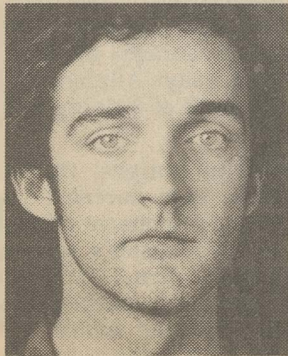


LEARNING

50 lucky students learn from company dancers at Jacob's Pillow

STUDYING WITH MARK MORRIS

Below, dancers Rachel Murray (left) and Susan Hadley are teaching students at Jacob's Pillow the dances of Mark Morris, pictured at right. The dancers are members of Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris.



AP file photo

By Christine Temin
Globe Staff

BECKET - There was the world's most celebrated young choreographer, charging down a path at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, blowing the whistle he'd just bought at the local five and dime. "Tweeet!!! OK, campers!" Mark Morris yelled to no one in particular.

The "campers" were all in the Pillow's studios, struggling to master dances by Morris himself and by members of his company, during a recent two-week workshop. They weren't campers in any usual sense, of course, although living in the Pillow's rustic cabins

is certainly an outdoorsy experience. They were actually the lucky 50 students chosen from hundreds who auditioned for the privilege of working with the Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris, as the troupe was rechristened when it moved to Brussels last fall. The students ranged from 17 to 33 years old, and they came from all over the country. At least some of them were aware that Morris had occasionally asked students in previous workshops to join his company. In the back of their minds - or maybe in the front - was the hope that the same would happen to them. Company member Rachel Murray said when Morris visited her class the students "froze completely," because they were so scared. To lessen the pressure and competition, the students were divided into groups called "either" and "or" instead of the usual "intermediate" and "advanced."

In one studio, company members Donald Mouton and Pier Voulkos started teaching Morris' "Strict Songs," a dance dedicated to Liberace, by running students through some of the dance's floor patterns. The task was to make lines and circles come out at the right place at the right time; it took about 25 minutes to get about 20 seconds of the piece down. Mouton's and Voulkos' instructions were all about counts and steps: There was, at that early stage, no poetry, no imagery. There were sensitivity and kindness, the very opposite of the stereotypical dance teacher dripping sarcasm and whacking errant feet with a stick.

This dancer-to-dancer method of teaching repertory is a necessary one in an art form with no completely satisfactory way of being recorded. Most dancers can't read or write any form of dance notation, and although most repertory nowadays is videotaped, learning a dance from a tape requires constant starting and stopping and is difficult at best.

In another Pillow studio, company members Rachel Murray and June Omura were teaching part of Morris' "Celestial Greetings," a dance to popular Thai music. Murray used verbal imagery to help get movement ideas across: "Make your body into a D... Think of wrapping yourself up," she said, demonstrating a gesture with arms crossing the body protectively. Each step and position and transition was assembled piece by piece. In ballet, a teacher can sit back and say, "Pique arabesque, tombe, pirouette," and so on. But in modern dance, where there is no codified vocabulary, there's no way other than the hard way.

After the class, Murray, who had joined the company just last fall, said she was surprised that Morris asked her to teach. She'd had only the briefest brush with teaching dance, and she was only an understudy in "Celestial Greetings," which she had never actually performed. But she was finding that teaching "Celestial Greetings" was a fine way to deepen her knowledge of the piece. She deliberately did not let the Jacob's Pillow students see the videotape of the work: "I didn't want them to get preconceptions about it," Murray estimated that it would take all her time with her class - an hour and a half a day, six days a week, for two

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Globe photo/Richard Carpenter

50 lucky dancers study with Mark Morris company

■ MORRIS

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weeks - to teach about 10 minutes' worth of the 15-minute "Celestial Greetings" in a simplified version that she and coteacher June Omura stayed up nights working on.

For Murray, and for Morris dancers in general, "The most important thing about dancing is what you're learning right now, not about some cool job you can have some day." Dancing "honestly and as a whole person" is important to Morris' company, who tend to be mature individuals, anything but the cookie cutter adolescents of some troupes.

Morris' own training was eclectic - ballet, modern, Balkan folk dance and flamenco - and his dancers, too, have varied backgrounds: Murray's is predominantly in modern dance - of the Doris Humphrey/Jose Limon strain - although it's the fashion for modern dancers to study ballet now. While some modern dance choreographers have created their own techniques for training - Martha Graham, Jose Limon, Merce Cunningham are notable examples - Morris hasn't, at least not yet, and he seems to cherish variety rather than a uniform look.

The company member who taught "Celestial Greetings" to Murray was Susan Hadley, who has been her mentor. "I wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for Susan," Murray said. Unlike Murray, Hadley has had extensive teaching experience and is now preparing to take a year off from Morris' company to be a guest artist at Ohio State University, where she plans to work on her own choreography, which is generally to music by her husband, composer Bradley Sowash.

A tomboy in her childhood, Hadley "didn't like chiffon and swans" and bowed out of ballet

early on to dance in school musicals. There wasn't any modern dance training in Columbus, Ohio, where Hadley grew up; nationwide, modern dance education is still much less common than ballet. But in her studies at the University of Colorado and then Ohio State, Hadley found the modern dance classes she craved.

She has emphatic ideas about dance. Because of the current emphasis on ballet for modern dancers, "This generation of dancers isn't in touch with modern. I feel a mission about that. That's my background, and that's what I love." A major difference between ballet and modern, Hadley explained, is that the dancer's weight is lifted up off the hips in ballet, while the modern dancer releases the weight into the floor, for a deliberately earthy look. Morris does want dancers to acquire the articulate feet and high elevation of ballet, but he also wants the strength, swinginess and resilience of modern. And he wants musical dancers.

Hadley's musicality - she grew up singing in choirs and studying tap dance - fits well with Morris', which is powered by a strong rhythmic sense. Hadley said that while other Morris company dancers teach the spacing of a dance first, or its sense of flow, she begins by teaching rhythms, "because that's how I learn."

She may be a champion of modern dance, but Hadley was teaching ballet at the Jacob's Pillow workshop: Morris seems to like to give his company members unexpected assignments. One challenge she faced was getting ballet students out of their musical rut. Ballet class music is generally in fours and eights, but "I gave a combination in nines the other day," Hadley said, "and the ballet-trained people were all flooded."

LEARNING—SCHOOLS

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