

Slice of Life: Christopher Morgan, dancing to his own beat

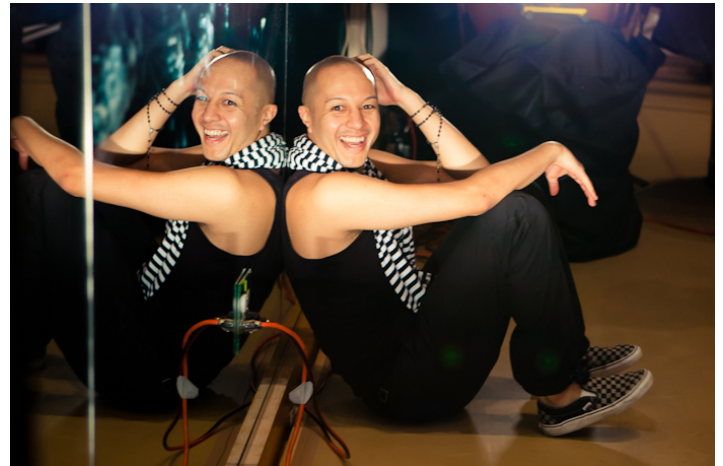


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Hoai-Tran Bui, special to wtop.com

WASHINGTON - As the dulcet classical music swells from the laptop perched on a table at the front of the dance studio, all eyes turn to Christopher Morgan, the 37-year-old modern dancer and Artist in Residence at American University.

He immediately launches into the complicated choreography that he seems to be making up as he pirouette and weaves through the studio. The wide-eyed group of young AU dancers follow his every move, picking up his movements effortlessly.

It's the kind of inspired and impromptu dancing style that sets Morgan apart from other educational choreographers, as well as his experience as the artistic director of the professional dance company Christopher K. Morgan & Artists.



Christopher Morgan, a 37-year-old modern dancer and Artist in Residence at American University, finds inspiration for his choreography by observing the world around him. (Courtesy of Brianne Bland)

You have a very intimate and playful instructive style than other dance instructors I've seen. Would you say being close to your students helps you teach?

Yeah, I think getting to know the students really well just helps the whole educational process. I think if people feel that they're invested in that way, that they're more likely to learn and grow and prosper, and especially in an arts environment, that's really a key part of the long-term journey and growth of each student. I'm also interested in the multiple approaches of learning --some people learn better with humor, some people learn better with rigor, so I do try and balance those kinds of approaches.

Do you focus mostly on modern dance or do you explore other areas?

These days my focus is primarily on modern dance. I grew up in Southern California, so the first big exposure I had to dance was through jazz dance, a much more commercial scene. So when I began, I was focused on that. I always trained in ballet throughout my career and really believe in some of the tools it gives dancers, and I've also studied a lot of martial arts. So I think what ends up happening in my work is that it's a synthesis of all these different things, that I've studied different types of modalities and movement over the years, but definitely my focus is on modern.

So what would you say your dance style is specifically?

If I have to say it in just a few words, I would say it's modern dance, the contemporary aesthetic. And then when I talk more about it, I tend to say that in general I start creating a new dance with an idea or a sense of meaning. Sometimes that meaning is rather apparent in the final product. Sometimes it's just a jumping off point if I'm moving for something more abstract as the work develops. But I'm definitely interested in making art that's about something, not just pure abstraction.

So how are you influenced to make those abstractions in art? Like, how are you inspired?

Usually an original inspiration for dance comes from something personal, either that I'm experiencing myself or that I observe in life around me. I think a few of the works that I've made that in some ways have been the most successful ... some really have to do with the personal journey that I've been through myself.

I have a work entitled "Rice" that uses a childhood task that I had every day of making rice for my family for dinner. Then it became an exploration for me also about race. As a child I would watch my hands every night making rice, and as the water would turn milky white so would my skin. And that kind of became this interesting thing for me as a child sometimes wishing I were different than I was. So that ended up being sort of a monologue which turned into this performance piece that I've probably performed more than any other piece in my life; I've probably done it more than hundreds of times by now.

Do you see the body as an art form itself?

Yeah, absolutely. I think the amount of training and discipline that it takes to get a dancer's body into shape is like any other classic art form -- it just takes a lot of discipline, a lot of time and investment, focus and energy that spans a lifetime. And then in terms of the artwork that I make as a performing artist, the body is my primary tool.

At the same time, I'm interested in other mediums. Occasionally works of mine have incorporated texts. I collaborate with other artists. Right now, I'm working with a cellist. In fact, the class you just saw, all of that music is kind of working tracks of a piece that will be premiering in April. So though the body is my primary tool, I'm also interested in all the different ways that an idea can be transmitted in performance. And I think the body's a big part of it but not the only part of it.

Do you see yourself as more of a choreographer or a dancer? Because right now, you're speaking mostly as a choreographer.

These days I definitely see myself more as a choreographer. I do still occasionally perform and get up on the stage with my company or in my solo works. But definitely identifying more in that realm these days. But my entire adult professional life has been in dance. I got my first professional company job when I was 19 and quit college actually to start dancing with the company. This was in California where I grew up. And then spent the next 15 years working for a whole myriad of dance companies all over the world. I was based in California, New York, Munich, Washington D.C. So finding my way as a performer and a dancer as been a huge part of my life.

Do you choreograph as you go along or is there some process by which you plan it?

It depends a little bit on my circumstance. With my students at American University or my company members where I have a little more time with them in the studio to work, I tend to create movement on the spots. I'll usually have clear ideas -- maybe the ideas are content-related or a certain type of imagery that I want to conjure in the movement, sometimes it's music-related. So I usually enter the studio with some idea of where I want to go. In those circumstances, it's much more experimental and playful, and I'm exploring with the dancers in the room what we're going to do. In other circumstances where I'm commissioned to make a work and I have a shorter time frame, or I may not know the dancers as well and have to produce a lot quickly, I'll usually have a much broader plan.

How differently do you choreograph for your students at AU versus members of your company and your workshops?

When I work with students at AU or these other kind of students in these residencies, I tend to be much more egalitarian. It's important to me since it's an educational experience for these students, even though it does have its performance element, it's important for me that everyone has the chance to experience and learn, execute movements, execute ideas, contribute to ideas and perform. So that results in usually larger ensemble works. Sometimes it doesn't always serve the artistic idea to embrace this because I'll end up giving people all equal stage time when actually maybe the piece is calling for clearer lead characters. Or the audience eye wants to follow one or two people more specifically, but I keep shifting it to a lot more student stage time.

When I work with the company, I try to establish really clear relations between the dancers in the company so that they know that even though I care for them, I also care for the artistic product that we create. And sometimes that is not so egalitarian because some pieces dictate that not everyone can be as involved, that there might be a featured role in a particular piece or production. But the realities of the process of art-making, sometimes it's not so inclusive, which I think is a big difference between educational work and company work.

You mentioned characters and narratives earlier. Do you usually choreograph by pure art form or do you have some form of narrative?

It varies a little bit work by work. Some dances do have a clear narrative that one can follow. Some leave a lot of room open to interpretation. I am interested in both ways of working on it. It kind of depends on the piece.

Do you personally prefer narrative or abstract dance styles?

Oh that's a good question. I think more and more I tend to prefer abstract. I definitely always value the origin of the idea and a clear sense of inspiration, but then it starts to abstract and that's where my aesthetic is moving towards these days. At the same time, being based in Washington, D.C., I think I've encountered that audiences here crave a little bit of narrative. So I'm trying to balance my artistic desires and inspiration I want to move into with what I'm hearing and seeing with audiences.

How has dance touched you or inspired you personally?

Dance in many ways took me by surprise. I started it at a fairly old age. I was 17, and I wasn't really aware of it as an option for a career or a lifestyle. It really changed my perspective.