

Mark Morris: Student and Teacher

Lauren Grant

BR: Which of your teachers influenced you?

Mark Morris: My first dance teacher was Verla Flowers. She was a genius of certain skills. She was very magnanimous, maternal, and strict in a loose, crazy-woman way.

Another very important teacher for me was a famous jotoero in Spain named Pedro Azorín, who you should look up because he's just unbelievable. He died a while ago, but he was the most famous jotoero ever. He was a singer, dancer, and choreographer, and championed the jota from Aragon. When I changed my focus over from flamenco, I ended up being fully focused on jota. There's no career there, but it was thrilling.

He was a gorgeous teacher, and funny, with a very strong Aragonese accent. His class was him, playing castanets and singing – he sang jotas – singing loud in a little studio with twenty people playing castanets really loud. It was just amazing.

A great teacher from whom I learned an enormous amount, most of which was wrong – and I disagree with him hugely – was Perry Brunson. He was very well reputed and feared, and he was insane. I learned from him about dancing with music. When he moved to Seattle with the First Chamber Dance Company, I studied with him very intensely for a while. That's when my legs got gigantic, I got Achilles tendinitis, and had to have a knee aspirated. I couldn't point my feet.

It was so tense and so hard – *wrong* hard. He was so cruel and senseless. He made you do stuff that was very dangerous. It was all, "Do this because I said so." He had a great understanding of music and the looks of things, but

Lauren Grant, a member of the Mark Morris Dance Group since 1996, received a 2015 Bessie (a New York Dance and Performance Award) for her sustained achievement in performance.

everyone who studied with him, at least when I did, had the same gigantic thighs and very tight ugly feet, and beautiful port de bras and musical consciousness, extreme music awareness.

Marjorie Mussman was a very important teacher to me from when I was fifteen until she died. She basically cured me of Perry Brunson, technically.

BR: Did a live accompanist play for your classes when you were a student?

Morris: Verla sometimes played the piano for her own class; sometimes, but it was mostly recordings. Music for the Spanish classes at her school was all records. Perry's and all the classes I took at First Chamber were pretty much with live music. That's where I met accompanist Harriet Cavalli, who always played for him.

Marjorie's husband, John Hancock, played for her classes. He was great in a way. Very musical (whatever that means), and he played only his own music; he was improvising and writing his own stuff all the time, whereas Harriet who played for Perry only played from music scores – stacks of scores. She played nothing from memory. She could, but she didn't. She would play *Swan Lake* for rehearsals; she was a real *ballet* accompanist. Didn't improvise at all. She hated improvising. She wouldn't do it. And John *only* did.

BR: When did you start teaching?

Morris: During the time when I was studying with Verla I began teaching my first classes in her school. I was very young, around thirteen or fourteen, and taught what I had just learned: beginning Spanish dance, Sevillanas. At sixteen, I got a paying job teaching a beginning Spanish dance at a community center once a week. (That day stands out in my memory. When I came home to give the announcement to my family, nobody was there because my father had just died.)

Later, when I was eighteen or so, I started teaching Croatian dance. In the folk dance community, you were always teaching somebody something: "Here, learn this step, you have to do this." I was always teaching,

whether it was a formal class or just helping Koleda dancers learn something they needed to know. In New York, I periodically taught open ballet classes. I studied with Marjorie Mussman and Jocelyn Lorenz. When they were off, I taught for them. As a dancer, I was known, so I had a following because people knew me from class and from shows.

BR: Are parts of your class modeled on the structure or principles from any of your former teachers?

Morris: My ballet class was, and still is, very Marjorie Mussman based. But in the early days of teaching my company I modeled my class on Hannah Kahn's. She was a great, fabulous teacher. Hannah taught a modern dance class that was at the barre as long as a ballet class. It was very complicated with lots of parallel and torso stuff, and really difficult rhythms. Her class was really intense, very intellectual, fun, satisfying – very musical. So, my modern class had a lot of barre work. I liked using a barre because everybody took ballet class. It was really rhythmic, really complicated.

BR: How has your class evolved?

Morris: When I moved to Brussels my company was only a few years old. The company historically dates from 1980, but it wasn't really until 1984-1985 when we were recognized and I was getting work. It was still basically the original dancers. Then, four or five years later, the huge sea change: we moved to Brussels. That's when I codified my class more.

I suddenly had twenty-four dancers. I taught a two-hour company class every day – which was still very complicated rhythmically – long, complicated, ornate combinations. That's when Linda Dowdell was playing for me. She could do those rhythms. She was good at playing for class and improvising.

But I hardly do such complicated rhythms in class anymore because most accompanists can't play them very reliably. That's why I loved Ethan Iverson [former MMDG music director and now pianist for the jazz trio The Bad Plus] as an accompanist. He could do that. Loved him for class. But most pianists, who are ill-

equipped to play for class, just go by downbeats. There's no notice of whether the music is in a *three* or a *two* or a *six*.

For example, I can't stand it when pianists go into a *6/8* when they're playing *3/4*. Since a *6/8* is a *six*, it can be divided into *threes* or *twos*: one-two-three, four-five-six versus one-two, three-four, five-six. When an accompanist plays a *6/8*, the triple meter waltz that I want becomes a *two*. A waltz – one-two-three, one-two-three – is circular, and a *two* is linear. A *three* has a heavier area.

BR: How does the meter change the nature of the movement?

Morris: It should make a difference whether I do a combination in a *duple* versus a *triple* meter. People like dancing in a *three* because it's more fun, more physically natural. Yesterday I began with the *petit allegro* in a *two* and then I changed the tempo slightly and did it in a *three* because it changes the experience of the step. There's air time in a *three*.

BR: Your integration of musical elements in class grooms your dancers in rhythm, quality, and phrasing. Can you give an example of one of your exercises?

Morris: This one famous combination of mine just touches off in first and fifth positions to get action through the whole phrase instead of stopping and starting, which is what dancing has become, and not just the ballet industry: Hip-hop and voguing from the olden days are posing and freezing, as are many of these techniques.

I'm generalizing, of course, because there's great fluidity in certain kinds of street dancing. How about The Rockettes? They are fabulous at sequencing, but some choreographers just have them doing stop-action posing. I also see that in a lot of contemporary ballet. They just stop.

When I work with ballet companies I try to teach people how to walk and stop on one leg instead of *step and then tap your foot into B+*. Everybody does that – *step, smash* – with their knees together: *walk, walk, step, touch*. But I want *walk, walk, walk, walk*, and then go into the next thing. Dancers learn material in bits



Lauren Grant teaching at a Mark Morris Dance Center open house. (Photo: Johan Henckens, MMDG)

and put a full stop on everything, usually several within a phrase: *tombé pas de bourrée, STOP. Pirouette, STOP*. Everything stops. It's photographable. I don't like that.

BR: So the benefit of training your own company every day is that you can develop the kind of dancers with whom you would like to work?

Morris: I want to work with people who can do things specifically. It's much more complicated to have a pointed, flexed, relaxed, sickled, dangling, or clenched foot than it is to just point your foot or not. I use all those options in my work, but people think that in modern dance no one articulates their feet. Well, they

don't. But in my company, we do, as well as our hands, elbows, and necks, too.

When I am commissioned to make dances for ballet companies, I see the dancers take class. Because of how they're taught as well as what is valued in those classes, there's rhythmic chaos. Everyone dances as soloists rather than practicing dancing together.

In general, people stop studying when they get a job in a ballet company, or in an orchestra. I find that's not true of singers, most pianists, and certain dancers I know. You *take* class, but you also take class to *learn*. You train and study. You don't just practice. That's what I like.