

# 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 LA. 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



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

TIMOTHY MORRIS/OJAI MUSIC FESTIVAL

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

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

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

No  
Contract

NEW

# Finally, a cell phone that's... a phone.

FREE  
Car  
Charger

Better  
Sound and  
Longer Battery Life

Introducing the all-new Jitterbug® Plus.

We've made it even better... without making it harder to use.

All my friends have new cell phones. They carry them around with them all day, like mini computers, with little tiny keyboards and hundreds of programs which are supposed to make their life easier. Trouble is... my friends can't use them. The keypads are too small, the displays are hard to see and the phones are so complicated that my friends end up borrowing my Jitterbug when they need to make a call. I don't mind... I just got a new phone too... **the new Jitterbug Plus. Now I have all the things I loved about my Jitterbug phone along with some great new features that make it even better!**

GreatCall® created the Jitterbug with one thing in mind—to offer people a cell phone that's easy to see and hear, simple to use and affordable. Now, they've made the cell phone experience even better with the Jitterbug Plus. It features a lightweight, comfortable design with a backlit keypad and big, legible numbers. There is even a dial tone so you know the phone is ready to use. You can also increase the volume with one touch and the speaker's been improved so you get great audio quality and can hear every word. The battery has been improved too— it's one of the longest lasting on the market— so you won't have to charge it as often. The phone comes to you with your account already set up and is easy to activate.

**The rate plans are simple too.** Why pay for minutes you'll never use? There are a variety of affordable plans. Plus, you don't have to worry about finding yourself stuck with no minutes— that's the problem with prepaid phones. Since



	Basic 14	Basic 19
Monthly Minutes	50	was 100 NOW 200
Monthly Rate	\$14.99	\$19.99
Operator Assistance	24/7	24/7
911 Access	FREE	FREE
Long Distance Calls	No add'l charge	No add'l charge
Voice Dial	FREE	FREE
Nationwide Coverage	YES	YES
Friendly Return Policy <sup>1</sup>	30 days	30 days

More minute plans available. Ask your Jitterbug expert for details.

there is no contract to sign, you are not locked in for years at a time and won't be subject to early termination fees. The U.S.-based customer service is knowledgeable and helpful and the phone gets service virtually anywhere in the continental U.S. Above all, you'll get one-touch access to a friendly, and helpful GreatCall operator. They can look up numbers, and even dial them for you! They are always there to help you when you need them.

**Call now and receive a FREE Car Charger** – a \$24.99 value. Try the Jitterbug Plus for yourself for 30 days and if you don't love it, just return it for a refund<sup>1</sup>

of the product purchase price. Call now – helpful Jitterbug experts are ready to answer your questions.

**Order now** and receive a **FREE Car Charger** for your Jitterbug – a \$24.99 value. Call now!

jitterbug  
plus

firstSTREET  
for Boomers and Beyond<sup>SM</sup>  
1998 Ruffin Mill Road  
Colonial Heights, VA 23834



## Jitterbug Plus Cell Phone

Call today to get your own Jitterbug Plus.

Please mention promotional code 47530.

1-877-651-6949

www.jitterbugdirect.com

We proudly accept the following credit cards.



IMPORTANT CONSUMER INFORMATION: Jitterbug is owned by GreatCall, Inc. Your invoices will come from GreatCall. All rate plans and services require the purchase of a Jitterbug phone and a one-time set up fee of \$35. Coverage and service is not available everywhere. Other charges and restrictions may apply. Screen images simulated. There are no additional fees to call Jitterbug's 24-hour U.S. Based Customer Service. However, for calls to an Operator in which a service is completed, minutes will be deducted from your monthly balance equal to the length of the call and any call connected by the Operator, plus an additional 5 minutes. Monthly minutes carry over and are available for 60 days. If you exceed the minute balance on your account, you will be billed at 35¢ for each minute used over the balance. Monthly rate plans do not include government taxes or assessment surcharges. Prices and fees subject to change. <sup>1</sup>We will refund the full price of the GreatCall phone and the activation fee (or set-up fee) if it is returned within 30 days of purchase in like-new condition. We will also refund your first monthly service charge if you have less than 30 minutes of usage. If you have more than 30 minutes of usage, a per minute charge of 35 cents will be deducted from your refund for each minute over 30 minutes. You will be charged a \$10 restocking fee. The shipping charges are not refundable. Jitterbug and GreatCall are registered trademarks of GreatCall, Inc. Samsung is a registered trademark of Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd. ©2013 Samsung Telecommunications America, LLC. ©2013 GreatCall, Inc. ©2013 by firstSTREET for Boomers and Beyond, Inc.

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.

**M**orris 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

## Helios

Strong horses, Percherons, bred  
for imperturbability and speed:  
Aethon, Eous, Pyrois, Phlegon,  
what names to call a conflagration  
by. Two decades with the force,  
and you'd little use for people, but horses,  
that was a different matter: strong  
horses, swift as shadows lengthening  
across the tile bed, a father  
could not hold them, how could a god.

AMANDA JERNIGAN

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

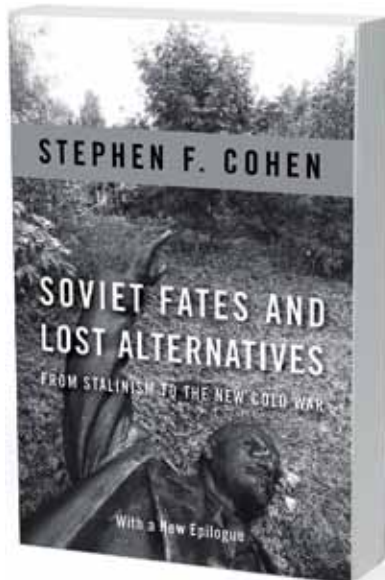
accent, then rolls again, this time to the right, then backward, then to the left. After this, the theme having reached its conclusion, he jogs back to the spot where he began. When the melody begins again, so does the dance. Before a new, dreamier melody is introduced, McMurray takes a few casual steps, 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

## Now in Paperback

### With a New Epilogue on Obama's Russia Policy



**"Stephen F. Cohen is far and away the most original, creative, informed, and insightful observer writing on Russian affairs today."**

— Alexander Rabinowitch, author of *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*

**"A brilliant and important book."**

— Dan Rather, HDNet

**"Provocative and insightful."**

— *New York Review of Books*

**"An extraordinarily rich book ... an absolutely vital beginning point for anyone interested in a serious study of political and foreign policy developments involving Russia."** — *Slavic Review*

**"[George] Kennan's understanding of the Russian state ... has proved to have enormous currency over time. Cohen's views should be given similar credence."** — *Current History*

**"This masterly investigation of 'lost opportunities' is necessary background for understanding Russia and the world today."**

— Robert Conquest, author of *The Great Terror*



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.cup.columbia.edu · cupblog.org

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.

**A**s 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.

**M**orris 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.” ■