looking for. I wondered if I would be interested in the overchoreographed Ravel and Debussy quartets. They're beautiful. I like them. But no.

Then I realized that almost all modernist string quartets reminded me – at least in the repertory of a dance company, and there aren't a lot of them – of Bartok, which had these expanded techniques. The Bartok is in Webern, in the Britten string quartets, and in everybody who wrote a string quartet after the 1920s, and even before that. These pizzicati and special techniques, it all reminds people of modern music.

Milhaud's string quartets, no. Grieg wrote some beautiful quartets. Brahms is too long-winded, and it is earlier than I wanted. Shostakovich is fine, but no. I looked for about six months listening to string quartets just about every day. I was close to a Grieg one actually. And I included trios and quintets at



Petrichor. (Photo: Tom Brazil)

one point because nothing made a dance for me.

I ended up with the seventeen string quartets of Villa Lobos. They're all wonderful and a little bit French-sounding because he was writing in France. It's not just violin accompanied by the strings. It's full of equal parts, rhythmically fascinating, difficult, and texturally complicated and interesting. Actually, with Villa Lobos the choice was between a couple of them. I chose the second one because I couldn't imagine a dance to it.

BR: It's not an easy piece of music.

Morris: Not at all. It's partly hard because no one's ever heard it before. People aren't used to his language, a very beautiful complicated Brazilian language.

BR: For *Mozart Dances*, why those three piano pieces?

Morris: Originally, I was thinking of three different concertos for different solo instruments. Like horn, clarinet, piano, or double piano or violin, but I decided to have a full piano immersion because we did it first with Emanuel Ax and Yoko Miyazaki, his wife and partner.

The last one, No. 27, was in response to the request to use music from the last year of Mozart's life. What's the one that's super-famous? No. 26 I think. This one is not famous. In fact, some people don't find it rich enough because of the very simple tune that the last movement's variations are based on, which was one of the last songs he wrote before he died.

It was part of his Masonic music. He went very deep and weird before he died. He was writing music for his temple. It's a little song



Mozart Dances (2007). (Tom Brazil)

about spring, meaning the spring of man. It's this little "la la la la la a la di da" kind of thing. But it's so beautifully treated. I had to convince Louis Langrée, who runs Mostly Mozart, where we premiered it, that it was a wonderful piece of music. Manny Ax loved it. That wasn't a problem.

The first one, No. 11, I chose because it's early and very simple-seeming and gorgeous and nobody really knows this. Then for the middle, I was going to do the double-piano concerto. But every time I listened to it, I would warm up by listening to the sonata. Then, I played the slow movement of the Double Sonata for everyone. "Listen to this, it's unbelievable." That's how that came to be.

The evening goes out from the middle – like the Bartok Fourth String Quartet, which is in five movements. In a certain way, it's the slow movement of the Sonata that goes out to the Allegros at both ends of the piece. I decided I wanted a women's dance, then a men's dance, but that could have gone either way. I just choose that.

In Champaign, Illinois, where we're going after Chicago, we'll do a "cheaper" touring ver-

sion of the show. That's partly why I chose the No. 11 piano concerto because Mozart wrote a string quartet version of it. We are doing it as a dance called 11, then the Double Sonata, and then Lou Harrison's *Grand Duo* instead of No. 27, which is the only piece that needs a full orchestra. It's a really good program. We've done it a lot. If it can't be the full Mozart evening, then it's something else. They were meant to stand alone, those Mozart pieces.

BR: I recently read a review of *Nixon in China*. I thought the writer went to a different show than the one I saw. The ballet, I thought the whole thing was a dream sequence. But this reviewer wrote that the dignitaries are actually there, watching a revolutionary ballet.

Morris: It's both. The fact that the ballet is pointing this way and the audience is pointing that way is just to make it so we can see everybody. It's like cubism. Then, it falls apart and turns into the Cultural Revolution.

The ballet *Red Detachment of Women* is a product of the Cultural Revolution there, of course. So, they're watching it and they're in it. The transformation takes place when the curtain

closes. There's a big storm: "Come over here and help." It's that guy from the ballet. "Okay, just this once." I think it's funny.

BR: They revived *Red Detachment of Women* for the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

Morris: I know. It's playing all over. People love these things. I think young people see it as this wacky history. Old people would rather kill themselves, if they're still alive.

I love those dances but you weren't supposed to for a while. In rehearsal, Peter Sellars [the director of *Nixon in China*] started talking about the Cultural Revolution and these officially approved ballets and operas. I was worried because I've heard this story before. Then he said this incredible thing, that they are great, fascinating pieces of art.

I thought that when I saw *Red Detachment of Women* on TV when I was fifteen or sixteen. I loved it. I used moves that I imagined remembering from that because back then you didn't record anything. When they asked me to choreograph *Nixon in China - Red Detachment*

of Women - I said of course I would, but I never looked at the original. I did it from my teen memory, even though there are ten people in my dance, instead of two hundred.

BR: I want to ask you about a word that I have a problem with: musicality. It's the Mark Morris Critics' Catch-Phrase Word. Your work isn't any more musical than it's poetic or philosophical or fun. What do you think people mean when they say that you are musical?

Morris: Of course, the term musical used to be a secret code for homosexual. "Oh, he's so musical." So sensitive. Artistic. That's what it meant. If that's what it still means, I don't care, but it's nobody's business.

The complimentary part of it is that I know about music and I use music knowledgeably. My work is much more popular with musicians than it is with dancers. The corny thing that dancers would never say about a piece of music, musicians say all the time as a compliment about dance: "It was like looking at the score. It was like seeing the music brought to life before me." Dancers can't say that because



Nixon in China (1987). (Photo: Tom Brazil)



O Rangasayee, 1984, (Photo: Tom Brazil)

that's too obvious or stupid or old-fashioned. "Music visualization" is not an insult at all to me.

Music visualization [laughs], that's what I do. You know: "I don't know anything about dancing but when I watch this, I feel like I'm experiencing the music in another way." I get that from musicians all the time. They just can't believe it: "Oh my God. You can read the music?"

John Eliot Gardiner, whom I met recently, said, "I've never seen the hemiola in a dance before." If you're trying to stump me, I use the hemiola at work fifty times every day, because my dances are rhythmically more accurate and astute than any company's I know, except maybe the Ballet Nacional de Senegal or something. My dancers are as rhythmically competent and engaged and educated as South Indian dancers or African dancers are. No ballet company is capable of doing what my company does.

I'm a big fan of South Indian dance. Of all Indian dance, it's just that I go to the South. I have friends who are Odissi dancers but they live in Bangalore. As a fan, I've known Indian

music for the last thirty years. I've been a big fan of Carnatic music. It took me seven or ten years to be able to hear it, to tell that somebody was good at improvising, if it made sense musically. Before, it was just gorgeous sound to me. Now I can understand it, same with the dances.

In Indian dance, you would never be off rhythm or out of tune. You would never fail to tell the story that's being sung. Why would you do the opposite? Why do you have to prove that you're independent? It doesn't mean, when everybody's improvising including the mridangam [drum], that I can't find a downbeat. Then the old ladies in the audience all go, "There it is. Yes. There. Oh, finally." So, I'm pretty good, but I still have to follow it.

A kathak concert might start: "la di da, ricky ta ta . . ." Then it gets so hard that it's like tripping. It takes me to the limit of what I can do. Then I'm lost. It's not that it's chaos; it's that it's over my head. It's too hard for me.

BR: But there are parts in your choreography where all of a sudden I'm lost. I can't follow anything and it just goes into this other dimension. That's good. Something to work on.

Let me ask: Will you ever dance again?

Morris: I dance in *The Hard Nut* and I will dance some more. It will happen.

BR: Because you are such a beautiful dancer.

Morris: I'm a really good dancer, in fact. I know that.

BR: Sybil Shearer was dancing in her eighties. I'm sure I'm not alone in wanting to see you dance again.

Morris: I'm working on it. I take class and stuff, and I'm doing all right.

BR: I would love to talk to you again and hear what you think about other choreographers. That would be a good one.

Morris: I think they should all keep making up dances. There aren't many of us. "Best wishes everybody," that's what I say.