THE ROUTLEDGE DANCE STUDIES READER

Alexandra Carter
One of the things that has endeared Mark Morris to his audience is the emphatically human look of his company. In the troupe’s early days, the women tended to be large — the ‘girls’ basketball team’, someone commented at a 1983 concert — and the men small. In other words, they looked more like regular people than like a dance company, where size differences between the sexes are greater than the human norm. But what is most striking about the lineup of dancers who have passed through the Morris company is simply the physical variety within the group. Some of the women are large, and have discernibly female bodies. Others are tiny. One of the men, Guillermo Resto, looks like a wrestler; others are delicately built. One man is grey-haired, another balding. Two have dreadlocks. Morris’s dancers are also older than the average American dancer. For most of the company’s existence, the majority of its members have been over thirty. And they are a vivid ethnic assortment. No one wears glasses onstage, but otherwise they look a lot like the crowd one might meet at the bank or the grocery store.

They also move like human beings. On occasion they perform the kind of ‘ordinary movement’ — plain walking, sitting down in a chair — that was introduced into dance in the sixties by the Judson Dance Theater. For the most part, however, what they do is not ordinary movement but a carefully designed choreography that stresses qualities we think of as ordinary, such as weight and effort. Weight above all. ‘Gravity is our friend,’ Morris said to an interviewer in 1989. ‘At least, we modern dancers like it.’ This love of gravity is one of the things that make people, when they look at his work, think of the early modern dancers, such as Isadora Duncan, who reintroduced weight into concert dancing at the turn of the century. Morris’s dancers tend to stand in demi-plié (on slightly bent knees), with their bare feet flat on the floor. They look solid; you can feel their weight in your mind. And often, when they jump, they don’t cushion the landing by bringing the foot down in stages (ball, then heel). They land with a thud.

Indeed, they are always thudding, falling, smacking the floor. In Gloria
(1981), the prayer-for-mercy section begins with a man crashing onto the stage from somewhere high in the wings, as if he had been dropped down by a backhoe. In Dido and Aeneas (1989), when the wicked Sorceress (played by Morris) comes running onstage along a balustrade, her feet smack the wood loudly with each step. A reviewer once commented that Morris used his feet as if they were webbed, a remark that reportedly annoyed him very much but which had some justice. Flesh against hardness—he loves this sound.

In insisting on the relationship of the body to the floor, Morris is telling not just a hard truth—the earth is beneath us, we’re mortal—but a delicate truth, about what the body is. Never has flesh seemed more human than when, in Morris’s dances, we hear it come up against the unyielding floor. In Behemoth (1990), his most terrifying work, he turns the screw even tighter: a lone dancer, lying on his back, moves slowly upstage by pushing himself with his feet, and the traction of his sweaty back against the floor makes a low moaning sound. We cannot see the man’s face; we only hear this moan, the report of what is tender and alive against what is hard and cold.

What Morris is interested in is exposure, and this helps to explain another curiosity of his choreography, his love of the buttocks. ‘People have always said we have big butts,’ he commented to Christine Temin of the Boston Globe in 1989. ‘We do have big butts.’ As it happens, only a few of the dancers (including Morris) have big butts—that is, normal butts, not dancer-thin—but what all of them have is choreography that emphasizes the buttocks. Demi-plié, to begin with, tends to push the buttocks out. (According to company wisdom, Morris’s heavy use of demi-plié actually increases the size of the buttocks.) Beyond that, Morris is constantly showing the buttocks. In the Waltz of the Flowers in The Hard Nut, Morris’s 1991 version of The Nutcracker, seven dancers lie down on their backs with their heads to us and execute a half-somersault, so that we look directly at their back ends—seven of them, all in a row, blandly greeting the audience: an image all the more remarkable in that these people are supposed to be flowers. They repeat the manoeuvre four times, lest we miss the point. The costumes aid in the exposure. In a number of Morris’s early pieces, what the dancers wore was simply underwear: jockey shorts, boxers, jogging bras. Elsewhere too, the costumes he has favoured—smocks that end at the crotch, tights and jumpsuits that end at mid-thigh, like long-line girdles—tend to be revealing.

‘I love to see their butts,’ says Morris. That love is not erotic, or not mostly. If it were, their buttocks would look sexier and presumably the men’s buttocks would be more in evidence than the women’s, which they are not. No, what he is after is the thing that is underneath, both literally and metaphorically. The buttocks are an innocent, hardworking part of the body—soft and round, the seat of humility, the place that gets kicked. To Morris they seem to represent something modest and tender and unacknowledged, the body’s vulnerability. At the same time, what they represent in dance terms is the body’s dignity, for they are the motor of action: they contain the
pelvis, from which the movement originates. So in both senses the buttocks harbour a fundamental truth, and one that in Morris's eyes is validated by the fact that it requires exposure. For him, truth is always hard to find. Veils have to be dropped. Once, describing to a journalist why he loved conducting choreographic workshops, he said, 'It's like we all pull our pants down' — a telling metaphor. In one of his dances, Striptease (1986), the performers do pull their pants down.

And it's not just the buttocks he is interested in. He also makes heavy use of the crotch. In his L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato (1988), when the vocal text speaks of a goddess giving birth, three women lie down on the floor and spread their legs. In his L'oezy (1985), we see a woman in baby-doll pyjamas on all fours, butt out, with her back to us — a startling sight. In Gloria, in the middle of a slow, plangent, here-is-my-soul passage, the dancers bend down and, with one arm in front and one behind, clasp their hands at their crotches. The effect is not at all sexy. This is not the crotch grabbing of rock singers ('Look what I have here') or of alley mime ('Screw you'). On the contrary, there is often a note of pain — the dancers in Gloria look as though they are hanging on to their crotches for dear life. Elsewhere, the point, again, is simply exposure: something private being revealed, something inside being forced out.

Another way Morris exposes the body is by refusing to refine effort out of his choreography. Most dance is designed, and cast, in such a way that however difficult the steps, they can be executed with a look of ease. Indeed, this is one of the great pleasures of watching dance: to see something so hard be done, it seems, so effortlessly. Morris's logic is the opposite. He gives the dancers steps that cannot be performed with a look of ease — turns so hard-flung that they can't be finished neatly, steps that must be completed in one count when, to be done without rush, they need two, stretchings and reachings that push the dancers beyond any control over their appearance. 'In a lot of the movement,' says Donald Mouton, who danced with the company for nine years, 'your job is to push one extremity as far as you possibly can. It's not just step right, step left. You have to bring your left leg all the way around until you can't go any farther, so you have to go to the next place. It's not a decorative thing at all.'

On the contrary, it is a struggle. Toward the end of The Hard Nut Morris has about half the cast of the ballet come onstage to do pirouettes à la seconde. Pirouette à la seconde is a virtuoso ballet step in which the dancer — almost always a man (Baryshnikov was famous for this step) — sticks one leg out at a 90-degree angle to the body and then performs a pumping turn in place. The more turns, the more spectacular the step: the dancer looks like a pneumatic drill. But the extended leg must be kept absolutely straight and at 90 degrees, and the dancer's balance must not waver. For this reason, there is usually some allowance in the choreography for the dancer to end the pirouette when he chooses (that is, before he starts to fall over). Furthermore, the
pirouette à la seconde is normally done solo; if two people tried to do it together, they would tend to go out of unison and thus rob the step of its look of focused perfection. Morris, however, has not just one or two people but ten people – none of them professional ballet dancers, many of them struggling to keep the leg from drooping – perform pirouettes à la seconde in unison, with no allowance for ending early. The effect, and the goal, is not a look of perfection but one of good-humoured effort. It is like watching ten people trying to climb a flagpole simultaneously. In other pieces the dancers show a kind of blunt purposefulness that, combined with the kind of steps they perform, makes them seem like children in a Christmas pageant. They are trying to do their job, and that’s all. No matter how proficient the company has become, they have never lost this look of innocence.

Morris often underlines the quality of effort by casting his dancers against type, against ease. ‘I remember, when he gave us a step in rehearsal,’ Mouton says, ‘and we all did it, if he said to you, “That’s a natural for you”, that meant you weren’t going to get to do it.’ Morris doesn’t always cast against type, but he does it often, and deliberately, ‘so they can’t do imitations of themselves,’ as he once explained in an interview.

What he is trying to get at through all this exposure can be seen in his 1982 New Love Song Waltzes, a work that became a big audience favourite. Set to Brahms’s song cycle Neue Liebeslieder, the piece is a love dance, but whereas most love dances are transfiguring, moulding the human form into longer lines, sweeter harmonies, as if love naturally made us superhuman, New Love Song Waltzes tells the opposite story: love makes the dancers human.

The opening is thrilling. As the lights go up, we see a single woman, Ruth Davidson, crouching at the back of the stage. She runs toward us, jumps into demi-plié, leaps upward, executes a full turn in the air, her skirt flying up meanwhile to show her strong thighs, and then lands, bam, in demi-plié, facing us straight on. This is an explosive announcement, and what it announces is what the vocal text is telling us at that moment: ‘Abandon hope of rescue, O heart, / when you venture on the sea of love.’ It is a declaration, in bodily terms, of the violence of love and the sheer, exposing effort love puts us through: how it turns our heads, lifts our skirts, makes us tear around.

The rest of the piece follows in the same vein. There are fifteen sections – a ring dance, a cascade dance, an exploding down-the-middle-of-the-stage dance, and so on – each with a lesson about love. But in all of them, the force of love is to make the dancers struggle. They hang by their legs from each other’s necks. They haul each other around by the armpits. They fall, and others step over them. At other times they don’t so much struggle as simply move with utter bluntness. They take hard little hops; they stoop; they squat; they sit on each other’s arms.
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In what is always the audience’s favourite section, the dancers, in pairs, take to the floor and embrace, but not in a poetic manner. They lie smack on top of each other, tangling their legs together, letting their skirts hike up, showing us the insides of their thighs. Looking at them, we can feel the actual heaviness of another human body, the warmth of the flesh, the burden of it. They feel the burden too, and as the dance proceeds, the dancers get up one by one and move over into other pairs of arms. They are always restive, always searching.

New Love Song Waltzes, like A Midsummer Night’s Dream, is about love not as something that two people feel for each other and can therefore resolve – this may be the only love dance in the world that contains no partnered duet – but as something that one person, or all humanity, feels: love as a goad, a yearning, changeable in its object but not in its force. This is an extension of Morris’s concern with human vulnerability, and the voice of that vulnerability is the body. Somebody trying with all his might to hook himself onto somebody else by a body part that can’t hold him, and in the process showing his bulging tendons, his clamped gluteals: that, for Morris, is romantic love, its comedy and its sorrow.

It is no accident that New Love Song Waltzes is set to vocal music. Since 1980, half of Morris’s entire repertory has been set to vocal music – an extraordinary percentage. There are probably a number of reasons for this, but according to him, the main reason is that singing comes out of the body: ‘When you have a person reading music and playing the violin, you have the sound of that, but it’s one generation removed from the body. Singing is like dancing. It’s the body, the body in the world, with nothing in between, no instrument between.’ The closer something is to the body, the more interesting it is to him. And of course the voice comes from inside the body – the lungs, the throat, the mouth – and sounds like it: liquid, fleshly, urgent. It too is a private part.

This intensely visceral idea of dance is something for which there are obvious sources in Morris’s early life. Both the main styles of dancing in which he was trained as a boy, flamenco and Balkan folk dance, are stamping styles. They give an oral report of the rhythm, not just a visual report, and it was from them that Morris learned to love the sound of the foot coming down on the floor. Folk dance – and, in particular, the Koleda Folk Ensemble, a commune-like troupe with whom Morris performed as a teenager – is also the obvious model for effort in dancing, for the image of dance as a bunch of regular people trying to do something together. Indeed, the Morris company in their pirouettes à la seconde in The Hard Nut look like a flashback to Koleda: a big group, a hard step, a good will. Another possible model is the annual recitals staged by Verla Flowers, Morris’s first dance teacher. In those recitals every child got a part – got to be a cowboy or a sugar plum – and worked hard at it. As for the love of vocal music, Morris grew up on singing. He came by it all naturally.
But for the particular way that the Morris troupe looks - human, unglamorized, naked almost - there is another source, the troupe itself. As with all dance companies, what they are onstage is something like what they are offstage, and what they are offstage is unusually unassuming and comradely. The troupe began as a group of friends, and though some of those people have since departed and been replaced by people hired from auditions, they are still a group of friends. Of course there is competition within the group, and there are resentments over who gets what role. Rehearsal is not democratic; Morris says what he wants, and the dancers do it. But there is a spirit of common cause. According to Morris, the reason he chose the dancers he did for his early company was not just that they were friends: 'They were learning how to dance at the same time that I was learning how to choreograph. It happened at the same time.' That is one of the reasons that over the years the dancers have tended to be older. Simply, they are his age, because they started out with him. In turn, the fact that they are close to him in age makes the troupe more democratic. 'Nothing in this company is ever mandatory,' says Tina Fehlandt, one of Morris's original dancers, 'and when it is, I'm gone.' Of course, some things, if not mandatory, are strongly recommended, and the troupe today is not as democratic as when they were starting out. Still, the feeling of fellowship is strong. Within two salary levels, based on seniority, all the dancers are paid the same, and many of them are to be found at the same bar after the show, with Morris at their centre, ordering another round and keeping everybody up too late.

With this sense of equality comes a certain humility. In his troupe, Morris says, 'you can't be that selfish, and you can't be that important, because you're just not. Neither am I.' Again, his humility is not what it used to be, but it is still a philosophical conviction, and you can see it projected onstage: human bodies toiling, and toiling together.

That humility may have a darker side. Several of the older members of the troupe claim that Morris sees himself as ugly. This is not an uncommon emotion in the dance world. Having to go out night after night and show their bodies to large groups of strangers, many dancers are very sensitive about what they imagine to be their physical imperfections. And what others feel but do not say, Morris does say. He says that he felt ugly as a child. The fact that he has given himself so many grotesque roles suggests that he may also have felt ugly as an adult, a condition that, according to some of his dancers, he generalizes to them. 'He wants to show off how odd we are,' says Erin Matthiessen, another company veteran. 'He sees himself as odd and broken.'

But because this matter so closely touches their self-esteem, the dancers probably overstate the case. If Morris wanted to make the dancers look ugly, he could do so, whereas they usually look immensely appealing. What Morris is intent on is not ugliness but, again, exposure and struggle. According to Jon Mensinger, he conducts auditions on the same principle, looking
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for people who seem somewhat awkward or unconfident: 'If there isn't something about them that's a little vulnerable, they don't have a chance.' We have seen the same principle in his casting: those for whom the dance being rehearsed is a natural are the ones who won't get to do it.

For Morris, a look of mastery, of taken-for-granted achievement, is the face of false pride. 'The big thing,' he told a critic in 1989, 'is not to tell lies [. . . ] I can tell in shows when other choreographers, pieces, dancers, audiences are lying. I can tell it in my own dancers. And in myself.' According to Keith Sabado, one of Morris's most frequent corrections in rehearsal is 'You're fa--king!'

This phobic sensitivity to falseness may have something to do with being homosexual and thus having had to operate in false situations. (He has said that part of the reason he left the Eliot Feld Ballet, where he danced from 1976 to 1977, was that he 'got tired of pretending to be a straight guy in love with a ballerina'.) Presumably, it also has something to do with his family—with their high moral standards—of which this is a carryover, and with their unremitting kindness, against which this is a reaction. And of course it has to do with the times in which he grew up, the sixties and seventies. Both Morris and his company—or its older members, the ones who started out with him—show many of the incidental manners of the sixties youth culture. They are warm, informal, down-to-earth, anti-genteel.

But whatever his horror of falseness, Morris does not base his work on any claim to a restorative 'trueness', nor does he offer the kind of woolly naturalism that in the art of the sixties (and later) was so often put forward as the alternative to the fraudulence of bourgeois life. Asked about the effortfulness of his style of dancing, he answers, 'It's not effortfulness. It's non-effortlessness [. . . ] I'm not stating the opposite of something else, like, "Here, check this out, it isn't conventional beauty". The thing I'm making, I think it's beautiful. I'm not doing an "anti" anything.'

The exposed look of the body on his stage might look like an 'anti' something, and in some of the early dances it probably was, at least in part. Gloria, which has ten dancers in grey street clothes dragging themselves across the floor on their stomachs to Vivaldi's exalted Gloria in D, has something in common with Jerome Robbins's Dances at a Gathering and Paul Taylor's Esplanade, those benchmark works of the sixties/seventies youth cult, with their gangs of fresh-faced young folk skipping and running and falling to the accompaniment of sanctified high-art music. Like them, Gloria shows a certain Franciscanism, an exaltation of what is plain and openhearted and innocent, as opposed to what is fancy and fake.

But despite this moral balm, most of Morris's work is free of sentimentality and also of naturalism. However natural the dancers' bodies may look, what they are doing is not natural. Leaving aside the extreme complication of the patterns they are making—the structure of the choreography, all of it pinned to the structural complications of the score—the steps
themselves, plain though they may look, are highly artificial, 'made up'. People do not naturally fall onto their stomachs and drag themselves across the floor by their arms, let alone do this in a line of seven, in canon. Weight, exposure, struggle: all of these, in Morris's work, are carried far beyond what is normal. They are artistic strategies. For Morris, they give the dance its vividness and edge, its sheer specificity — this image, no other — and hence its symbolic force.

In 1987 Morris created a piece called *Strict Songs*, to a score by Lou Harrison that involved a large chorus singing adaptations of Hopi chants. *Strict Songs* is a hymn to the holiness of the world — the chorus sings of the deer on the mountains, the fantail goldfish, the falling stars — and it is full of dancers dressed in brown, green and blue (for earth, plants and sky) skimming across the stage. At the same time, it is clearly about death, and images of pain and struggle are interspersed among the more ecstatic moves. In the last moment of the piece, those two strands come together in a culminating image. Five couples (the full cast) are onstage. In each couple, one person lies down on the floor on his back, and the other person, placing the first person's feet against his stomach, launches himself into the air, where he levitates, balanced atop the first person's legs, as the curtain comes down.

This is a hellishly difficult manoeuvre. For the second person — the 'flier' — not to fall, the feet must be placed exactly right on the abdomen, and the takeoff into the air must be done with exactly the right thrust. We watch the dancers going through all this with immense care and deliberation. But then, once fliers are launched, we are shown an amazing sight: five people floating in the air. They have died and gone to heaven. At the same time, in the effort they have gone through — some of them are still trembling as they float there — we see how hard it is to die, how hard to get to heaven. Or rather, we feel it in the body, because it is the body's struggle we have witnessed.

This is merely an extreme case of what goes on in all of Morris's choreography. The quality of the body's effort has changed as the work has developed. In the early dances there is more fumbling, more awkwardness, and also more sweeping, more emotionalism. In the later dances the body is neater, more exact in its action. But in all of them the facts of the body are made very clear. This is partly because Morris loves those facts and partly because they accord with his idea of truth. But above all it is because he needs the full force of the body in order to show the force of the soul. Only in the body's resistance to its intention — the fact that the thighbone can only rotate so far in the hip socket, the fact that it is almost impossible to balance a 130-pound body horizontally in the air on somebody's feet, the fact that whatever you are trying to do up or out, your body is at the same time pulling you in and down — can he outline starkly enough that intention: somebody trying to do something.

Insofar as he is interested in ugliness and toil, it is for the same reason. What he is really after is beauty and mastery, but he wants them exactly at
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the moment when they come into being – when they emerge from what was not beautiful or mastered – so that we can see them clearly. There are many, many ways for a dancer to get into the air, and most of them are designed to look easy. By making the dancers of Strict Songs struggle to get in the air, Morris catches that action in the moment of its birth; we see something appear that wasn’t there a moment ago. The sheer unexpectedness of that event gives it a miraculous character, or, rather, reveals its miraculous character. The dance is launched into metaphor, and what were dancers become angels.